For the Right Price

by ShaeTiann

Summary

The Jedi Order teaches that Falling is done by choice. They never discuss what the reasons behind that choice might be.

Summarily expelled from the Order, Obi-Wan ventures into the wider galaxy alone to seek a new purpose. He finds a new family, unexpected allies, and deeper shades of grey than he’d ever imagined.

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Next update: 02 August 2019
There are a lot of characters to keep track of! Dramatis Personae

Massive thanks to TheAceApples for the initial concept!
I can be found lurking as inqorporeal on tumblr and dreamwidth, and HellcatEli on twitter
Chapter Summary

The Ace Apples' original concept for this was a what-if based upon the concept of an Obi-Wan who Falls while fighting Maul, saves Qui-Gon's life but is banished from the Order and becomes a bounty hunter trying to help people in a way the Jedi can't. There were other details, including alternate universes colliding with canon universes, but that seemed a bit much to deal with on top of the rest of the concept.

This is the result. I'm not sorry.

Edit: The tags say "slow burn" for a reason! I promise it'll be worth it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reformation Year 988.02.13
Raxus Secundus

"Table in the back, opposite the entrance."

"Are you sure?" Rex squinted against the bar's dimness, feeling grossly under-protected in the rough civilian disguise. The table General Skywalker had indicated with a jerk of his chin was occupied by a single armoured and masked figure. The other patrons were steering well clear of the shadowed corner, regardless of their level of inebriation.

"Got a feeling."

"Uh huh. They're radiating threat."

"Everyone here is, welcome to Raxus. C'mon." Skywalker collected their drinks from the bartender, pressing one into Rex's hand. "It'll be fine, trust me."

"I've heard that before." The booze was watery with a slick like oil on the surface and smelled like industrial window-cleaner; Rex grimaced as the ethanol fumes burned the backs of his eyeballs.

The armoured figure barely shifted to acknowledge their approach. A half-emptied bottle of something along with an empty glass sat on the table in front of them; Skywalker tilted his head and gave the mercenary a calculating look. "Kind of hard to drink through that helmet, isn't it?"

A sarcastic snort, filtered through the helmet's electronics, answered him. "There's a trick to it." Male, most likely humanoid. The accent was muddled by the tinny vox.

"Really," Rex drawled. "Maybe we could join you and you can tell us all about it."

The mercenary leaned forward, propping one armoured elbow on the table. Rex got the distinct impression of being sized up through the inscrutable dark lenses.
It felt like having his soul inspected for flaws.

"The trick is that someone needs to offer a contract; we negotiate terms. Then the helmet comes off and we drink." The man sat back in the booth. "Are you offering a contract?" His tone suggested he found that unlikely.

"As a matter of fact, we are." Anakin offered a broad grin that seemed a bit forced. Rex could sympathise: if any of the other Generals knew what they were up to, they'd be in shit up to their necks. Well, one General might be forgiving, but the others would crap baby Banthas.

"Hmm. Have a seat, then, and tell me your particular tale of woe."

Rex sat back, letting General Skywalker take the lead. They were a long way behind enemy lines, disguised as traders to meet with a double agent. The false skin which changed the shape of his face just enough to hide his identity as a clone itched, and only long experience wearing a helmet for hours on end kept him from rubbing at it. He briefly allowed himself to wonder how the Commander was getting on without them, laying a false trail of faked voice comms suggesting Rex and Skywalker were still with Ahsoka and the 501st.

Their contact hadn't shown, but a message had, indicating the agent's cover was blown. Only quick thinking had kept Rex and Skywalker from being caught by Separatist forces lying in wait. Now they needed someone familiar with Raxulon's underbelly to help locate the agent and get the three of them to safety.

Not that Skywalker was saying a word about that.

The mercenary scoffed. "Your cousin is missing? Pull the other one, it's got bells on." He leaned forward, and the general air of threat suddenly focused in their direction. Rex felt the hair on the back of his neck spike in alarm.

"If you two are going to sit here and waste my time, I have a blaster you can talk to."

Oh.

Rex gripped Skywalker's shoulder as the General's mouth started to open in protest. "If you want more than a sob story, we're going to have to talk somewhere less public."

The mercenary dropped the bottle almost carelessly on the table before pulling a device from his belt. Rex twitched in reaction as the high-pitched hum of a dampener climbed beyond the range of human hearing.

"Private enough for you?" he sneered, dropping into one of the chairs.

Skywalker nodded and claimed the other one. "Alright. Here's the deal."

The mercenary listened in silence as Anakin explained without too much detail what they needed. Rex leaned against the wall with his arms crossed, hoping fervently his General hadn't just got them both killed.

"That's not a little thing you're asking, kids. It'll cost you."

"Of course it will. The question is, can we trust you to not accept a higher amount from the
Separatists in exchange for stabbing us in the back?" Rex growled. Skywalker winced, but the mercenary seemed amused rather than insulted.

"I daresay that while I have little love for your side, I have less for the Seps. It's a personal thing," he added when Rex raised an eyebrow in question. "How about this: I don't turn you in to your enemies. And you don't tell the Republic who helped you out."

Underneath the bucket, the mercenary was human, pale and lightly tanned with long copper hair pulled back in a tail at the nape of his neck and a neatly trimmed beard framing his jaw. Blue eyes regarded them warily above an elegant smirk.

Rex glanced at his General and tensed as Skywalker blanched in shock.

"It can't be," the Jedi breathed. "Obi-Wan?"

Chapter End Notes

I draw sometimes. Here's Bounty Hunter Obi-Wan.
Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Twelve years later, Anakin Skywalker and Rex encounter a familiar face while seeking aid behind enemy lines.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcum1 for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.04.28
Naboo

Stars exploded behind his eyes as their opponent’s booted foot impacted the side of his head. Dazed, Obi-Wan was dimly aware of the floor disappearing from under his feet and the sudden rush of open air tugging at his clothes.

Oh, this was going to hurt.

He barely managed to gather enough concentration to cushion his landing, breath wheezing from his lungs as he rebounded from the catwalk and slipped over the edge. His arms screamed at the strain of arresting his fall, the precision-cut edge of the catwalk biting into his fingers as he dangled over an improbably long drop. The reactor room might well descend into the planet’s core, for all he knew; the bottom was invisible in the darkness far below his feet.

Master?

The silence from Qui-Gon hurt. It had started on Coruscant; there was enough communication for them to work together, but casual contact had been shuttered away. He missed the easy connection they’d had, before...well, everything. Before the mission. Before Naboo and the Sith.

Before Anakin.

Dammit.

Obi-Wan heaved himself onto the catwalk and took a moment to get his bearings. Qui-Gon and the Sith had moved on, and dropped a level down.

Master, you can’t do this alone, don’t let him separate us!
His reserves were flagging; this fight was nothing like sparring in the Temple’s training salles, and it had dragged for far longer than any training session. “A proper fight between two evenly matched swordsmen will either end in two strikes, or carry on until exhaustion wins,” his Master had once said. It seemed a lifetime ago.

Exhaustion was winning.

Even the quick leap up to the next catwalk almost had him stumbling before he found his feet and charged after the combatants. The Sith was backing into an enclosed passageway barred with a series of ray shields; the red energy fields were cycling open as they approached. The entire situation was screaming, “Trap!”

He skidded to a halt as the shields cycled again, snapping back into existence a palm's-breadth from his nose. The barrier at the far end had conveniently separated Qui-Gon and the Sith, who hissed in annoyance.

Obi-Wan watched as his Master knelt in the final partition, gathering his reserves while he could. The last hour flashed through his mind as the Zabrak snarled at them both through the force fields: the number of times the Sith could have grievously wounded either of them but had not. How they’d been herded and corralled into a dead-end passage with a pit leading who-knew-where. Where the Sith seemed entirely confident rather than backed into a corner. The way they’d been separated, almost as if by intention.

The way Qui-Gon had allowed it to happen, in order to keep the Padawan under his charge safe.

In less time than it took to blink, Obi-Wan knew exactly how this was going to end. His breath hitched painfully in his chest.

Master, don’t do this!

In the Force, Qui-Gon felt anything but serene, a maelstrom of conflict wrapped around him like a stormcloud. He knew it, too. And he was about to do something he regretted but saw no way to avoid.

Dammit, Qui-Gon, he’s going to kill you! Don’t let him draw you in there!

In the link between them, Obi-Wan felt his Master brush his plea aside. As if it were nothing. As if he—seven years of training and companionship and familiarity and, dammit, love—meant nothing.

The surge of anger was so intense it took his breath away, ripples of fire prickling along all his nerves, a flare of furious, hateful energy that needed desperately to be released before it blew him apart.

NO.

The shields dropped; Qui-God surged forward, his blade igniting and catching the Sith’s in one move.

There was no way Obi-Wan would make it to the end of the hall in time; his endurance limit had been reached, and the Force seemed so very far away.

The fire roared beneath his skin, begging to be released, and without further thought he reached for it. What had ebbed to a trickle over the past hour became a torrent surging through him. It was almost laughably easy to thread it through overextended nerves and aching muscles, restoring strength and stamina in a heartbeat.
It was breathtaking.

The final barrier barely missed clipping the heel from Obi-Wan's boot as it closed. The Sith, distracted by Qui-Gon's attack, went down as the Padawan's foot swept his legs from under him. He turned the fall into a swift roll back to his feet, yellow eyes widening in surprise as a blue blade arced toward his head; the Zabrak swayed back to avoid a beheading and lashed out with a kick to Obi-Wan's gut that sent him flying back toward the opposite wall. Laughter echoed hollowly through the chamber as the Jedi twisted, landing catlike with his feet braced.

"Obi-Wan!"

Ignoring his Master's call, Obi-Wan lunged after the Sith. If anyone was going to die today, it would not be anyone he cared about, dammit. Not today. The fire roared in his ears, savage and joyful; every strike seemed to feed it. The Sith was good, skilled enough to challenge the best fighters the Temple had to offer, and Obi-Wan's blood sang with elation at the true test of his skills.

The Zabrak stumbled and rolled away as Obi-Wan appeared between them, a whirl of blue light and copper hair. Caught off-guard, Qui-Gon took a step back while his Padawan pressed the attack, menace radiating from every line of his wiry frame. An expression of shock crossed the Sith's face as he hurried to defend against a flurry of cuts that drove him back around the edge of the pit. The young man was laughing; his face was lit with a fierce exhilaration, but the sound was foreboding rather than lively.

“Obi-Wan!”

The visions that had plagued Qui-Gon’s dreams for several nights had fallen silent once his choice had been made; but it had been a difficult one. It hurt to admit that he’d been distancing himself from Obi-Wan so that he wouldn’t regret this decision -- the decision to place Obi-Wan and Anakin’s lives above his own. The pleading he had so bitterly ignored throughout the fight haunted him now with the knowledge that some fates could not be changed so easily.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to contain his troubles. He almost didn’t recognize the Padawan he had brought with him.

It was not a pleasant feeling.

Despite knowing he should step in -- defend Obi-Wan, seek an opening to end things quickly -- the Force was telling him that this was no longer his fight. A coil of utter wrongness snaked through the chamber, a chill in the air as if the combatants leached the warmth from their surroundings. As if the Light were fading.

"Obi-Wan, no," he whispered.

The Sith spotted an opening and took it, committing everything to a strike toward Obi-Wan's face that sent the Padawan reeling. Instead of pressing the advantage, the Zabrak threw a kick toward his ribs and then vaulted the chasm in the center of the room, intent on removing the threat Qui-Gon still presented.

Qui-Gon brought his guard up, and watched in amazement as the Sith arched back, mephitic yellow eyes flying wide as he dropped to his knees and then fell facedown, lightstaff deactivating as it
clattered to the floor. Behind him stood Obi-Wan, lightsaber prepared to catch a blow that would never fall; the Padawan was shaking visibly, the left side of his face seared red and breath coming in harsh, choked gasps.

The Jedi Master stared down at the remains of the Zabrak Sith; reeking smoke rose from the cauterized wounds running shoulder to hip. He had no words for what he had just witnessed; he wasn’t certain he wanted to find any.

His Padawan’s cry snapped him back to the moment; Qui-Gon looked up in time to see the younger man collapse, clutching his head. He was at Obi-Wan’s side in an instant, pulling the young man into his arms.

Qui-Gon hissed as he saw the extent of the damage; his Padawan’s face was deeply scored from the Sith’s blade, the left eye a total loss. How he’d fought through pain like that was beyond understanding. The Jedi Master shoved sweat-soaked hair from his eyes and focused, sending soothing healing energy to aid Obi-Wan.

It took a moment to realize it wasn’t working.

“What happened?” He continued, murmuring soothing nonsense as much for his sake as Obi-Wan’s. His Padawan was locked down so tightly, nothing was going in or out. His presence in the Force should have been marred from his distress, but there was nothing but silence. The young man was shaking as if caught in a seizure, muscles clenched as tightly as his mind.

At last, the gentle touch of Force healing reached through the quivering mess of pain and horror. Obi-Wan’s shaking eased, his breathing evening out. “Master?”

Despite his anxiety, a relieved smile creased Qui-Gon’s face. “There you are. I need you to relax, Padawan. Let me heal you.”

Gasping harshly through the pain, Obi-Wan’s remaining eye flickered open. “What happened?”

A dreadful chill ran down Qui-Gon’s spine at the sight of baleful amber overshadowing the crystalline blue. “You killed him, Obi-Wan. It’s over.”

Except it wasn’t over. He knew in his heart it was only the beginning.

Reformation Year 988.02.13
Raxus Secundus

The mercenary grinned humorlessly. “Obi-Wan. Now that’s a name I’ve not heard in a long time. I go by Scogar Bastra, these days.” Out from under the helmet vox, his accent was lightly Coruscanti, more mellow than his rough appearance suggested. A long scar cut across his left cheekbone onto his forehead, the shiny surface of the burn just missing his eyebrow; his left eye was clearly a cloned
Rex felt his eyes go wide. “I’ve heard of you. You helped a group from Ryloth a few months back.”

Bastra’s expression hardened. “One of many groups I’ve aided over the years. The Council don’t realize the freedom they gave me when they cut my braid and told me to get out.”

His General seemed stunned speechless, so Rex took the lead. “You were a Padawan?”

“Hmm. Master Jinn’s Padawan, before Anakin here. Grown like a weed, I see,” he added. “Your disguise is good, never fear. But I couldn’t possibly forget that particular Force impression.”

Skywalker regained his voice enough to croak, “If you hate the Separatists so much, what are you doing on Raxus?”

The mercenary’s lips quirked in amusement. “The Force suggested I should be here. Just because I was cast from the Order doesn’t mean I’ve stopped being a Jedi.”

“But you Fell.”

Shit. That explained that. Rex wondered if they were going to have to deal with the man in front of them. He didn’t feel like a Sith, but the Order didn’t look with much kindness on the Fallen either.

“Which means precisely nothing, as far as the Force is concerned. All that matters is that I’m able to listen and possess the mobility to be in the right place at the right time. The Jedi used to be able to do a lot of good that way, until they started letting the Senate write the orders.”

“The Senate does not -” Skywalker’s protest died on his lips as Bastra tilted his head towards Rex.

“You expect me to believe the Order is commanding this war?” He snorted, and Rex was disturbed to see a glimmer of amber flicker across the man’s eyes; there was the Sith, if only for a moment. “When I suggested you yank my other leg, I wasn’t being literal.”

“But. We digress. You have a person for me to find, intact and breathing if possible. Sounds to me like we have a contract. My operating fee is fifty thousand, half up front. I’m not a charity,” he gritted, when Skywalker looked ready to argue the point. “Except for very special cases, but the Council is more than capable of picking up its own damn tab. Unless you’re here without their knowledge?”

Rex gave his General a pointed look as the other man cringed visibly.

“Well, you are in a pickle, aren’t you.” Bastra was definitely amused at their expense.

“They know we’re here, Obi-Wan. Just...not that we need help. We can pay you,” he added quickly. “It’s just...that’s a lot of credits.”

Bastra handed the General a datapad with barely a twitch in his expression. “If you were any other Jedi, I’d be asking more. What’s the name?”

“Kardoong, Lailyk’ardoon. Twi’lek woman, she was working as a political aide here in the capitol. We were supposed to meet at the Blue Kraic--”

“A little upscale for you, isn’t that?” Bastra smirked at Skywalker’s glare.

“I’ll have you know, I clean up just fine.”
“So you say. How long ago?”

“Yesterday evening. Someone slipped this under the door of our doss sometime before we were supposed to leave.” Rex tossed a data chip to the bounty hunter, who caught it idly in midair. “Text-only message telling us her cover was blown and to avoid the club. Our orders were to get her out if she was in danger of being discovered. Who knows what they’d do to her if they caught her.”

Bastra was studying the chip itself, rubbing his thumb over the surface while his eyes stared into the middle distance. Rex had seen that look on Jedi before; it was strange to see it on someone wearing blaster-scored body armor. “She’s not in Raxulon anymore. Whether that’s by her initiative or someone else’s, I can’t tell. Yet.” His gaze refocused on the General. “Is your cover secure?”

“For the moment.” Skywalker handed the datapad back and hesitated. “I’d tell you where to find us once you have something to go on, but I don’t know if we’ll be staying in one place. Seems a bad idea right now.”

Bastra nodded. “Qui-Gon’s taught you well. I’ll find you if I need you. Go...I don’t know. Shopping or something, whatever it is Republic soldiers do when they’re playing at being spies.”

Suppressing a grin as Skywalker bristled, Rex nodded. “Do we want to know how you’ll find us?”

The mercenary drained off the bottle in a single pull and stood, helmet in hand and a cheerfully rakish grin on his lips. “Oh, I never forget a pretty face.” He winked at the clone soldier and pulled the dark-eyed mask back over his head, leaving without another glance.

Chapter End Notes

Update: This chapter has had minor edits since it was first published
Abandonment

Chapter Summary

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Twelve years later, Anakin Skywalker and Rex encounter a familiar face while seeking aid behind enemy lines.

Chapter Notes

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See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.05.19
Coruscant

Nobody would speak to him.

Obi-Wan had been in Theed Palace’s infirmary, recovering from broken ribs, a twisted ankle, and a lightsaber wound to the head, and thus missed the victory celebrations. The medics had been effusive and sympathetic -- as far as any of them knew or cared, he was as much a hero as Qui-Gon, Padmé, and Anakin. And Jar Jar, to his chagrin.

Things were not so simple in the Temple.

The cybernetic eye the Naboo medics had fitted him with was as sleek and subtly decorative as anything else they created; the matte-silver casing looked less like a prosthetic and more an affectation without seeming pretentious. Adapting to it had been easy, to his great relief. The Jedi Healers had given him an almost brusque examination, cleared him from additional oversight, and sent him back to the quarters he’d shared with Qui-Gon since he was thirteen.

They weren’t his quarters anymore.

It felt like being a stranger in his own home: with Qui-Gon determined to take Anakin as his next Padawan, by all rights the room that had been his should belong to the kid now. Obi-Wan had even insisted Anakin use his bed while he slept on the couch in the sitting area, not wanting the boy to feel unwelcome. It wasn’t Anakin’s fault Qui-Gon had all but cut Obi-Wan loose since his discovery on Tatooine...although it was difficult not to harbor some small amount of resentment.

Since their return, none of his friends had called. A quick check of the Temple roster showed they were all currently in residence. But nobody had been waiting to talk to him once he’d been released
from Medical, not so much as a message asking if he was alright. Even Qui-Gon had been absent for long stretches of time without a word, arguing with the Council most likely. When he was home, Obi-Wan’s Master acted as if all were normal, but it felt forced.

He sat on the edge of a chair in the Council Chamber’s atrium beside the long glass wall overlooking the city, lost in thought. He could always comm Garen. Or Bant.

He was afraid to.

“I’m sorry.”

Obi-Wan looked up from the wall he’d been staring blankly at for the past...however long it had been. “You broke something already?”

Anakin made a face at him and plopped down on the floor with the unsselfconscious ease only a preteen could manage. “No! I mean...you're sad. Because they're supposed to Knight you, right? And they won’t.”

“It's not that simple.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I...did something wrong. Very wrong. Did Master Qui-Gon explain the Force to you? Did he tell you why we fight the Sith?”

Anakin’s face scrunched up thoughtfully; Force, had Obi-Wan ever been that small? “He said they use the Dark side, and it’s bad.”

Obi-Wan nodded, looking down at his clasped hands. “When we fought the Sith on Naboo...I used the Dark side to defeat him.”

“But you're a Jedi! Jedi don't use the Dark side.”

He sighed. “Well, that's the trouble. I used the Dark side. So I might not be a Jedi anymore. They may give me a chance, let me take my Trials; if I pass, that will be the end of the matter. But if they decide not to give me that chance...”

“They wouldn't kick you out!”

Oh, to be so certain of things again. “They might. The fact that nobody will even look at me in the commissary says says the Temple rumor mill isn’t going to forget this anytime soon. It could be worse, I suppose: sometimes Fallen Jedi are expected to kill themselves.”

The kid actually jumped to his feet in horror. “But why?!?”

He smiled sadly. “To protect everyone else.”

Anakin took a moment to puzzle through it. “Is the Dark side like a cold?”

A surprised laugh escaped Obi-Wan’s lips. “No, you can't catch it from a Sith sneezing on you. But those who are Darkened could influence others, make them doubt their resolve to the Light.”

“Would you really do that?” The boy looked skeptical.

“Not at all! I want to serve the Light. But the Council has to make the decision to let me do it.”

“Psh. That's stupid. You can just serve the Light when they're not looking.” When Obi-Wan stared at him in astonishment, Anakin shrugged. “Well, that's how I built Threepio. Watto couldn't sell those parts anyway.”
Obi-Wan’s comm pipped. He checked the message and sighed. “The Council wants to see me.”

“Can I come in, too?”

He collected his cloak, shaking his head. “It’s best if you wait here. There should be some games on that learner’s datapad Qui-Gon gave you.”

“I finished them already.”

Now that was adorably unsurprising. “Try them again, see if you can find different ways to solve them,” Obi-Wan said with a teasing smile.

The expression faded as he approached the doors. He had a bad feeling he knew what the Council was going to say.

They grilled him thoroughly on what happened on Naboo; by the time he realized Master Poof was asking the same question Master Windu had asked earlier, his feet were killing him from standing in place so long. Qui-Gon, for his part, may as well have been carved from stone; his expression didn't so much as twitch from a displeased glower that was aimed over Master Windu’s head at the distant traffic.

They were trying to catch him out, he realized, seeking hints of pride or arrogance; all he felt was remorse, and it seemed to irritate them more. Well, all save Master Yoda, who kept shooting slit-eyed glares around the room.

Obi-Wan was well aware the only thing that had protected him from censure before was Qui-Gon’s staunch support. Something had changed, and he suspected he knew what it was.

“Enough,” Master Yoda announced finally, running over yet another lecture from Master Windu about self-control. “Troubled, we are, Padawan. To fight a Sith, and win, no easy task it is. Declared, this Council has, that your Trial this was.”

Obi-Wan’s throat closed hard. Yoda’s eyes were focused somewhere around the level of the young man’s knees.

They seemed to be waiting for him to respond. Protesting would only light off a new line of interrogation; he knew his temper had been a source of concern since he’d been an Initiate. It took a moment to swallow past the tightness. “I will abide by the Council’s decision, Master.”

Qui-Gon gave him a sharp glance, his Master's expression unreadable. He may have expected Obi-Wan to fight it, but Obi-Wan had no more energy to waste on a battle that had already been lost.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Master Windu intoned. “It is the decision of this Council that, based upon your failure to uphold the ideals of the Jedi Order during the Naboo Crisis, as well as your known past history, you are not fit for the role of Jedi Knight. You are hereby cast from the ranks of the Order. Master Jinn?”

Obi-Wan’s vision seemed cloaked in a haze of grey, like a cloud that refused to lift. He had known this would happen; he’d put on a positive face for Anakin, but in his core he’d known it was inevitable.
“No.”

The other Jedi Masters started in surprise; Obi-Wan chanced a look at his Master. Qui-Gon’s arms hung stiffly by his sides, fists clenched. His glower had deepened and was now aimed squarely at the Head of the Order.

“This is wrong. You cannot ask this of me!”

Windu looked like he wanted to rub the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “Qui-Gon, we’ve been over this. In fact, we’ve discussed this three times in the last day, alone.”

“You cannot ask me to cut my Padawan’s braid only to cast him out the door,” Qui-Gon seethed. “Do it yourself.”

“Master.”

All eyes swung back to Obi-Wan, who suddenly felt very small indeed. He touched Qui-Gon’s elbow hesitantly. “It…it’s alright, Master.”

With shaking fingers, Obi-Wan carefully unlaced the cords that bound his braid; the beads, he caught and pressed into Qui-Gon’s fingers until his Master accepted them.

He felt numb, empty. The tears would come later, he knew, but for now his face felt as still and emotionless as a mask.

He let the colored threads fall where they would and drew a small knife from where he’d tucked it into his belt that morning. Finding a length on the long lock of hair that matched the rest of his short Padawan cut, Obi-Wan drew the blade across the copper strands just past the tips of his fingers.

The chamber’s silence pressed against his ears as he looked at the unbound strands of hair between his fingertips. Seven years of growth seemed so insignificant.

“I take my leave from the Order. If all is truly as the Force wills it...then perhaps this was always meant to be.”

He released the lock of hair, letting it drift to the floor. It was probably meant to be burned or something, but he took a small flash of satisfaction in forcing the Council to clean up a mess it was responsible for.

Obi-Wan straightened and bowed for the last time to the Council, then turned and departed. If anyone called out to him, he never heard it over the roaring of his own heartbeat in his ears.

It was a subdued Qui-Gon Jinn who returned to his quarters later that day. Anakin had been formally recognized as his Padawan, but neither of them felt like celebrating.

They found Obi-Wan in the midst of packing, dressed simply in rough brown trousers and a dark shirt under a leather jacket Qui-Gon had forgotten his Padawan owned.

Former Padawan. His gut twisted unhappily at the reminder.

Obi-Wan had trimmed his hair down as well; the tail-knot was gone, the hair around the back and
sides clipped to velvety fuzz while the length at his crown was brushed back. He looked like a University student rather than someone Qui-Gon had done his best to train for seven years.

Perhaps his best hadn’t been enough.

“Are you going to the Corps?” Qui-Gon didn’t realize he’d been about to speak until his words broke the silence.

Obi-Wan shook his head. His face was still locked in that flat, expressionless mask he’d worn into the Council Chamber. The light caught briefly on the dark lens replacing his left eye; it was still jarring to see on Obi-Wan’s face, the scarring beneath it the angry red of new skin. The lightsaber’s passage had carved a shallow furrow into his cheekbone and above the bridge of his nose; Obi-Wan would be reminded of both victory and failure every time he looked in a mirror for the rest of his life.

“Do you know where...?”

“Away. It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

His former Padawan glanced up with a fierce, too-bright eye, the only hint of his inner turmoil. Whatever the young man wanted to say, he bit back and swallowed.

Everything he wanted to take with him fit into a single bag; many of the keepsakes around their quarters were as much Qui-Gon’s as Obi-Wan’s, and it was clear the young man either wanted no memories or felt that such things were meant to stay with his former Master. Qui-Gon’s heart ached to see that even the river stone he had given Obi-Wan as a gift had been left.

He couldn’t do it. He caught Obi-Wan’s shoulder as the young man turned to leave.

“Let me help you, Obi-Wan. Just...one last time.”

Didi Oddo’s heavy features pinched in a thoughtful squint. “Sure, I can probably sort ya boy out, Jinn. Know a few people. You just have a seat, let me take care of things.”

Qui-Gon returned to the booth he’d left Obi-Wan and Anakin at. His former Padawan was listlessly toying with a mug of tea whilst staring out the diner’s window at the late-afternoon traffic. Anakin had pressed up against the young man’s side as if he wanted to cling and never let go; whether the contact was welcome or not, Obi-Wan gave no outward sign. At least he wasn’t pushing the boy away. The three sat in silence for a while; words didn’t seem appropriate or possible.

Eventually Didi emerged with steaming plates of something Qui-Gon fervently hoped was the daily special. “Give an hour, someone will be by to pick you up, kid. You didn’t say where you wanted to go; hope you don’t hate Corellia.”

Obi-Wan shook his head slightly. “Thanks.”

“Heh, don’t thank me yet. You gotta pull your weight on the trip out. Once you get there, friend of mine will meet you at the hangar, get you where you want to go.” Qui-Gon suppressed a smile at the way Didi emphasized the word “friend”. He had an idea of whom the other man was referring
“Anyway. Sorry to hear you’re leaving us, kid. Got something for ya. Now don’t open it til you’re off the planet, ‘kay?” Didi slid a box that was clearly heavier than it looked at first glance across the table. “Some folks here might take it the wrong way.”

“Involving my- Obi-Wan in nefarious dealings already, Oddo?” Qui-Gon strained to keep his tone light, but it was ruined when he stumbled and nearly called Obi-Wan his Padawan again. Force, but it hurt.

“Would I do that? Never you worry, it’s legal, trust me.”

A smile couldn’t quite break onto Obi-Wan’s face; he squeezed the parcel into his bag on top of the rolled-up clothes with a soft, “Thank you.”

Eventually a speeder pulled up on the landing outside; Didi led them out to greet the Rodian driver. “Sheesa will take care of you as long as you take care of her ship, kid. Don’t worry about taking care of her, she’s been in the business a long time.”

The Rodian gave Oddo a look of fond annoyance. <<You’re such a gentleman.>> She studied Obi-Wan for a moment. <<I’m old and set in my ways, kid. You can do as you please as long as you keep your stuff out of the way and don’t break anything. How’s your piloting?>>

“I won’t crash things by accident.” Obi-Wan paused, a wry uptick on the corner of his mouth. “On purpose is a different story, of course.”

<<Okay, I like you. No long goodbyes, I’m on kind of a tight schedule. Sorry.>>

Obi-Wan knelt to hug Anakin tightly; the new Padawan’s face had crumpled and he sniffed back tears. “Make sure Master Qui-Gon doesn’t fall into any Gundark nests, okay? Force knows how he’d have survived without me the last few years.”

That drew a wobbly smile from under the misery. “I promise.”

Uncertain of how to cope, Qui-Gon held a hand out to his former Padawan. Obi-Wan looked at it for a moment before clasping it tightly.

“I’m sorry, Obi-Wan. I wish…”

The younger man nodded, then dragged Qui-Gon forward into an embrace. “I know. I- I’ll comm you. Sometime. Once I know what to say again.”

Qui-Gon and Anakin remained on the landing, watching as Sheesa’s speeder vanished into the distance.

Force be with you, Obi-Wan. Someone needs to be.
Anonymous and nondescript in his armour, Obi-Wan followed the flow of foot traffic through the mid-levels of Raxulon, allowing the current of sentient life carry him along. Twelve years ago, he had tried to push away the awareness that had been honed sharp by years of work at Qui-Gon’s side; it hadn’t gone well. He had learned swiftly that the consequences of ignoring that pull would hurt more than the consequences of listening. He listened now, following the faint thread of connection from the datachip.

He hadn’t entirely told Skywalker and his cloned friend the truth; the currents around the datachip told him it had been sent by someone other than their contact. That information would have done the younger men little good; better to deal with things first and present them with solid answers rather than a puzzle.

Under his face-concealing mask, his lips pulled back in a feral grin. It was lesson time.

“Pop quiz: you’re a Republic agent on a planet full of Separatists and your cover’s been blown. Where do you go to ground?”

The comm was silent for a moment. “Trick question: you don’t. You get off the planet as fast as possible rather than waiting for word to reach the spaceport security. Pay someone like us to get you out, or stow away.”

Obi-Wan moved to the side of the roadway with the rest of the pedestrians, allowing a patrol vehicle to glide past. “Correct. Question part two: you were supposed to meet friendly contacts when your cover was blown. Their covers are still secure. What do you do?”

A muffled curse. “You stay away from the spaceports, to keep your friends’ escape route clear. Either disappear into the countryside, or lose yourself in the underbelly.”

“Ori’jate. Our target would be notable in the rougher country, so she’s likely to have mingled with the lower classes. The only clue I have right now is from someone else; an associate, I suspect. I need you to eavesdrop on the local security forces; I’ll follow up on the associate’s trail here.”

“Got it, ba’vodu.”

That invisible thread nudged him toward a side street with little traffic and a series of rubbish bins hosting their own microclimates of flying vermin. Obi-Wan circled the block, getting a sense for the situation.

Down. The public turbolift around the corner was in poor repair. He pulled up the city map in his helmet’s HUD, picking out an alternate route.

<<Look, I don’t have that kind of money right now. I can get you three thousand up front, and fifteen once we get there.>> Gurke leaned over the table, pulling her best I’m an innocent victim, you can trust me face.

Too bad humans’ friendly body language often resembled other species’ threat displays. How the hell did humanity last long enough to manage space travel, anyway?
"You must think I'm stupid, baldy. Where are you going to get that kind of money, if you don't have access to it now?" Her contact bared actual, leave-you-leaking-like-a-sieve fangs, and Gurke got the distinct impression there was a blaster pointed her way under the table. "Sounds like you want to use my ship and my crew to complete a contract. You'll be getting paid better than that-"

His threat was interrupted by the comm on his wrist going off. "Shard it, what do you want? I'm busy!"

The reply was in Huttese so badly accented Gurke couldn't make out more than a couple words. Her contact blanched a sickly yellow under his thin layer of fur and glared at her.

"What kind of game are you playing?" There was the blaster, over the top of the table this time.

"I have no idea what you're-" Gurke threw the remains of her drink -- half a tumbler of straight hard spirits -- into his eyes; the chiller cube smacked off his forehead as he shrieked and fired into the wall where her shoulder would have been. She was already moving, scuttling fast through the late-night bar crowd as her contact’s burly boys roused themselves from their stupor.

Ooh, he'd had more backup than she'd suspected; either that or some other smuggler crew thought that was the cue to bump the party up a level. Either way, time to leave.

The alley out the back was cramped and dead-ended in the wrong direction. Cursing under her breath, Gurke yanked her hood up against the liquid dripping from who-knows-where and followed the passages between crumbling duracrete buildings. Shouts rose up behind her, slapping off the alley walls.

Three turns and still no exit; Raxulon’s lower levels had been built upon like a pile of child’s blocks without consideration for people who need to get out. She leaned back around a corner, taking expensive seconds to gulp fetid air into her lungs.

“You look like you need a hand.”

Gurke jumped and spun around. “Who-?”

“Up here.” Sounded male, spoke Basic through a helmet, perched on a heavily oxidized escape ladder above her head.

The angry yelling was getting louder. “How much will it cost me?”

“A short conversation, nothing more.”

He didn't sound threatening, at least. “Fine, Sparky, let's jam.”

The guy released the lever keeping the ladder retracted; even as she grabbed the lowest rungs he was hauling it back up. Definitely stronger than he looked.

“You got a better place to talk than this?”

There was a sound of amusement through the helmet’s grille. “No, I thought we could find a nice spot here on the rooftops. This way, if you please?”

He led her on a route that climbed steadily out of the dregs into more civilized levels; must have a good map in that can of his, Gurke had been living here for years and never found this path. She waited until their first short rest, on the cracked and now-useless solar panels of a rooftop maybe an hour later, to breach the silence.
“So who taught you manners? A protocol droid?” she sniped.

“Close enough. There were sticks and arses involved, at least.” He seemed amused; some weird private joke, probably. He rolled his shoulders, checked to see if she was ready to keep moving, and pulled the next ladder down with help from a grappling line stored on his belt.

“Self-awareness is a virtue. Might wanna tarnish that shiny accent a bit, people will think you're making fun of ‘em around here.” Her bare palms felt scraped raw from all the flaking metal they’d been scaling. She rubbed them on the hem of her shirt, wincing as roughened patches of skin caught on the fabric.

Still better than getting worked over by that other guy’s mooks.

“I do not have an accent.”

“Downright prissy one, too. You got a name, faceless?”

They hauled themselves over a guardrail into a side street that was clean and well-lit. The buildings were still run-down, but lived-in and cared for; no longer the dregs, still low enough down her new friend’s armor wouldn’t raise eyebrows. “Bastra. You are..?”

She could have cheered when he started leading the way up the street. Her limbs were shaking from the unplanned activity of the last couple hours; urban spelunking had not been in the job description!

“Gurke, Shorley Gurke. That was mighty coincidental timing, Bastra.” She followed him at a more casual walking pace; still feeling suspicious, yes, but there was just…something trustworthy about him.

“Ah.” He paused, as if embarrassed, and she finally got a good look at him in the amber glow of a streetlamp: short, definitely male humanoid, well-worn armored leather jacket and plating over a suit that looked like it could handle vacuum, shades of blue and raw matte metal with black trim. The armor looked cobbled together from random sets; either he was poor as hell, or he was trying to be as nondescript as anyone could be in combat gear.

“I’m afraid it's my fault you were being chased, back there. Someone's lookout saw me and assumed I was after their boss.” A smile colored his slightly distorted tone. “Sorry about that.”

“The deal was going sour anyway,” she muttered. “So what do you want, Bastra?”

“You left a message for a friend with some other friends yesterday evening. Your friend’s friends want to help them get home.”

She blinked but kept her face carefully blank as Bastra studied her through his mask. How the hell did he-- “I’m starting to think this entire evening has been a setup.”

“Honestly, I was only looking for you.”

“Give me a reason to trust you. Beyond dragging my hide out of the bins down there.”

He shrugged and gestured to the building they’d stopped in front of.

Gurke froze, jaw clenched. It was the safe house. He’d walked her right back to the sodding safehouse. Either they were completely hosed, or all Laily’s prayers had been answered. She leaned into his space, growling, “If you knew it was here, why come looking for me?”
“I didn’t know.” The helmeted head tilted. “But you did.”

*Force sensitive,* her mind hissed. Either the Republic had actually sent a Jedi to the worst planet a Jedi could be on right now, or shit was about to go down badly. She felt her lips skin back from her teeth, somewhere between a grimace and a snarl. “Okay, Bastra. Let’s get off the street and we’ll talk.”

Kardoon desperately wanted to go home; she was shaking hard, entirely unable to sit still. The Twi’lek woman had paced the entire time they were speaking, just this edge of frantic, *lekku* twitching.

Her partner -- definitely more than just an associate, partners in every sense of the word -- looked like she wanted to be holding a blaster on him, distrust carved into her lovely dark features. Obi-Wan ignored it; it wasn't the first time, and he'd done enough pushing for the evening, anyway. A hard push could be useful in the short term, but too much sudden acceptance would cause a denial loop in most sentients’ minds that shook the influence off faster.

He hadn't removed his helmet, and neither woman had asked him to. While the two women were discussing whether Gurke would remain -- okay, they were arguing, and he wasn't about to walk into that Gundark nest -- he shut off the external vox and commed the ship.

“It's about time! What did you do?”

“Found some friends, got invited for tea. Why?”

“Local security's gone nuts about a riot near here. Is that your work?”

He gave a soft laugh of surprise. “Wish I could say it was.” Hmm. “When did that happen?”

“Few minutes ago, they're pulling patrols off the spaceport to take care of it. If we’re leaving, it’s gotta be now.”

Anakin; it had to be. Obi-Wan stood, getting the women’s attention immediately. “We’re out of time. How were you planning to get to your hired ship?”

Gurke glared at him a moment, then relented when Kardoon elbowed her in the ribs. “Speeder in the alley behind the house.”

His head tilted for a moment as he listened to the currents flowing around him. “You're both going. You can always come back later, Gurke, they don't know about you,” he added when she started to protest. “Five minutes.”

Kardoon loaned Obi-Wan a poncho to cover his armor and look less notable as a driver. The pair of women wrapped ornate traveling cloaks over their more functional gear, and yelled at him shrilly about being late for their ship when security tried to inspect them at the spaceport. The poor droid seemed utterly out of its league and quickly gave up, waving them through.

“What is all of that?” Kardoon asked as yet another flare arced over the tops of the buildings a few blocks away. Flashing security lights reflected red from the duracrete towers, the sound of chanting a discordant roar like ocean waves in the distance.
“A distraction courtesy of your friends. Once we’re out of here, I’ll set up a meeting point and you can be on your way.”

Gurke eyed the modified YT-2400 freighter on the landing pad dubiously before hiking up the ramp. “Does it actually fly? Or just waddle?”

“Why is nobody ever enamored of the ship that’s supposed to get them to safety?” Obi-Wan sighed.

The woman gave a humorless smile. “Because we’re worried, No-Face.”

He snorted and pulled his helmet as they reached the passenger compartment, stowing it in a locker. “Better?”

Gurke gave an exaggerated double-take. “Ugh! No, yikes, put it back on. What’d you do, faceplant the cooker?”

Absurd laughter bubbled up; as if he didn’t get enough playful abuse already. “I’m useless in the kitchen. Strap in, we’re leaving as soon as we get clearance.”

Obi-Wan’s co-pilot eyed him as he dropped into the pilot’s chair. “Clear departure vector in two minutes.”

“Think you can handle it yourself? I need to make a call.”

“More Jetii stuff?”

“You knew what you were getting into, ad’ika. If you can’t handle it--”

A string of invective, along with the sort of eyeroll only teenagers specialize in, answered him; he grinned and settled back, eyes closing. It had been a very long time since he’d done this.

Anakin? The signature he remembered so well, like a small sun blazing into the darkness, had become far more orderly, more controlled, in the intervening years. He brushed it lightly, aware that the Jedi was probably up to his neck in something, if Qui-Gon’s influence hadn’t changed.

There was the distinct impression of manic glee, and maybe a slight bit of panic, on the other end. What the-- Obi-Wan?

Having fun without me, are you?

Running like hell, you mean.

Please tell me you haven’t blown your cover.

Nope, just evading the security cordon. Need something?

Just a destination. We have a couple of parcels for you.

Surprise, suspicion mingled with relief. Already?

Well, whatever you’re doing out there was a useful distraction.

A bit of a sour twist with a hint of wry humor, now. It was an accident, really. We can get out, might take a bit though. Find, I don’t know, an island off the southern coast we can both land on. There’s a storm system down there right now, it’ll cover us from the orbitals.
My co-pilot will love that. He really wouldn’t, because Obi-Wan was going to make him do the hard work in the name of training.

You trust them?

He’s family. If I didn’t trust him, I’d be out here solo.

You have family? Teasing, but more than a little disbelief.

What, you think I popped out of the ground like a mushroom? Get back to me once you’re in the air. And I don’t mean falling off buildings.

Hey, how do you know--?

Obi-Wan slid out of his trance with a chuckle, shaking his head. “Head south for the archipelago.”

It was raining on the level Rex had called pissing it down; Anakin was forced to admit the comparison was appropriate. The water was lukewarm and tainted with chemical pollutants that left a thin silvery coating behind as it evaporated.

The island Obi-Wan had found was little more than a flat-topped rock sticking out of the water. The former Jedi’s passengers made a hurried dash between the ships, huddled together under a poncho. Obi-Wan followed at a slower pace to meet Anakin and Rex in the warm pools made by the landing lights, probably dry as hell in that armored suit and helmet. Water trickled in rivulets over the stone, steaming in the heat below the ship.

Anakin transferred the remaining credit balance to the account number Obi-Wan had provided. “So how’d you get involved in this business? This is literally the last place I would have thought to see you again.”

The Jedi-turned-mercenary tucked his helmet under his arm. “I made the right sort of friends.” The cold, slightly hostile air he’d carried at the bar was gone; in its place was a sort of affable professionalism.

The Jedi squinted at him suspiciously. “Was that all an act, earlier?”

“I was working.” He shrugged. “Honestly, I was just as surprised to see you. My brother Padawan, beating out Qui-Gon for height.” Obi-Wan frowned thoughtfully. “How is he, by the way?”

Anakin ran a hand through his hair; it was still growing out of the Padawan cut and was almost past the Ridiculous Mop stage. “He’s good. Driving the Council nuts.”

“Did they finally force him into a chair?”

“Ha! Yeah, couple months ago. He hates it, but they wanted someone who wouldn’t be afraid to tell Poof where to stuff his lightsaber.” He looked down, sobering. “The first couple years after you left were hard on him. On me, too; I’d thought we’d get to work together and stuff. This...isn’t really what I’d hoped for.”

The older man tilted his head thoughtfully, glancing over at Rex, who’d been standing by quietly. The clone looked odd without his armor, almost as odd as he looked in his formal uniform. “Well.
For you, I might make exceptions.” He held out a strip of ‘plast bearing a comm code written in a hasty scribble. “Just in case.”

Anakin tucked it away in his jacket. “I promise not to abuse the privilege.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw his Captain twitch, swearing in astonishment under his breath. “Is that…?”

Obi-Wan glanced back at his ship and the young man in armor standing at the top of the ramp, giving Jedi and clone a level stare through the rain. “Go get us prepped to leave, Boba.”

The teenager snorted and vanished through the hatch. The clone soldier was having a hard time picking his jaw off the ground. Anakin arched an eyebrow at Obi-Wan.

“So that’s where he got to. We couldn't find him after the battle on Geonosis,” he mused. “Or Jango’s ship, for that matter.”

Obi-Wan inhaled sharply, his mouth pulling back in contempt, amber flaring in his eyes again. Force, it was going to take a long time for that to not make Anakin’s heart jump into his throat; he heard Rex mutter a startled curse behind him. “Someone needed to look after him after Mace lost his shit. Preferably someone his father knew well.”

Anakin gave him a look of profound disbelief. “Jango Fett trusted you?”

“We were a bit closer than that.”

“File that under things I never wanted to know.”

The other man rolled his eyes. “Hilarious.” The amber dissipated, but slowly. “It is good to see you again, Anakin. But I did mean what I said before: please don’t give any name other than Bastra, if you really need to tell them you broke Code and hired a bounty hunter.”

“Not even Qui-Gon?”

Obi-Wan hesitated. “No, I’d rather he find out I’m still alive from me directly.” He offered Anakin a one-armed hug, slapping between the younger man’s shoulders hard enough to wind him, before giving Rex a nod and another cheeky wink that disappeared under his helmet.

Rex was silent as they watched the freighter lift off and vanish into the rolling mists and torrential rain. “Weird guy. You trust him?”

After a moment, Anakin replied, “Yeah. He’s family.”

Chapter End Notes

These first three chapters make a good prologue. After this, I’m going to shift to updating every other week, otherwise this is going to totally eat my life.

No, I'm serious. This is going to be massive: we don't know where it's going to end.

Edit: Holy shit you guys, araydre made some awesome fanart for this chapter. Check it out!
Identity

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Now Obi-Wan has to figure out what to do with himself when there’s nobody to guide him.

Chapter Notes

Consider the previous chapters a prologue. Here’s where the real fun begins ;)

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.05.21
Corellia

Coronet City might not have had the level of development of Coruscant, but where Coruscant’s surface had acquired a crust of habitation, Corellia’s capital bristled with needle-like spires, the spaceport looming on the east in a series of artificial mountains. The landing platform Sheesa had been directed to provided a spectacular view over the city and the glimmer of ocean just visible beyond the buildings.

Sheesa waved Obi-Wan off when he tried to help unload. <<We have a system worked out; you’ll just get in the way. Didi said someone would meet you here. Turbolift’s over there.>>

The ‘lift opened as he neared, and a man dressed in comfortably-worn street clothes emerged. Shaggy, silvering dark hair framed a mischievous face and hazel eyes: he could have been any other Corellian scoundrel.

To Obi-Wan’s Force sight, he blazed.

“Hey, kid!”

Obi-Wan sighed and trudged forward. “When Didi said he had a friend here, I didn't think he meant you.”

Nejaa Halcyon grinned and clapped him on the back in welcome. “Believe me, there are worse people he could have called. How was the trip?”

“Blessedly quiet.”
The Jedi Master hissed through his teeth with a wince. “Ouch, I’m going to need to go to Medical for that one. Come on, I’ll buy you lunch and we can talk about the important stuff.”

They ended up in a tapcafe just on the acceptable side of shabby, not far from the spaceport. It seemed to be a favored stop for a number of transient freighter pilots; sentients shared drinks and jokes at the bar and tables spaced around the floor, business deals were conducted in secluded booths to the back. A hologram recording of a band currently occupied the stage along the left wall, with a sign indicating the performers would be playing live that evening.

Halcyon waited until a serving droid had delivered their food before switching from small talk to business. “So. Let's start with the basics, kid. What’s your ultimate goal?”

Obi-Wan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I…hadn't really thought about it.” The food was greasy, but no more so than Oddo’s; it seemed to be a pile of sandwich contents and condiments without any bread to contain it.

The older man offered a sympathetic smile. “Tough, isn't it? You go through eighteen years of training to serve someone else's ends, suddenly you have to figure things out on your own. Let me rephrase it: what would make you feel better?”

No, there was the bread, in a thin layer hiding underneath everything else. “Launching the Council Chamber into low orbit mid-session isn't an option, I take it?”

The Jedi Master cracked a laugh that carried over the rumble of midday conversation. “Sometimes I wish!”

Obi-Wan considered the question as he sipped his drink. “My initial idea was to disappear. But that really is more of a desire to no longer exist than a reasonable goal.”

“I know how that feels. How about the next best thing, then?”

Intrigued, Obi-Wan arched his eyebrows at the older man, waiting for the punch line.

A lopsided grin pulled at the corner of Halcyon's mouth, making him look more roguish than ever. “Become someone nobody knows.”

“How does that work?”

The older man counted points on his fingers. “We get you a new ID. Then I introduce you to some people who have no idea that I’m a Jedi, set you up with steady work, in a place you're unlikely to run into people who know you. You can start fresh. Rediscover yourself. You're still young,” he chided at Obi-Wan’s skeptical expression. “Being on your own in an unfamiliar environment is very freeing, that way. You’ve never really been in a situation where nobody has preconceived expectations of you.”

Obi-Wan mulled it over. “How would I get a new ID?”

“I know people, don't worry about that. Do some research, pick a name that appeals.”

“And what sort of people are you introducing me to? Do you trust them?”

“Scoundrels and ne’er-do-wells. I trust them with everything but my real name, they're a vital part of my contacts network.” Halcyon laughed wryly. “They’d ghost in a heartbeat if they found out who I am, so we'll be telling them you're my cousin's kid.”
His eyes narrowed. “You don’t really work for Acquisitions, do you.”

Halcyon blinked at him innocently. “My file says I do.” His eyes unfocused briefly, seeing something beyond the visible. “There’s someone in particular I want to introduce you to, kid about your age. He looks to his own skin first, but he knows that means looking after his crew as well. As long as you remember that, you should get on great together.”

“It sounds like you’re trying to set me up on a date.”

The Jedi Master snickered outright. “Just a job, kid. Getting along with your employer is important. Honestly, a lot of the dodgier types wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of a lone Knight with no Temple affiliation. You don’t want that; I don’t want that.”

Obi-Wan paused between bites. “I’m not a Knight, Master Halcyon.”

Halcyon eyed him as if he wanted to argue that point, but shrugged and rolled past it. “How soon do you want to go, then?”

“I…” He considered it. “As soon as possible. I’d rather not sit around too much, not that I don’t appreciate the hospitality.”

They ate in silence for a minute; Halcyon was clearly focused elsewhere. At last he shook himself and smiled. “It’ll be a couple days. Plenty of time to get you set up. Get you some clothes that match your story, too. You look very Coruscanti.”

“I am Coruscanti. Essentially,” Obi-Wan corrected. Having been handed over to the Temple at the age of two left him with only the barest memories of anything before. If he really concentrated, he could remember bumbling around with wobbly knees on a ship.

“The Core accent can be explained away. Your fighting skills are less easily dismissed, particularly at your age.” Halcyon gave him a narrow look. “You don’t have your lightsaber still, do you?”

“No. If it didn’t fall down that pit on Naboo, Master Qui-Gon has it.” His heart clenched in his chest for an instant; events had been too chaotic to really think much. Once he’d awoken in Theed Palace’s infirmary after a dip in bacta, knowing in the pit of his soul that he’d done something wrong, it hadn’t even seemed polite to ask after the weapon.

“Those are hard souvenirs to explain away, and very, very valuable on the black market. If Qui-Gon has it, it’s for the best.”

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Halcyon invited Obi-Wan to stay with him for the few days needed. Obi-Wan was less than enthused about staying -- again -- in a Padawan room, but the Jedi Master insisted that he should save what money he’d retrieved from his Padawan stipend. They caught a hoverbus, and Halcyon took delight in describing the more sordid secrets from the landmarks they passed.

And then the Corellian surprised him.

Halcyon’s place was, unusually, not in the Corellian Temple; he’d purchased an apartment in a decent part of the city close enough to be convenient but far enough away to enjoy more expansive property. There was even a garden outside the front door.
A dark-haired woman was curled up on the sofa with a datapad and a pile of flimisiplast documents; she offered a massive smile as they entered.

“I was wondering where you two were.”

“T ook him to Gorrol’s to unwind from the trip.” Halcyon waved Obi-Wan over. “Scerra, this is Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan, my wife, Scerra.”

Obi-Wan froze in the midst of shaking her hand. “That must be the best-kept secret in the Order.”

Scerra winked. “They can’t object to him training Valin if they don’t know they’re related. And this way I know they’re together out in the field.”

After giving that information a chance to settle in, Obi-Wan laughed. “Well, I’m certainly not qualified to remind you it’s unorthodox.”

Scerra returned to her work while Nejaa showed Obi-Wan the guest room. “Do some research on what we discussed, I’ll help sort your ID out tomorrow.”

Valin turned out to be a cheerful fourteen-year-old with an exhausting amount of energy. The boy returned from classes and immediately dragged Obi-Wan off to show him a game he was in the middle of, which they ended up playing together until Scerra announced that dinner was ready.

The boy reminded Obi-Wan a bit too much of Anakin. The thought was accompanied by a twinge of regret: he should be there to help Anakin adjust to life in the Temple. Regardless of what the Council thought, Anakin *needed* training. He flared like a sunburst in the Force; without learning some sort of control he would absolutely become a danger to himself and others.

Something was wrong there.

He tucked the thought away, putting on a sociable face for dinner with Nejaa’s family. Scerra and Nejaa kept the conversation impersonal, save pointed questions to Valin about school. If Obi-Wan seemed a bit withdrawn, nobody commented on it.

While Halcyon settled in to help Valin with homework after dinner, Scerra engaged Obi-Wan in a no-stakes sabacc game over a pot of smoky red tea.

“I wanted to ask if you're alright with this, Obi-Wan. I know Nejaa has ideas for where to send you, but he tends to be somewhat singleminded about things.”

Obi-Wan sipped at his tea. “It sounds like he’s thinking smugglers.”

She grinned knowingly. “Singleminded. Does that appeal to you, though? Or would you rather settle down somewhere?”

He laughed at the idea. “I honestly can’t see myself being happy sitting on a planet or station for the rest of my life. I was so desperate to avoid being sent to the AgriCorps…” The memory soured and he frowned at his cards without really seeing them. “Nejaa said something earlier that just...it was about knowing yourself. He’s right; I’ve spent my entire life training to be a Jedi. It was all I wanted to be. I don’t know who I am outside of that. Maybe I’ll decide to settle someday, but I can’t make that decision in good conscience right now.”

Scerra nodded. “You’re alright with Nejaa’s plan to set you up with one of his less than legal contacts?”
“Would he do so if he thought it would be too risky?”

A cheerful smirk creased her face. “Yes.”

“Hey!” Nejaa protested, coming in from the other room for a tea refill. “They’re not all less than legal.”

“Just most of them,” Scerra teased.

“There’s one I’m thinking of, wants to set up shipping on his own. It’s risky -- not as much as hauling spice for the Hutts, but risky on a personal finance level -- and he needs all the help he can get setting it up. Obi-Wan can pilot, shoot, haul boxes around and generally be reliable. You... are reliable, right?” he asked, looking concerned. The glint of humor in his hazel eyes gave the joke away, and Obi-Wan rolled his eyes.

“Depends who you ask.”

“According to the people who like you. The people who dislike you will be critical of everything, and aren’t worth asking. Never ask an enemy for a job reference.”

“Keeps lightsaber in tune, efficiently severed my primary motor function from my central processing unit, signed A. Droid,” Obi-Wan deadpanned. Scerra snorted into her tea.

Halcyon laughed. “I suppose if you want impartial, droids are the way to go.”

“Better droids than the Sith. Speaking of impartial, may I ask your opinion?”

The Jedi Master settled into the third chair with a sigh. “You want to know if I think you didn’t fuck up. I think you did.” Before Obi-Wan could say anything, Halcyon added, “But I also think that, considering the circumstances, many other Jedi might have done the same thing.

“It’s easy to look at a situation like that in hindsight from the comfort of your chair and play a mental game of dejarik and say, ‘no, I would have done this instead of that’. You can’t do that in the moment: in combat, there’s only the now.” His index finger thudded into the tabletop for emphasis. ”You might get a lightsaber up your sinuses while you’re preparing for one to the heart, and then where are you?”

He leaned forward, catching Obi-Wan’s eyes intently. “I think the Council are a pack of hypocrites, and that your place is on Coruscant. But that’s not my call to make.

“So have you chosen a name yet?”

Obi-Wan drained off the last of his tea. “Yes.”

The early evening crowd jostled and surged through the bazaar. Treasure Ship Row never truly slept, and hawkers sang their wares beneath lighted domes while twilight fell beyond the spires. Smells of alcohol, roasting meats and incense almost covered the occasional waft of ordure from the drainage grates.

The cantina Halcyon led him to was lousy with neon on the exterior; the sign declared it The Nebula, and Obi-Wan cringed, preparing to be blinded by more last-decade decor.
He was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong: the interior was dim and lit with warm, diffuse lighting. The walls and ceiling glittered with imitation stars, and the live band was in a room full of flashing lights further back, leaving the taproom volume comfortable for conversations.

“This is not what I was expecting from the outside.”

Halcyon chuckled. “It's deliberate. The offensive façade scares off the non-regulars.”

They got drinks and settled in at a table where the Jedi Master could watch the entrance. Obi-Wan shifted inside his old jacket and new clothes; he and Halcyon had spent the previous afternoon walking the garments into the ground in the rear garden to make them look worn. Scerra had pushed a container of gel into his hands and encouraged him to do something with his hair; the resulting spikes resisted being crushed or flattened, and might possibly leave holes in the pillow that night if he wasn't able to rinse the styling goop out.

People here knew Halcyon as Jance Retten, and the Jedi Master took great delight in introducing his cousin’s kid, Scogar Bastra, to everyone. With each repetition, the name seemed to sit easier in Obi-Wan’s ears, and a curl of cautious optimism wound through him. Maybe he could do this, after all.

“Booster!” Halcyon called suddenly, waving over a dark-haired, bearded young man about Obi-Wan’s age. Booster favored them with a grin as he sauntered over and claimed a seat.

“Retten! Haven't seen you for a while. Just get in?”

“Yesterday. You?”

“This morning.”

“Excellent. I have an opportunity, if you're still looking for crew.”

Booster leaned back in his chair, eyeing Obi-Wan appraisingly; Obi-Wan grinned and tilted his glass slightly in the other man’s direction.

“You expect me to take this green twig out on my runs, Jance? I need people who have actual spine to ’em.”

It was a game, a classic Obi-Wan knew well, and he slipped back into the role easily. “Scogar Bastra,” he introduced, holding his hand out. “And not quite that green.”

“Oh yeah?” The other man clasped his hand. “Booster Terrik. What happened to your eye?”

He and Nejaa had worked that story out well in advance. “I was finishing a year at Theed Royal University when the Trade Federation invaded. Managed to stay out of the internment camps til the Queen came back with an army. Got winged in the face on the last day, fucking droids.”

“So either you're sneaky or you're lying. Why didn't you fight back?”

Obi-Wan scoffed. “I’m not stupid nor suicidal. There were a bunch of us just trying to survive for weeks, but thirty-six people can't take on an army. Nailed a few clankers that were off alone on patrol, but only to keep ourselves alive.” There had been several pockets of resistance the droids had failed to weed out; when the counteroffensive began, many had used the chaos to ambush Trade Federation patrols throughout the city.

Terrik eyed him skeptically. “I try to run safe, but pirates and competition exist, and I can guarantee we’d be getting into fights. You any good behind a turret?”
Studiously avoiding the potential innuendo, Obi-Wan shrugged. “I’ve done my time in both the pilot’s and gunners’ seats. I don’t look that young, do I?”

The other two exchanged a glance; Halcyon looked insufferably smug. Terrik scowled at him.

“Young kid here blowing smoke up my ass?”

“Nope. Trust me, he’s not going to crack under pressure. Known him and the guy who taught him for years, they’re good people.”

Terrik grumbled something under his breath and invested a moment in his drink. Obi-Wan took that moment to signal for a second round, receiving the lightest touch of approval from Halcyon.

“Okay, Bastra, here’s what’s going on. I need a few reliable people to get my own business up and flying. Pay’s one thousand a month, if you want something other than Republic credits, we can negotiate. I already have a second-in-command, so don’t go thinking you’re a hot-shot, alright? How’s your navigation?”

He affected a casual shrug. “I can handle it.”

“Good, that’s your job. Don’t shoot the droids and don’t tease the Whiphid, and you’ll be fine.”

Obi-Wan looked back at Halcyon with a raised eyebrow. “You’re sure you weren’t setting us up on a date?”

The Jedi Master spluttered his drink while Terrik looked mildly offended. “Keep your matchmaking out of this, Jance. I’m not looking right now, got more important things to do.” He pinned Obi-Wan with a calculating look. “Docking bay Krill-Zerek-243-8, noon tomorrow. You’re coming with us when we meet our next client, so try not to look like dregs trash.”

“A challenge on the first day? I like it already.”

The pilot snorted and moved on to greet someone else at another table. Halcyon leaned over with a conspiratorial grimace. “You’re going to end up pissing someone off with that deadpan dry humor of yours.”

Rolling his eyes, Obi-Wan let a little smugness leak into his grin. He’d forgotten how much he enjoyed this game. “Oh, it’s far too late for that.”

It wasn’t until he was stuffing items into his new, larger bag that Obi-Wan ran across the box. He hadn’t really forgotten about Didi’s parting gift, but opening it hadn’t seemed very important.

He sighed. Best to open it now; if it was something illicit, Halcyon could dispose of it.

After a moment struggling with the box, he was convinced it was Oddo’s idea of a joke. There was no latch, only tiny gaps between wooden panels to indicate it wasn’t a solid block. Obi-Wan had seen puzzle boxes before, but this one was defying the usual solutions. It felt like cheating to use the Force on something so banal, but as he tested the box’s moving pieces with his mind, he realized that the Force was the only way to get the box open.

Then he noticed the feel of the contents.
Qui-Gon, you didn’t.

The pin shifted easily, allowing the interlocked surfaces to slide open like a mechanical iris. Inside, nestled on a scrap of white silk, lay both his lightsaber and the river stone Qui-Gon had given him for his thirteenth birthday.

Obi-Wan sat back, staring at the gift where it lay on the bed. Tears sparked in his eyes and he blinked hard against them, feeling his heart twist.

This was exactly what he’d hoped to avoid. He’d chosen to leave everything behind, Qui-Gon had no right--


Obi-Wan scrubbed his hands over his head, feeling the spikes of his hair rebound under his fingers, a pool of confused emotions seething in his gut. “I can’t decide if I’m furious or grateful.”

“You can be both, you know.” The Jedi Master frowned, stroking his beard in thought. “That’s a good container to keep those safe in.”

“Would you keep this for me? I- I can’t take it with me, if it got lost….” It was one thing to keep a lightsaber on your belt, another thing entirely to be unable to retrieve one from another room if they needed to evacuate the ship.

“Read the note first. Then decide.” Halcyon left him alone with the box and his own inner turmoil.

The curl of real paper was wrapped around the lightsaber’s hilt. Qui-Gon’s tightly slanted handwriting covered one side of it, showing signs of being written hastily.

Obi-Wan,

I’m sure you intended to leave without these, but I cannot in good conscience keep them. The Force tells me that it’s important to return your weapon -- the Council be damned -- and my heart tells me this stone belongs with you still.

I am sorry. I have likely already said this more than once, but it bears repeating: the Council hold Anakin’s place in the temple hostage to your own well-being, and I can neither forgive them nor myself for this egregious compromise forced upon me. There is a blindness in them that disturbs me, a callousness that is not befitting of a Jedi. But I have not the words to speak of it; they stick in my throat, as if I fear censure for offering criticism.

It is beyond ridiculous. Perhaps with time and distance, you may be able to see what we here at the center cannot.

The presence of the Sith concerns me deeply, as does the Council’s unwillingness to investigate further. We faced an Apprentice; the Master is still a threat. I have never known Mace to sit quietly and wait for a known source of trouble to act a second time, even if it is deemed "too dangerous".

It was "too dangerous" to send only two Jedi back to Naboo, after the Apprentice revealed himself on Tatooine.

I’m sorry. I’m bitter. There is something I cannot see lurking beneath the surface, and it has already
caught you in its snare; I can think of no other reason why you were cast from the Order. Is it presumptuous of me to think that one or both of us were considered a threat? Am I paranoid for thinking that something deliberately wants us separated?

Yoda advises me to meditate more. The more I meditate, the worse this feeling grows.

Please take care of yourself, Padawan. You have friends here still, and we will not forget you.

Qui-Gon

p.s. The Senate inquiry pried a name out of Gunray: the apprentice we fought was Darth Maul. I tell you this for your safety only. If you choose to investigate further, I beg you, be careful.

The river stone warmed reassuringly in Obi-Wan’s hands as he cradled it, glimmers of red light responding to his touch through the glossy darkness. Beneath the stone, sealed in clear plastic, were the beads that had adorned his braid.

He hadn’t meant to, but the stone’s gentle Force presence lulled him into a light meditation; when he opened his eyes again, an hour had passed, and he felt more settled. More at ease than he had since that initial, ill-fated flight to Naboo.

Obi-Wan found Nejaa and Scerra lying across each other on the sofa, watching a holodrama on low volume out of consideration for their son sleeping in the next room.

“Do you have a bit of string I can use?”

Chapter End Notes

The Rogue and Wraith Squadron books are some of my favorites; I couldn't pass up the opportunity to borrow some well-known characters.

While I was working on this, the discrepancies between the Legends and new canons became painfully obvious: fitting a Legends character or event into the new canon is a square-peg-round-hole issue, and I didn’t have much choice but to get a saw out and start cutting. I feel bad messing with established information -- it runs counter to my career in game content-writing -- but it couldn't be helped

I’ve started adding meta information at the start of the chapters and flashbacks to clear up any timeline confusion: every change made to the Legends-canon timeline was done with very careful consideration and consultation with friends who are also both writers and Star Wars nerds. We love this stuff; we simply want to be able to do it proper justice rather than half-arsing it.
Negotiating

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Now a member of Booster Terrik's crew, Obi-Wan struggles to find a new identity beyond being a Jedi.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcum and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.08.29
The Eidolon Hazard

A long string of blisteringly foul Huttese preceded Terrik through the entrance to the lounge. The crewmembers huddled around a sabacc game at the table turned to watch their boss storm through on his way back to the captain’s quarters before refocusing on their cards.

“Poodoo,” Tovari spat under her breath. “I bet that means another regular’s cancelled.”

“That makes, what? Three?” Bastra tossed a couple coins into each of the pots -- nothing spectacular, but the newest crewmember never seemed to play for keeps.

Pulkka growled softly, shaking her mane before doubling Bastra’s ante. “This month, yeah.” The Whiphid glared at the fourth crewmember. “This doesn’t mean you won the bet!”

The Twi’lek bared a sharp-toothed grin. “The month’s not up. Yet.” Fanu’dar rolled a coin across the backs of his blue-skinned fingers into each pile in a display of nonchalance, but he reeked of desperation.

“Showoff.” Tovari added a card to her freeze pile. The dark-skinned human scented of annoyance, less at the cards than at Bastra’s obliviousness. She’d been pursuing the one-eyed human for weeks, unsuccessfully if the way she was angling her legs towards his under the table was any indication. The Whiphid found the young sentient’s intensity amusing.

“Anyone know why they’re cancelling?” Bastra seemed to be playing on autopilot, his one blue eye focused somewhere beyond the bulkhead, but his scent was that of intense concentration. He shifted, likely freeing his ankle from an entanglement without changing expression, and there was a burst of disappointment from Tovari.
Pulkka recognized the predator’s gleam in Fan’s eyes at their crewmates’ distraction and shook her mane again; Fan was probably going to be losing this one. “They say they’ve found more reliable people to do business with. I don’t buy it, though.”

Bastra’s eyebrow twitched. “More reliable people. The same people?”

“No idea. Maybe.” She snarled as the cards shifted -- it wasn’t a bad shift, but getting the others overconfident was never a bad thing. Fan’s discard pile was looking suspicious; the Twi’lek was going to either fold or call in the next round.

He called, and eyed Bastra’s cards in dismay as the human claimed the hand pot. “How do you even do that?”

The human smiled guilelessly. “Misdirection.” His olfactory aura was just the slightest bit smug at Fan’s expense.

“Are you even old enough to drink? Where’d you learn to play like that?”

“The answer to that question is not worth the contents of this hand pot.”

Pulkka whickered a laugh at the Twi’lek’s thwarted expression. “He’s old enough for the boss, Fan, you know he doesn’t hire younglings.”

“You know what is worth the contents of that hand pot?” Tovari asked with a sly grin. “Taking me out somewhere nice once we get to Coruscant.”

“We could also play another round and you could win it back and treat yourself.” Bastra let Pulkka catch his eye knowingly as Tovari pouted.

The Whiphid let loose a rumbling chuckle. “I’ll take you up on that challenge, kid. You deal.”

Obi-Wan leaned in the doorway, eyeing Booster. Their boss was scowling fiercely at the screen in front of him and muttering under his breath as he stabbed at the keys.

“I doubt that console ever did anything to warrant that level of abuse.”

Booster didn’t look up, although his typing softened. “Draygin backed out at the last minute and Haugg isn’t answering. We might not have anything to lift off the surface with. Even the smallest loss right now puts us in the negatives.” He glanced up through lowered brows. “I have operating costs to cover, and I’d rather not have to let any of you go.”

Much as he disliked the idea of making a reappearance so close to his former home, Obi-Wan sighed and offered, “I may know someone on Coruscant who could put us in contact with people who need haulers. No guarantees, but--”

“Fuck, I’ll talk to anyone as long as the cargo’s not illegal. Haugg tried to get me to haul those damn drugs with the last shipment of nerf and I had to tell him where to stuff the death sticks. We’re not doing that; that’s how you get screwed over with bounties on your head and pirates up your exhaust pipe.” The captain jabbed an emphatic finger in Obi-Wan’s direction. “No contraband, got it?”

“No problems there, boss. I’ll let you know if my guy has anything useful.”
He spent the better part of an hour fretting over the wording of his message, settling finally on thanking Didi for that awkward unexpected present before getting to the point. A reply came as they were on final approach for landing, inviting Obi-Wan for a free lunch.

Booster insisted Obi-Wan take Pulkka with him. “Not that I don’t trust you, it’s everyone else who worries me. Also, Pulkka can speak for me better than you can.” Obi-Wan didn’t argue, merely sending a response to Didi that he was bringing company.

Oddo barely blinked at the scale of the company, eyeing Obi-Wan critically. “Looking good, Bastra. A bit skinny though. You people been feeding him enough?” he demanded of Pulkka. The Whiphid whuffled in amusement as the diner’s owner plowed through without expecting a response. “He never eats right, known him for years and he never takes my advice. You’re never going to get any taller at this rate, you know. Your old friend Walker’s been gaining on you already, saw him last week and he must be a full head taller…. He rambled on as he showed them to a booth, dropping enough coded information to let Obi-Wan know that Anakin and Qui-Gon were doing well, before whisking off to the kitchen.

“He didn’t want to take our order?” Pulkka rumbled. Obi-Wan grinned.

“He saw what we were looking at on the menu board. Oddo knows his business.”

“How well do you know him?”

“Met him when I was thirteen. Didi’s Café is the best place for scuttlebutt in CoCo Town, all the most accurate stories filter through here.”

Didi returned a few minutes later with a sandwich for Obi-Wan and a plate of something definitely not suitable for human consumption for the Whiphid, whose heavy brow lifted in pleasure. The proprietor shuffled Obi-Wan further into the booth and squeezed in beside him, since Pulkka took up the entire opposite side of the table on her own.

“So what’s this about, then? Need some business contacts?”

Pulkka provided Terrik’s details and Didi scribbled into his datapad for a minute.

“You’re not the first folks I’ve heard having trouble. Someone’s buying up the regular contracts and leveraging non-compete agreements in exchange for lower rates.” He hunkered in closer, dropping his voice. “Between you two and me, I heard that a few had their haulers strong-armed. Pirate attacks, ransoms in exchange for business deals rather than goods. Been happening for a year or so, but it only recently started making a pattern.”

“Got any names?” Pulkka rumbled quietly. Didi scribbled onto his datapad for a moment and then turned it for the Whiphid to see. The big alien squinted at the tight scrawl for a moment before nodding. “Gives us somewhere to start on the avoidance list.”

Obi-Wan took a moment to memorize the names as well before Didi cleared the screen. “Have you heard anything about Haugg? Our boss said he wasn’t answering his comm.”

“Heh, yeah, someone offed him a few days ago.” Despite the laugh, Oddo looked grim. “Dumped him in his own carbon-freeze chamber. Whole operation’s been shut down while Judicial investigates that little death-stick side business he had going; shareholders ditched and ran for the hills when that came out.”

Pulkka muttered something that was probably a curse.
“Anyway. I’ll send a few names your boss’ way; what he does with ‘em is up to him.” Didi punched Obi-Wan lightly in the shoulder as he hauled himself out of the booth. “Good to see ya again, kid. Want me say hi to the folks for ya?”

He hesitated a moment before nodding. “We’re not really back to speaking yet. But they’d probably appreciate it.”

Pulkka eyed Obi-Wan carefully as Didi left. “Family trouble?”

“Something like that.”

She gave him an approving look and reached across the table to pat his shoulder heavily. “You are seeking a new tribe when the old one no longer fits. Good for you. Your people cling too strongly to tribes that are bad for you, and nobody benefits.”

A reluctant smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “Thanks, Pulkka.”

Obi-Wan rolled over in his bunk, listening to Fan’s snores overhead. It wasn’t his crewmate’s nocturnal humming that was keeping him awake: the Force prickled over his skin, raising the hair on his arms and the back of his neck. He’d shut it out weeks before, walling his mind off after one too many nudges he hadn’t been able to respond to. It was still debatable which torment was worse: not being able to act, or the Force practically begging for his attention when things were quiet.

The absence of his old training bond with Qui-Gon ached like a phantom limb.

Terrik liked Obi-Wan’s habit of keeping his hands busy: it meant the less urgent nuisances got repaired or cleaned or reorganized quickly. His constant tinkering irritated some of the others, particularly Terrik’s second-in-command, Feid, but the Zabrak woman had yet to complain beyond muttering about fidget toys. Obi-Wan was learning a lot more about small-device and ship maintenance than he’d ever needed to know before, and had branched into tweaking already-repaired items for efficiency. It didn’t always work out on the first go, but he had time and HoloNet tutorials aplenty.

The work distracted him from the Force’s constant presence. It wanted to be listened to, an incessant nagging pressure like someone leaning over his shoulder. Jedi were trained to resist using the Force frivolously, but they still exercised their connection to it every day; he’d never been told that not using it at all would cause the energy to practically dance under his fingers, offering to retrieve tools fallen within easy reach and activate switches from across the cabin.

It was as if the Force refused to let him go, once he’d linked himself consciously into its all-encompassing network. He’d given up on meditation altogether when the quiet attempts to focus invited all the universe to intrude on his mind, demanding to be acknowledged.

_I’m not a Jedi anymore. Go away. Find someone who can act without making things worse._

Talking at it never helped.
“Too bad the pay’s not good enough for the resort. I’m way overdue for a massage,” Tovari sighed. She glanced over at Scogar, currently occupying the pilot’s seat on the approach run to Bespin while Booster and Feid prepared the cargo for their Cloud City contact. “You ever been to the spas here? They’re amazing.”

He chuckled warmly without looking up. “They’d never let someone like me on the same level, never mind through the door.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. I bet you clean up real good.” He was getting a little scruffy-looking with his coppery hair growing out, but it suited him.

“Clean?”

She pulled a face at his profile. “With your accent, I know you know what kriffing soap is, Bastra.”

“Sounds like something from a specialty shop.”

“You’re terrible.”

He seemed amused -- she hoped that twitch in his cheek was a smile, anyway. He reached forward to adjust one of the controls, and the sunlight shafting through the viewscreen gleamed for a moment on something at his left wrist.

“I didn’t know you were a jewelry type.”

“It’s not jewelry.” He extended his arm for her to see the artfully knotted red and yellow cord around his wrist; cheekily stealing the opportunity, Tovari grasped his hand, feeling calluses from long hours of tool- and weapon-use. Tied in among the knots were a few cloudy green beads; the polished surfaces had been the glimmer she’d noticed.

“Pretty. So what is it, if not jewelry?”

“A gift from my...teacher.” Scogar reclaimed his arm, if only to make another adjustment on their flight path.

“The colors mean anything?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“It’s difficult to explain.”

Time to needle him a little, if he was going to be cagey. “So what kind of cult was it you were part of? Like the Mandalorian bounty hunters?”

He hesitated. “I...suppose they’re similar that way, yeah.”

“Are you hunting someone, then?”

“No all teacher-apprentice pairs are bounty hunters, you know.”

Ooh, definitely a sore spot. Tovari grinned and leaned forward eagerly, tucking a strand of her chestnut hair back behind her ear. “So what was yours like? I know you can fight, I saw you and
Feid sparring in the hold the other day.”

“We need to buy her a punching bag. I like my ribs where they are.”

“Gotta ask the boss permission to hang it up somewhere. So?”

He blinked at her. “So?”

“Your teacher! Your training! C’mon, Scogar, you never talk about yourself.”

“Maybe there's a reason for that.”

She scoffed. “Fine, be that way. You know pretty much everything about me, already.”

“That's because you tell everyone everything. You have no shame, and that's a wonderful thing.” For a moment she thought he was being complimentary, until he followed it up with, “You have nothing anyone can hold over your head.”

“You have issues, Bastra.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Before she could say anything more, a diode lit on the console in front of Scogar. He toggled the comm to the hold. “Boss, Cloud City patrol is hailing us. You want to deal with ‘em?”

“Yeah, patch it through.”

Booster showed up a few moments later and smacked the back of his hand lightly against Scogar’s shoulder to move him from the pilot’s seat. “Go help Feid finish wrapping things up back there, I’ll talk to the greeting party.” His gaze slid over to meet Tovari’s as he settled in, but he waited until the other man had left before saying, “You are so fucking obvious.”

Obi-Wan followed Terrik, Feid, and Pulkka along Cloud City’s upper level concourse, mingling among citizens, tourists and traders; Fan and Tovari had remained behind to wait on the delivery of their outgoing cargo, which was inexplicably delayed. Warm sunlight poured through the tall windows, casting rainbow shards across the tiles. The concourse was a broad mezzanine bazaar, but far more orderly, polished, and well-mannered than Treasure Ship Row. Even the kiosks spaced along the edge of the balcony that overlooked the fountain-filled parkland on the level below had some uniformity, and the shop owners weren’t attempting to force items into the hands of passers-by. It seemed almost sterile in comparison to its Corellian counterpart.

After three months, it was still somewhat unnerving to be just another spacer. Despite the worn-soft dark leathers he’d grown accustomed to wearing and the DL-18 strapped at his hip, part of Obi-Wan still expected people to pause in recognition or call out to him. The Force had something to do with it, of course: despite his shielding, others’ moods drifted around like hints of perfume as they rushed past, lighthearted and cheery, moody and tense.

It distracted him enough that he jumped when Feid slung her arm companionably around his shoulders. “You look seriously annoyed. Should we have brought that busted comm unit for you to mess with?”
He rolled his eye at her teasing tone and slid his arm around her back hesitantly, still uneasy with the casual familiarity his crewmates demonstrated toward each other. “You know me so well.”

The Zabrak woman gave him a sideways look as they walked, green eyes vivid against her golden skin. “I dunno what kind of person your teacher was, kid, but all that stuff about idle hands is banthashit.”

It took Obi-Wan a moment to realize she thought Qui-Gon had been some horrific taskmaster; considering his compulsive activity in his spare time, he couldn’t blame her. An involuntary snort of laughter escaped him and then he was giggling helplessly, gripping Feid’s shoulder for support. Pulkka and Terrik turned to pin him with identical looks of concern.

“How many times do I have to tell ya, Feid, don’t break the new kids!”

“I didn’t do it!”

Obi-Wan managed to get it under control, patting her shoulder in apology. “I just like fixing things, Feid. It’s nothing to do with my teacher.” It was getting easier to avoid using the term Master; he could only imagine the reaction that would get.

Her expression lightened fractionally. “You must not have been allowed a lot of down-time, though. Ever hear the word ‘relax’?”

“Yes. Usually right before something went horrendously wrong.”

Pulkka chuckled. Feid released him and smoothed her hands over the short plaits of her dark hair. “You know what? I don’t want to know.”

Terrik led them to a tapcafe on the outer edge of the concourse, a multi-leveled establishment with views out over the clouds. The bold mosaic panels in the walls and warm wood furnishings were a colorful relief from Cloud City’s overbearing use of white and cream.

“Business lunch, but don’t get too crazy, kids.” Terrik aimed a glare at Obi-Wan as he slid into a booth around a circular table. “Especially you. Where you acquired such expensive taste is beyond comprehension.”

“I happen to appreciate the finer things in life. They're not available very often.”

“True words,” Terrik muttered grudgingly.

They were still working on their first round of drinks and sharing a platter of appetizers when a humanoid woman swathed in layers of silk and velvet approached their table. The two Niktos and the human who followed her all looked distinctly out of place in their merchants’ robes -- a little too rough, a posture that suggested a preference for the weight of armor, the way their hands unconsciously drifted over the location of weapons they weren’t accustomed to hiding.

Terrik gave his glass a quarter-turn to the right and back as he set it on the table. Let me do the talking.

The hair on the back of Obi-Wan’s neck prickled as the human-mix woman moved to stand too close, almost looming over them while her bodyguards took up positions around the table. “Booster Terrik?” She pronounced his first name with emphasis, as if it were an alias.

Their boss studied the woman flatly for a moment, ignoring the thugs. “Who’s asking?”
She offered a closed-lip polite smile which held no emotion. “Sairel Draa. I represent the Independent Haulers and Trade Association. We’d like to offer you the opportunity to work with us.”

Obi-Wan remembered all the previous times he and Qui-Gon had faced down hostile negotiators, ironing his expression into an implacable mask. Feid’s eyes had shrunk to glittering green slits; Pulkka leaned forward, invading the robed woman’s space with her bulk. They became extensions of Terrik’s presence: calculating, suspicious, threatening.

Terrik barely twitched. “Work with you. As in, sign an exclusivity contract, only take the jobs you offer, lose a significant cut in contract fees--”

The woman had the patience of a Jedi. Shaking her head, she said, “You misunderstand. It’s not a contract we’re offering. We buy your services. You get to choose among the jobs offered by the suppliers we maintain haulage rights with.”

Her tone implied it was the most reasonable arrangement in existence. Didi’s words in the café were looping through Obi-Wan’s mind; he caught Pulkka’s eye across the table and knew she was thinking the same thing. Strong-arm tactics. Ransoms for business deals. How many had been threatened with financial ruin to create this arrangement?

Terrik looked unimpressed, verging on annoyed. “I’m independent for a reason: I got tired of being screwed over by people in fancy robes.” The number of casual customers pretending not to be eavesdropping on the conversation had gone from zero to thirty-two and over at the bar the server’s hand was hovering near the security button.

The woman found Terrik’s disgust tremendously amusing. “Surely you’ve noticed that lawful work is thin on the ground recently? We can guarantee you’d never be without a cargo.”

The captain’s brown eyes flicked from her to the bartender and back. “This is a civilized place, so I’ll use civilized language: no. Thank you.”

She sighed and drew a piece of ‘plast from a pocket in her robe. “Disappointing, but not unexpected. You do have a reputation, Captain Terrik. If you -- or any of your crew,” she added, soulless eyes looking around at the rest of them, “want better opportunities, you may get in contact here.” Obi-Wan repressed a shiver; he’d never before encountered anyone so hollow. It wasn’t that the woman had nothing in her heart; she simply saw other people as commodities to be purchased, used, and discarded as needed.

Terrik snarled. “You people think anyone is for sale. Take your fucking card and find someone else to jack up. I don’t play those games.”

Her smile was razor-thin as she placed the holographic card at the edge of the table. “But Captain Terrik, everyone is for sale. It’s just a matter of finding the right price to offer.”

She met their incredulous glares with placid disdain, turned her back with slow deliberation and left. Her entourage followed in her wake; the human paused to give each of them an impassive stare before departing. There was a ripple of relief through the room and the bartender relaxed, but around the table lingered a frisson of outrage so thick Obi-Wan could practically taste it.

Feid was the first to break the silence. “Boss.”

“Yeah.” Terrik pulled his comm out. “That cargo get there yet?”

“Few minutes ago,” Fan responded. “We were about to come join you--”
“Change of plans. Lock the hangar and finish loading, we’re coming back. I got a bad feeling.”

They were halfway back to the lifts to the landing platforms when Obi-Wan felt it; just a flicker of something wrong. Without thinking, he lunged forward into Feid, knocking her out of the way as a blaster bolt sizzled over his head.

Cries of shock and alarm rang out as the two of them fell in a tangle into the shallow cover between shop façades. Terrik and Pulkka dived to the right behind a kiosk; the merchant shrieked and toppled off her stool as more shots shattered a row of hand-thrown pottery. People around them ducked and fled; one unlucky sentient caught a stray bolt in the shoulder and spun to the floor with a wail.

Feid was swearing as Obi-Wan scrambled to his knees; her blaster was already in her hand as she pushed her comm at him and shoved him into the wall. “Call ‘em!”

“Fuck!” He thought ruefully of the lightsaber concealed in its pocket in the lining of his jacket as he hauled his own blaster out; useful as it may be, letting the world think a Jedi was involved would make matters so much worse. Lasers sparked off the wrought-metal decoration of the façade just above their heads as Feid returned fire. The surprise attack had set off a wave of chaos as unarmed people scattered for the exits. Pulkka and Terrik were firing across the open parkland at the opposite balcony, where a trio of people in armor were moving to flank them.

“Tovari!”

“Busy, Scogar! What?”

“Someone’s ambushed us on the concourse level!” He had to yell to hear himself over the frightened gabble of the crowd and the piercing shriek of blaster bolts. “How’s the ship?”

“Ready to go, but someone took potshots at our delivery boys on their way out! We got it locked down, but we have wounded guests, and they’re trying to break through the hangar entrance.”

Cursing silently, Obi-Wan joined Feid in laying down suppression fire along the walkway. One of their attackers squalled and fell back behind a kiosk. Their companions shifted their aim in retaliation and forced him to duck back behind the wall. “We can’t stay here! They’ll box us in!”

“I know!”

He leaned back against the wall and checked his blaster’s charge. None of them had thought to bring extras, and he could see Pulkka’s shots becoming more judicious as she worked to conserve ammunition. “Okay, Tovari? Tovari!”

“Godsdamnit, WHAT?”

“Get everyone in the ship and trigger the hangar’s fire suppression system.”

“Are you crazy, that’ll vent the atmo and lock down the- oh! But how will you get to us?”

“We’ll get back to you on that, just do it!”

An alarm suddenly wailed to life almost directly overhead, and the slightly lower pitch of standard police-issue blasters joined the chaotic symphony. Feid grabbed his arm and dragged him from cover, firing left-handed down the concourse to keep their attackers’ heads down. “Finally, a distraction! Let’s move!”

“We need to go down a level!” Obi-Wan winced as a bolt passed a hair too close and scorched his
sleeve. He returned fire without really looking, uncertain if the scream he heard was his fault or the result of something else.

“What? Are you crazy?!”

“Just trust me!”

“Pulkka!” she yelled over the din as they caught up to the others.

“What?!”

“We need to get into the trees down there!”


“Right now, yes!” Obi-Wan pushed Feid in Pulkka’s direction. “It’s only six meters, I can manage it. You take care of them!”

Terrik, Pulkka and Feid all stared at him in astonishment until a laser bolt snapped off the canopy of the kiosk sheltering them, causing them to duck and swear. Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “D’you have any better ideas?” Without waiting for a response, he vaulted the guardrail.

Landing without the Force to cushion it hurt, sending a jarring impact up through his legs even as he let himself collapse and roll into the lush greenery. He fetched up on his side against the base of a fountain as Pulkka swung down and landed nearby, looking irritated with Terrik and Feid clinging to her shoulders.

“Ride’s over, everyone off.”

“You!” Terrik grabbed Obi-Wan by the arm, hauling him upright with a scowl. “You’re insane. Where the fuck did Retten meet you anyway?”

“You really don’t want to know the answer to that question. This way.”

The door to the maintenance tunnels was secured with a simple magnetic lock which popped open obligingly with the aid of a blaster bolt. Unlike the appearance-conscious public face of Cloud City, the service halls were bare grey ferrocrete and durasteel lined with exposed cabling bundles and pipework, lit in dim, eerie orange by sodium lamps.

They didn’t pause for breath until the roar of the firefight faded behind them. “Anyone catch a look at the assholes shooting at us?” Feid gasped.

Terrik shrugged as he sagged against the wall. “No uniforms. Could’ve been anyone, probably mercs. Bastra. Bastra!”

It took Obi-Wan a moment to register that his name was being called. “Sorry, what?”

“What’s going on back at the ship?”

“Someone attacked the delivery crew. Tovari and Fan dragged them into the hangar and sealed the door, but they were cutting their way through. I told them to short out the fire suppression system.”

Terrik rolled his eyes. “Great, so the mercs can’t get in, but neither can we.”

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan insisted, “We can get to the maintenance bay off the hangar, grab rebreathers and use the access hatch.”
Pulkka gave him a heavily ironic look. “And you’re certain the people trying to break into the hangar haven’t thought of that, too?”

“No, but it was the best I could come up with at the time. I didn’t hear anyone else volunteering.”

“We were busy.” Terrik looked like he wanted to punch something, preferably Obi-Wan. “I assume you know where we’re going?”

“Hmm.” Obi-Wan ruffled a hand through his shaggy hair, sending drops of sweat flying. “I figured we’d follow the corridor til we reach the cargo lifts and figure it out from there.”

Terrik threw up his hands and started jogging. “We’re all fucking doomed.”

“How’s he doing, Fan?”

The Twi’lek glanced over his shoulder at Tovari hovering in the doorway. The wounded Duros on the floor had finally succumbed to the sedatives, allowing Fan access to the charred mess of his stomach. “It’s not karkin’ pretty, but nothing ruptured. He’ll live if I can get the bleeding under control, better if we can get him to a proper medic. What’s it like out there?”

“Oh, you know. Poisonous gas-giant upper atmosphere all over the place and a pack of Sithspawn trying to melt their way through a sealed pressure door. Nothing serious.”

“Oh, is that all.” He turned back to his patient and finished peeling fabric away from the blaster-score. “Heard from the boss yet?”

“Just now. We need to get ready to cycle the airlock because they’ve picked up heat again.”

“Great. How’s our other guest?”

“Mad as hell, but not at us. She’s on the comm with her boss, the two droids they had with them are scrap.”

Fan blindly tossed a wad of gauze soaked through with viridian blood in the general direction of the biological waste bin and reached for a fresh piece. “Could’ve been worse, at least ours are still walking. Get out of here and let me work.”

Tovari’s comm went off just as she turned to go. “And that’ll be Booster. Get that guy strapped in, we’re not going to wait around.”

The others’ arrival was heralded by an eye-watering whiff of sulphur and singed Whiphid fur. Pulkka entered the cabin a moment later to help Fan move the unconscious Duros to a bunk and strap him in. Even as the ship lifted off smoothly, they could hear Booster yelling at Bastra to get on with the navigating, dammit.

The graze on the Whiphid’s back wasn’t nearly as bad as he’d feared and could wait its turn; Fan had her hold a pressure bandage in place over his other patient’s wound. “Well, this has been fun. Who the druk were they?”

“No idea, but they attacked us after the boss told a conglomerate to go space themselves, so we’re assuming they’re connected.”
“Oh. Great.”

The flicker of the interior lights was barely enough warning for them to grab hand-holds before the ship hit hyperspace.

Chapter End Notes

Booster's current ship is a YV-929 armed freighter he had stripped down to a shell and heavily modified*.

(*At least, that's my excuse. The interior layouts I've found online are really quite badly-designed, with vital features in inconvenient locations ;p )
Finding

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Anakin is trying his best to find his place in the Jedi Temple, but it isn't easy. Particularly not when the Council sends Qui-Gon off on a mission with Quinlan Vos.

Chapter Notes

CW: torture

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.08.30
Coruscant

The letters on the page seemed to burn into his eyes mockingly as Anakin tried to work his brain around the new word. The characters were there, he knew Aurebesh well enough. But dammit, nobody taught slaves to read! He wished he could try sounding the letters out loud, like he did alone in his room in the evenings, but here in a classroom full of his agemates so far ahead of him, it would only earn scorn.

It wasn’t Anakin’s fault. He knew that much; his language skills were excellent, he knew his numbers better than most -- he’d had to while working for Watto, you didn’t get anywhere fixing machines if you couldn’t do the numbers properly. But the reading, so much reading. It tripped him up constantly, made him have to spend more time on his essays than the teachers seemed to think he would need. After the first couple weeks, Anakin had set up a speech-to-text function on his datapad so he wouldn’t be struggling to write as well.

He picked up the history and sociology quickly enough when watching holotutors late after dinner, when he was supposed to be sleeping. It made sense, gears and wires interconnected like a giant machine made of people and money; a local project sponsored by a planetary council could cause ripples that would roll across the galaxy. There was logic behind it, and once the words to express the concepts were given to him, it locked into his head easily.

The first thing he’d done was to look up the purpose slavery had in that giant machine; surely there had to be a reason for the Jedi to be so willing to look the other way while sentients were bought and sold under their very noses. He’d seethed to realise that entire societies would collapse if their sentient economy were suddenly stopped.
Why not just use droids? But they’d still need people to maintain the droids. Couldn’t they just hire those people then?

He suddenly realized he’d lost track of the subject, and Master Ph’kien was calling his name.

“Uh. Sorry, Master. What was the question?” Anakin ignored the soft snickers from behind him as he struggled to figure out where they were in the lesson -- a bunch of important-looking words on the main screen were unparsable -- but ignoring the invisible hand that shoved his chair from behind once Ph’kien’s attention was focused on another initiate was much more difficult.

If he pushed his chair back from the desk, it would be shoved forward again; if he stayed there, it would still be shoved until his belly pressed into the desk and moved the furniture with him, and the noise it made on the tiles would get him chided. There was no way to win; complaining never seemed to get the right response from the teachers.

He pushed his chair back into its original spot, braced for the next shove, and tried to figure out what page they were on now.

“If someone is trying to use the Force to move an object, can you use the Force to prevent them from moving it?”

Pulled from his musing over the datapad of mission information, Qui-Gon blinked at Anakin. “You mean, to keep the object still?”

“Yeah.” His Padawan remained focused on the plate of food in front of him. Now with a healthy diet introduced to his life, Anakin was in the middle of a dramatic growth spurt which caused the Temple quartermasters no end of consternation trying to figure out what his clothing size was this week. Qui-Gon had started keeping an array of snacks in their small kitchen so that Anakin wouldn’t feel the need to sneak out to the commissary after hours.

“Not an object in space or in the air,” Anakin clarified, a thoughtful frown pinching his brows together. “Like, if it’s sitting on the floor, can you use the Force to act as a lever, with the floor being the fulcrum, and keep the object where it is?”

Qui-Gon smiled, intrigued. “That might work, if they’re not trying to lift it. Where did this idea come from?”

Anakin shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “It was just a thought.”

Qui-Gon knew that look; it wasn’t so long ago that Obi-Wan had been dealing with unpleasant agemates, himself. He shoved away the pang at the thought of his former Padawan and his utter lack of contact, and forced himself to focus on Anakin’s needs. The boy didn’t feel comfortable discussing it; pressing the issue right now would make him withdraw rather than open up. Better to focus on the practical activities. “Well. Why don’t we try it?”

His Padawan looked up, eyes going wide. “Really?”

“Of course.” He pushed the datapad aside. “Finish your supper, and then we can practice on a few items that won’t get damaged?”
“Wizard!” Anakin stuffed a forkful of vegetables into his mouth, blue eyes gleaming with excitement and pleasure at not being dismissed.

Many of the teaching Masters seemed to think Anakin’s constant questions and theories were either pedestrian or irritating; several had contacted Qui-Gon and begged him to review basic concepts with the boy so they could avoid having the classes distracted by theoretical discussions above their level. Privately, Qui-Gon felt the digressions resulting from Anakin’s serious questions were healthy and encouraged the other Initiates and Padawans to investigate their potential further. _When did we become so formulaic in our approach to things?_ No wonder there were so few field-capable Jedi now.

They spent the evening on the floor of the sitting room, trying to resist each other’s Force pushes against a variety of objects. Anakin’s idea was one in which experienced Jedi were practiced, but it was more advanced theory than he and his agemates would be exposed to at their level. Qui-Gon delighted in his Padawan’s exploration, letting him learn through experience rather than instruction. They had a moment of near-disaster as Anakin attempted to anchor one of the kitchen chairs and neglected to account for multiple points of floor contact and a higher center of gravity, but he learned quickly from the experience and the cabinet was only slightly dented.

Anakin was ready the next day, burning with determination to foil Hui’s tricks. Nothing happened until the last ten minutes of first class; when he felt the nudge against his chair, it was a struggle to keep his expression neutral. He answered a question from Master Csabo as if he wasn’t half-focused on glueing his chair to the floor with the Force. The invisible shove came again and he set his jaw, willing the chair to become part of the tower’s structure, timeless and immovable.

A third shove was followed by the screech of Hui’s chair scraping backward across the polished tiles and jarring the desk behind her. Master Csabo frowned delicately and stopped her lesson long enough to ask the Initiate to cease fidgeting. Anakin pinched his lips together. He wanted desperately to grin with triumph, but he knew Braedeen was watching from one side of the room.

He’d barely left the room when a hand shoved him in the small of the back, and he stumbled as Hui and Braedeen bracketed him.

“I bet you think you’re smart, huh, Fannykin? Figured out how to push back.”

He shrugged Brae’s hand off his shoulder. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He wished there was an adult around -- or even one of the older Padawans -- to witness Hui’s involuntary confession to messing with him in class.

“You think you’re so special, you get to be a Padawan without even growing up here. But we all know how stupid you really are,” Hui continued viciously. Braedeen made an offensive mimicry of Anakin’s attempts to sound out words.

Swallowing a litany of the foulest Huttese invective he knew, Anakin reminded himself that this was nothing compared to Sebulba literally trying to get him killed by tampering with his pod four months ago. He kept walking, only to have his head jerked back painfully as one of the two Initiates yanked on his small braid. Eyes watering, he clapped his hand to the roots of the braid behind his right ear.

“You’ll never make it to knighthood, you know. Master Qui-Gon has been away too long from the
temple, he can’t teach even though everyone says he’s amazing. First Xanatos, now Obi-Wan. I bet you’ll fall to the Dark side, too,” Brae hissed poisonously in his ear. “You’re better off getting away from him, desert rat. Go volunteer for the Corps. At least there you’re not required to be smart.”

The taller boy yanked on his braid once more and Hui bumped his shoulder hard as they passed, making him nearly drop his datapad. Anakin scowled after them, rubbing behind his ear.

“That was pretty funny.”

He turned to glare at the girl who’d come up beside him; she also had a Padawan braid, half-hidden among the curtain of her auburn hair. She smiled shyly. “I mean what you did in class earlier. I felt that. I know Master Csabo felt it.”

“Would have been nice if she’d noticed them using the Force to push me around for the last month,” he muttered.

“They’re just jealous. And scared; Hui is going to age out this year if nobody takes her on, and Braedeen has been turned down five times.” The girl linked her arm into Anakin’s and tugged him along in the direction of their next class. “I’m Etain.”

“Anakin.”

“I know. Everyone was wondering what Master Qui-Gon would do once he knighted Obi-Wan.” She sobered, her mouth screwing up unhappily. “Well. Anyway, a lot of Initiates were hoping to get his attention. Then you just appeared out of nowhere and snapped the opportunity out from under them.”

“It’s not like I wanted to-”

“No, I get it. And it’s not your fault,” she added firmly, squeezing his elbow. “Master Qui-Gon is a big boy and allowed to choose his own Padawans.” Her green eyes were sparkling with amusement, and he couldn’t help but grin back.

“Us Padawans should stick together, anyway. Not that there’s anything wrong with Initiates, but they don’t have to deal with the same sorts of things we do. Looking after our Masters is tough work, you know.” Etain winked, and Anakin decided that he liked her attitude.

“Not all the time. Master Qui-Gon left this morning on a mission for the Council. I’m not allowed to go because it’s too dangerous and I’m still settling in here.” He did his best not to sound sulky; the Temple was hardly as exciting as following his Master into battle on Naboo.

Etain shrugged. “They do that sometimes, especially when we’re as young as we are. Mine’s been away for a week, and it’s kind of boring without him around. So…” she drew the word out, looking away shyly and then giving Anakin a sideways glance. “I was wondering if you’d like to come over after class. I know you have trouble reading; I can help you learn.”

He didn’t even pause to think about it. “Would you? I mean, yeah, that’d be wizard! They just seem to think I’ll magically absorb everything without trying, and it gives me a headache.”

“Absolutely. And maybe you can teach me that trick with holding your chair in place?”

Anakin felt like his grin would stretch off his face. “Definitely!”
“Good to see you getting back out into the world again.”

Qui-Gon felt a reluctant smile tug at his lips. “Can’t hide in the Temple forever. I thought I saw you on Tatooine.”

Quinlan Vos grinned easily. “Took forever to get the sand out of my—” he winced at an elbow jab to the ribs from his Padawan, who was giving him a disgusted look. “Hair. Right! Murdered Senator! You ready?”

“You seem far too upbeat about this.” Quinlan and Aayla Secura fell into step with him as he led the way through the hangar to the speeder he’d signed out for the day.

The Kiffar Knight shook his head. “I have to be. I’m probably going to have to touch unpleasant shit. Consider yourself lucky and let me joke about it.”

The location was within sight of the Jedi Temple, a penthouse apartment in one of the towering spires a short ride from the Senate dome. The CPF detail let them in after scrutinizing their credentials, and then they were alone in the opulent chambers.

Aayla wrinkled her nose in distaste at the gaudy hangings and art pieces. “Why do politicians never seem to have any sense of style?”

“They do, it’s just their particular style is called money;” Quinlan responded absently. “Man, whoever did this was a kriffin’ neatnik.” He pulled his gloves off, brushing his fingers lightly over the edge of the desk. His dark eyes unfocused for a moment, lost in the recent memories attached to the furniture. “Trell was scared shitless, though.”

Qui-Gon passed quietly through the open sitting area, senses brushing like feathers at the psychic imprints left from years of occupation. There was a sense like greasy residue hovering about; it was a rare politician who was clean, but this felt gritty on his mind in a way that set his teeth on edge.

Quinlan’s voice brought him back. “He made some comms shortly before this happened, Master. You check the logs, I need to see the balcony he got thrown from.”

The most recent call in the log was from eight days earlier to Trell’s legal advisor demanding a meeting; the one before was to his secretary ordering them to clear his schedule for the next day. The third had gone directly into the recipient’s message box.

“Haugg! Where are you? What's going on?”

“He’s not angry.” She paused the playback and pointed to Trell’s yellow eyes, wide, wild, and uncommonly bloodshot. A thin sheen like oil coated his skin. “That’s an extreme fear response.”

“Is he after me, too, Haugg? Haugg, this is intolerable! I want out! You hear me? Out!”

“Who is this Haugg, I wonder?” Qui-Gon downloaded the logs to his datapad. A quick search of the HoloNet informed him of one Groff Haugg, recently deceased and under investigation by Judicial for involvement in the drug trade. “Death sticks?”
Quinlan’s Padawan grimaced. “Those are nasty. Euphoria, awful hallucinations, and they literally knock time off your lifespan.”

“Whoever thought ‘death sticks’ would be a perfect name for a narcotic?” Qui-Gon mused. He excused himself to speak to the CPF officers outside the door, one of whom offered a short list of other known dealers.

“Most of ‘em are dead, you know. Or in custody. Someone’s been cashing in on their bounties hardcore this month.”

The Jedi Master looked at her sharply. “Was there a bounty on Senator Trell, as well?”

The officer shook her head. “If there was, it was a private one. Most of the others were paid out by Senate Intelligence or the CPF for contraband trafficking.”

“I see. Has Senator Trell’s body been recovered?”

Both officers cringed. “Never mind that the drop from the balcony is several klicks straight to the underworld, whoever was responsible shot down the CSF VAAT responding to the Senator’s security alarm. It made a mess when it hit.”

The other officer cleared his throat uncomfortably. “The team reported a humanoid, male, wearing Mandalorian armor. He, um. He was asked to release the Senator, so he did...but not over a nearby surface.”

Qui-Gon regarded them placidly, wondering if he could abandon the mission files among the datapads on Mace’s desk and how long it would take anyone to notice. “Thank you. We may be here a bit longer. I’ll confer with my companions.”

Quinlan was rubbing his palms briskly against his robes, looking bemused. “I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Why didn’t the CPF responders set up a jumper net before asking the bounty hunter to drop him?”

“You would think that would be the first order of business. Our minders have no idea what’s going on, but given how poorly the situation was handled, I’m going with the responders being on the take.”

“But not on the same side as the bounty hunter,” Aayla suggested. “If they were supposed to just look like they were helping? Whoever paid them probably didn’t want them to survive.” Quinlan nodded.

“I agree.” Qui-Gon held up his datapad. “There seem to be a number of smugglers in connection with this Haugg the Senator called.”

Quinlan finished pulling his gloves on and folded his arms. “I’m not inclined to go asking more questions of the CPF, all things considered.”

The older Jedi’s eyes glinted shrewdly. “Which is why we’re going out for lunch.”

“Qui-Gon! Quin! Been ages!” Didi slapped Quinlan on the shoulder, then stopped in surprise. “Is
this Aayla?”

Quinlan’s Padawan gave a shy smile. “How did you know?”

“I told him,” Quinlan grinned. Aayla shook the cafe owner’s proffered hand, which he turned into a bow and a light peck on the back of her fingers, making her blush violet.

“How’s Astri, Didi? The wedding is soon, isn’t it?” Qui-Gon asked. Didi rolled his eyes.

“Davinian’s mother is driving her up the wall with ‘suggestions’ that are really orders. She wants to elope, and I can’t blame her.” He rubbed the tip of his nose. “The idea of taking off and hiding out in the hills again is starting to sound more like a retirement ideal than an emergency countermeasure. But you’re not here to listen to me gripe. What can Didi’s Café do for you?”

“We got a puzzle, Didi,” Quinlan said. “Maybe the missing pieces have drifted through here recently.”

“I love puzzles. The back corner over there is more discreet,” Didi added with a wink.

With a gentle sound-dampener to accompany their meals, the cafe owner dropped into the space beside Qui-Gon. “Whattaya got, then?” He took a quick glance at the datapad and paused. “Funny. You’re not the first people with Haugg on their radar right now. A certain someone you know was here yesterday and asked about him.”

“Obi-Wan?” Quinlan beat Qui-Gon to it, leaning eagerly over the table and nearly dragging his long hair into his plate. “Is he okay?”

“Psh, yeah.” Didi flapped his hand absently, still focused on the datapad. “He’s with some good people-- well, disreputable people, but still good, know what I mean? Looked a little scruffy but that’s to be expected.”

Qui-Gon shook his head, amused. Everyone always let their hair go a bit wild after years of enduring that awful Padawan cut. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“I’m to tell you hi from him, by the way. Groff Haugg, death stick dealer, dodgy nerf products. Took an assisted dive into his own carbon-freeze pit. Was not actually wanted, but connected to a lot of people who are. The rest of these were wanted alive; the bounties are off the table, so it looks like they’re all accounted for.”

Aayla sipped at her drink. “Is there a way to find out who collected on them?”

The corners of Didi’s mouth pulled down as he rocked his head thoughtfully. “I know who I can ask, but they’re kind of shy. Give me a few.”

Quinlan slouched back in the booth as Didi disappeared through the door marked Staff Only. “At least I didn’t have to handle a corpse this time.” His Padawan’s face scrunched up in distaste.

“Does that happen often?”

The younger Knight gave him a look over the rim of his cup. “Even one is more than enough. I had three to deal with on Tatooine.”

Suppressing a smile, Qui-Gon asked, “What were you doing on Tatooine, of all places?”

“Tracing the origin points for a slaver ring,” Aayla muttered, lekku coiling in revulsion.
Quinlan nodded. “A particularly nasty one. They’ve been pulling sporadic raids around the Outer Rim for a while. All we’ve found on them so far is a link to the recent Colicoid purchase of the Kessel spice mines. Someone’s covering their tracks well.”

“That’s a dark road to follow. I hope you’re both being careful.” Qui-Gon grimaced. The slave trade was abhorrent, but far too deeply-entrenched to be dismantled through legal means alone. And the sentients who ran it were not opposed to using violence to keep it that way.

“Don’t worry about us,” Quinlan said with a tight smile. “We know when to stop poking.”

Aayla delicately wiped sauce from her fingers on a napkin. “So Didi is a slicer?”

Qui-Gon chuckled and took a bite of a roll of something that was crispy on the outside, chewy in the center, and tasted like spiced and sugared tea leaves. Definitely an acquired taste, one he wasn’t certain was worth the effort to cultivate. “I’m not entirely certain, to be honest. Didi Oddo is something of a fixture among the rougher crowd. He won’t discuss how he got that reputation, and that’s how he maintains it. He has a moral code which sometimes comes in handy.”

“Like right now?”

“Many Jedi come here to get that little bit of information we wouldn’t be able to pry from anyone else,” Quinlan said. “And even then, there’s a few Jedi he won’t provide the time of day. Like Master Dooku.”

Qui-Gon tensed a bit at the mention of his former Master. Dooku had stood in front of the Council a month after the Naboo Crisis, roundly told them off for their treatment of the situation and Obi-Wan, and departed the Order with a swirl of his cloak. Dramatic as ever. “Not that he would deign to descend into CoCo Town of his own accord. It happened twice that I know of, both times at Master Yoda’s behest.”

“And he was a prat both times,” Didi growled as he returned. “No offense, Jinn.”

“I should defend my master’s honor, except I know he would consider this matter beneath himself,” Qui-Gon countered with a smile. “That was fast. Any luck?”

“The payouts were delivered via a finder at Outland Transit Station.” Didi passed over a datachip. “That’s about all I found. Anyone for dessert?”

Aayla was less than happy about being left behind at the Temple. Quinlan was adamant that bringing her to a station within breathing distance of Hutt Space would put her in more danger than he was willing to handle, and instead tasked her with looking for a money trail connected to the CPF team that responded to Trell’s security alert. “Jedi fetch a high price on the slave market, kid. Especially younger, untrained, Twi’leki Jedi. I know you can handle yourself; but I know I can handle myself, and I don’t want to take that risk.”

Qui-Gon privately agreed. The fact that he’d had little choice but to bring Anakin into a war zone because the Council would not even make a temporary concession for the boy still rankled. This was not a consular mission; Jedi credentials might close more doors than they opened. Qui-Gon returned briefly to his and Anakin's quarters to exchange his robes for rough, nondescript clothes that would be unremarkable anywhere on the Outer Rim. His lightsaber settled into a pocket up the sleeve of his jacket, out of view and as conspicuous as any other sleeve-draw weapon.

As Quinlan had said, they were taking no chances.
Quinlan smirked at him as they reconvened at the Temple hangar. “You can take the Jedi out of the Temple--”

“If the punchline is a comment about sticks, I will tell Yoda on you.”

The younger Knight glared at him flatly. “Prime example. I’m assuming you want to take a roundabout route rather than straight through Hutt Space? That adds a few days onto this trip.”

“Not this time. I have a feeling that sooner is better.”

“A feeling, huh? Short route via Nal Hutta, it is.”

Qui-Gon had insisted on a ship with a better hyperdrive than he was usually granted; it knocked the transit time down to three days.

It was still three days of Quinlan’s terrible sarcastic jokes, but after seven years of Obi-Wan’s puns, Qui-Gon suffered through it with a pleasant sense of nostalgia rather than irritation. “How has Aayla not killed you yet, Quin?”

“She doesn’t seem it, but she’s worse than I am. Her filter’s just better.”

“You mean she actually has one.”

“Like I said: better.”

The trip was thankfully uneventful with the exception of a ridiculous twerp of a pirate attempting to extract “tolls” from ships changing routes in Nal Hutta. Qui-Gon scowled at the Dug through the comm and demanded to know if the Desilijic knew he was out there harassing the potential customers. The pirate huffed nervously and stammered something about special passes, by which time the navicomp had completed its calculations and taken them away.

Outland Transit Station was an older structure with a number of recent-looking additions and modifications, a central domed dish with six larger blocks extending from the center like cogs on a gear. The docking authority sounded bored as they ran down the list of rules -- weapons were fine but don’t shoot anyone who doesn’t shoot you first, all instances of cheating are to be settled between the parties concerned, don’t be a sleemo and steal from the merchants.

“Is there any security on this station at all?” Qui-Gon wondered as they locked the docking bay door.

Quinlan shook his head. “Only to protect the merchants and keep the pit fighters safe from the audience.”

Qui-Gon stared at him, wide-eyed. “Pit fighters?”

The younger Jedi couldn’t quite put a smile on it. “Reasons I didn’t want to bring Aayla. If you want to make a few trugut on the side while we’re here and feel confident in yourself without a lightsaber, go spar with someone in the pits.” He paused thoughtfully. “Actually, pulling a lightsaber there might make you really popular. Or get you accused of cheating. Depends on the day.”

“Please tell me you haven’t done that.”

“Only once, never with a lightsaber. In my defense, it was to settle a larger argument and I was in character.”

The promenade decks Quinlan led them to were lined with shops, bars, and clubs; people didn’t
stand around conversing against the flow of foot traffic lest they be accosted by wandering religious fanatics or employees from the nearest brothel. The atmosphere recyclers were unable to entirely clear the dry tang of fryer grease, motor lubricants, and the musk of thousands of bodies in an enclosed space. Speeders and swoops kept to the open passages between the levels, the odd pairs of racers whooping as they stunted around each other and wove through the walkways. It was, Qui-Gon thought, rather like the lower-mid levels of Coruscant.

“Here we are.” Quinlan’s soft murmur brought Qui-Gon’s attention to a particular shopfront. “Dex deals with mercs and hunters; if there’s a finder on the station, he can arrange us an introduction.”

“Does he know who you are?”

Quinlan grimaced rubbed the back of his neck. “Yes. Somehow. I certainly didn’t tell him.”

Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows. “That’s not concerning in the slightest.”

“Lucky he seems to like me.”

It was a weapons shop, defanged models resting on plinths beside holograms of technical specs, live models behind a security field beyond the counter; a door to the rear advertised a testing range, from which the sounds of repeated blaster-fire could be heard faintly. The Besalisk at the counter gave them a massive, toothy grin as they approached.

“Quin! Haven’t seen you through here for a while. Who did you piss off this time?”

Quinlan grinned back and shook the offered hands. “Nobody, yet. This is my friend, Qui. Qui: Dexter Jettster, the most trustworthy scoundrel on the Outer Rim. We’re here looking for someone; I was hoping you might be able to point us in the right direction.”

Dex twitched an eyebrow at Qui-Gon as they shook hands; Qui-Gon tilted his head in assent. The other man was sharp; he could probably identify a lightsaber user by their poise and weapon-calluses alone.

“Well, what have you got?”

Qui-Gon slid the datapad with the list of information he’d compiled across the counter. “There’s a finder here involved with these collected bounties; we’re looking to have a word with them regarding a related matter.”

“Hmm.” Dex flicked through the list. “That’d be Rozatta.” At Quinlan’s soft curse, the Besalisk chuckled. “Yeah, you’ll need an appointment. I’ll give her a call. Could take a bit. You go hang out at the bar across the way, I’ll come get ya.”

Qui-Gon waited til they were crossing the walkway to the other side of the level before asking, “Who’s Rozatta?”

“Huh? Oh. She runs this place, she’ll be busy. Got a good rep, though. That’s not what I was swearing about.” Quinlan looked disturbed, his features tight. “Do you feel that?”

Frowning, Qui-Gon moved to the edge of the walkway and leaned against the railing to watch the swoop racers; his mind focused on the currents running around them. This deep among a population, there was always going to be an undercurrent of Darkness, the baser natures of petty thieves and criminals drifting like smoke in the background. Now that Quinlan had drawn his attention to it, though…. His breath caught.
“Yeah, that. I can’t tell what it is, but I don’t like it.”

Something was threading through the crowd, attaching strands of clinging smog to a number of patrons, forming a grim spiderweb through the promenade. The number of interlinked threads was growing as they watched; a few even connected themselves to Qui-Gon and Quinlan, and Quin hissed in disgust at the tacky, clammy feel.

“Is there someone we can alert?”

The Kiffar Jedi shook his head. “None that would believe us. One of us needs to stay here in case Roz is free for a meeting. I can track these things down, whatever they are; you have the important information.”

“Alright. Stay in contact, dammit.”

The bar was quiet at this time in the afternoon; Qui-Gon paid for something non-alcoholic and ignored the bartender’s dramatic eyeroll. The network of foul filaments was increasing, sending a shiver down his spine. He was contemplating ordering a second drink when the Besalisk merchant appeared.

“There you are. Where’s Quin?”

“He went to check on something.”

Dex’s eyes narrowed and he rumbled under his breath in annoyance. “Well, Roz says she got time for you right now. Catch any lift and head to the Command Center, access code 22-Nirm-Trill.”

“Much appreciated.”

“Don’t mention it.” A heavy hand rested on Qui-Gon’s shoulder, stopping him, and the Besalisk met his curious glance with a frown. “No, really, don’t mention it. You guys are on another level, wouldn’t do for rumor to get around that I’ll pull strings for just anyone.”

The lift door had just slid open on the command center’s atrium when Qui-Gon was sent reeling by a surge of absolute malevolence and terrified pain emanating from the office.

“Sir?” The reception droid behind the front desk jerked upright in alarm as he surged toward the door. “Are you quite alright, sir?”

“I need to see Rozatta. Now!”

The droid attempted to move into his way. “I am quite sorry, sir, but Madam Rozatta is currently with a client.”

Another surge of agony battered Qui-Gon’s mind. There wasn’t time to negotiate with the receptionist; he yanked on the Force brusquely to hit the droid’s power switch and pushed past as it went rigid. The door was locked; muttering a curse, he sank the blade of his lightsaber into the office door’s keypad.

A shrill scream emerged from the soundproofed office as the doors opened.
Quinlan traced his ungloved fingers through the air along one of those invisible, polluted strands. The three that had linked themselves to him twanged silently; one was more tense than the others, and he followed it through the corridors into the residential levels along the outer walls of the station.

The number of people had dropped dramatically outside of Merchants’ Row and the public parts of the station, but the web of filaments remained, clinging in the corners like cobwebs. They were getting darker, too, a toxic haze drifting in his peripheral vision. He was glad he hadn’t yet run into a sealed security door; all the decompression hatches were locked open along the corridors, allowing unimpeded passage.

The one thread suddenly tightened, almost yanking him off his feet. Quinlan regained his balance, looking around frantically. He was standing in the passage along a residential spoke’s lower structural support column; dark, cavernous durasteel walls enclosed the area, connecting in a cross-junction just ahead with another part of the station’s frame.

Placed neatly at the corners of the junction were a series of blister-like devices that resembled mynock egg sacs on a ship’s hull. A wide network of the smoggy filaments concentrated around the junction, twined into the objects.

Swearing viciously, Quinlan backed away. In the Force, he could see the pattern of detonators now, placed with loving care in strategic locations to take the station apart. There were too many, too far apart, to disable by himself. There wasn’t even a way to tell how much time was left.

Quinlan ran back up the corridor to the last alert box he’d seen, smashed the protective plastic casing with the butt of his lightsaber hilt, and pulled the evacuation alarm.

Qui-Gon!

“You just signed your death warrant!” The lightly-accented voice, dark with fury and hatred, was coming from a comm screen on the far side of the desk. A large, brutish man in Mandalorian armor was leaning over it, a vivid-pink Toydarian pinned on her back under a heavy hand beside the console. Rozatta was wheezing, a harsh whimper catching on the end of each breath.

The man’s laugh was dark and ugly. “Don’t be a sore loser. It’s just business, old buddy.” He leaned forward, pressing down on his captive’s hand against the edge of the desk. The Toydarian shrieked as her spindly arm cracked audibly.

The frozen protocol droid flew through the air, a hundred kilos of metal and circuitry catching the helmeted figure in the chest. The two went down with a crash, the Mandalorian winded from the impact. Growling a curse, he kicked the droid aside and looked up; the Toydarian was gone, whisked away in the half-second he’d been distracted. He rolled to his feet, blaster already tracking toward the dark blur of motion near the door to his right. Three shots bounced off a humming bar of green light, and the armored man began to laugh.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” The Mandalorian chuckled darkly. “I’d love to add your lightsaber to my collection, friend, but I have what I came for, and the clock’s ticking.” He sidled around the desk and advanced, blue cape flying out behind him, pouring a barrage of dual blaster fire that Qui-Gon was hard-pressed to keep up with. None of the reflected shots did more than score the armor -- proper beskar’gam rather than durasteel. A lucky shot seared the outside of Qui-Gon’s leg above the
knee, and then the armored man was in the Jedi Master’s face.

Qui-Gon’s lightsaber blade struck the other man’s vambrace, scorching a line across the beskar. A blaster bolt singed his hair as he swayed to one side, the Force saving him from the point-blank shot but not the elbow that followed up under his chin, snapping his head back. Stars burst across his eyes from the impact, and he was dimly aware of the bounty hunter shoving him aside, running toward the bank of lifts.

An ugly laugh grated in his ears and something metallic bounced off the deck. Qui-Gon’s vision cleared in time to recognize the thermal detonator as it rolled to a stop near his feet. Seizing the Force, he swept the fist-sized explosive into the office and threw himself to one side of the door.

The explosion took out part of the command center’s wall and long transparisteel window. Vacuum licked at Qui-Gon’s clothes and hair for an instant before decompression alarms blared and the emergency seal slammed shut over the office door.

The bounty hunter was gone. Gasping for breath through aching lungs, Qui-Gon hauled himself over to where he’d deposited the Toydarian next to the reception desk. “Madam Rozatta?”

She wheezed again, and Qui-Gon rested his hand lightly on her chest, settling into a light trance.

Broken ribs, several of them. He was no healer, but years of field work away from the Temple had made him competent enough. The Force flowed into his hands and through them, easing the Toydarian’s pain and then setting to work repairing the puncture in her right lung. The worst part was resetting the dislocated ribs. Toydarians being resistant to Force suggestions, Qui-Gon couldn’t just put her to sleep; he took his time, temporarily pinching off connections to the related nerve clusters before realigning the bones. After a few minutes, he was mostly satisfied with the work. Chief Healer Vokara Che would probably strangle him with her lekku for the half-done job, but she would never find out.

“Ohh. Bless you honey. What brings a Jedi here?” Her voice was a hoarse whisper, but Qui-Gon had to smile at the personality that persisted despite her injuries.

“You do. Or rather, I would guess, he did. We’re investigating the death of a senator from Ryloth.”

“Trell. Ha!” She coughed on the laugh. “Crooked as they come. Whaddaya want to know, Jedi?”

Frowning in concentration, Qui-Gon prodded gently at her ribs, making sure they’d stay in place until she could be taken to a medical facility. “Was there a private contract out for Connus Trell or Groff Haugg?”

“Nope. I know Haugg ran afoul of our recently departed friend. That was Montross. He has a nasty reputation, if you hadn’t figured that out already.” She groaned as he helped her sit up, cradling her shattered arm against her chest; with broken ribs, flying would be out of the question until she could get proper treatment.

A shadow fell over them, and Qui-Gon glanced up into the barrel of yet another blaster pistol and another menacing T-shaped visor.

“I think a better question would be: who the hell are you.”

Rozatta chuckled and winced. “Hi honey. Your timing’s terrible.”

Qui-Gon held his hands up, leaving his lightsaber where he’d placed it on the floor. “I am Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn. Who might you be?”
The blaster didn’t waver. “Mereel, Jaster Mereel. And I’d appreciate it if you stepped away from my Toydarian friend.” It was the same voice Montross had been speaking to over the comm earlier; the man must have been inbound.

The Jedi Master edged back carefully. If Mereel had been inbound, and Montross said that time was running out… His eyes widened at the memory of the dark threads winding through the station. “Your friend needs medical attention; but I’m afraid we may have a bigger problem—”

The cyclopean hooting of an evacuation alarm shattered the quiet, and Quinlan shouted in Qui-Gon’s head. He winced at the sudden sensory overload.

The Toydarian uttered something that was likely a curse. “Montross planted thermal charges, honey. We need to go.”

_Thermal charges, Quinlan?_

_Yeah, a lot of ‘em! They’re on a timer but I don’t know how long we have._

_I think I have all the answers we need, I’ll meet you back at the ship._

_I’ll hold you to that._

Qui-Gon picked himself up and retrieved his lightsaber as the bounty hunter collected his friend with surprising gentleness. They took the lift down to the docking ring together in tense silence, alarms shrilling in the distance. When the door slid open, the Mandalorian glanced at him, his expression unreadable under the mask.

“I suppose I owe you thanks for saving Roz.” The respect in his voice had a grudging, reluctant tone. Qui-Gon smiled ruefully.

“I just happened to be there at the right time.”

“Yeah, you Jedi are good at that, aren’t you?”

He had nothing to say in response; the resentment simmering under a layer of cold professionalism prickled like static. Qui-Gon simply nodded to the pair and hurried to the hangar where Quinlan was waiting, grinding his teeth.

The first explosion rocked the hangar floor as they finished the truncated version of the preflight checks. Qui-Gon looked at Quinlan, whose face was locked in a grimace as he guided the ship through the vacuum shield, joining the cloud of ships and escape craft. Behind them, jets of flame from severed atmospheric systems flared out into space through rents in the station’s hull. A flare of blinding white cracked the station unevenly in eerie silence; the shockwave rattled their freighter a minute later, peppering the shields with debris.

It felt like a candle had been abruptly pinched out in Qui-Gon’s soul. First one, then a dozen, then a hundred: all the people who hadn’t reached a safe distance before the station exploded. Quinlan cupped his head in his hands, face etched with grief; Qui-Gon guessed he didn’t look much better.

“I should’ve—”

He gripped Quinlan’s shoulder, possibly harder than he’d intended. “Don’t. If you hadn’t found them at all, nobody would have had _any_ warning. Thousands are still alive because of you.”

Quin wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, mouth pinched. “You really expect that to help?”
Qui-Gon sighed. “I hope someday it will.”

They spent the trip back to Coruscant writing reports for the Council and the Senate. Qui-Gon was relieved that the latter didn't have to be presented in person -- enough politicians were lost to foul play or accident every year that the investigation itself was little more than formality. When they’d commed Aayla to let her know they were on their way home, she had reported a series of notable cash deposits into the accounts of the CPF response team members -- a trail, but a dead one.

He was reclining on the bench seat in the communal area, finishing writing on his datapad while Quinlan conducted follow-up research at the computer terminal, when the other Jedi cursed and pushed his chair back.

“Quin?”

“That first Mandalorian, Montross? Definitely the sort to throw people off buildings out of spite. He’s got a record of preferring to deliver his bounties dead. The other one, though. You said his name was Mereel?”

“Jaster Mereel, yes.”

“Those two have a long history.”

“It certainly sounded that way when I overheard them.” Qui-Gon shifted to peer over Quinlan's shoulder; the other Jedi pointed to a line of text in a large block of uninspired Concord Dawn personnel file.

“Says here Journeyman Protector Mereel died during a fight between a group calling themselves the True Mandalorians and a splinter group called Death Watch on Korda VI almost twenty years ago.” He opened a separate page with a different biography. “Montross was a member of the True Mandalorians at the time.”

Qui-Gon went back to the previous page and skimmed it, perplexed. There had been no hint of deception in the other man when he’d named himself.

“If that wasn’t Mereel I spoke to, who was it?”

Chapter End Notes

If you're wondering where this plot thread came from, Montross' destruction of Outland Station and torture of Rozatta is taken from the Bounty Hunter game. Roz dies in the game, but we have better plans for her ~__^
Delivery

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Obi-Wan has been trying to move forward with his new life, but sometimes the past just doesn't let go.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcum and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.09.05
Illic, New Cov

“Really, Captain Terrik, we can’t thank you enough for getting our people out of there.” The representative from Cov Innovations was pumping Terrik’s hand effusively as she babbled praise. From the patient look on his boss’ face, Obi-Wan knew Terrik was hoping a bonus was coming with the thanks, particularly since both the employees they’d rescued had been able to walk off the Eidolon Hazard under their own power.

“Really, it was the least we could do.” He extricated his hand politely and passed over the shipping manifest.

Obi-Wan turned back to watch the droids unload the cargo. A specialized unit was testing each can of compressed phosidium gas in turn; if the purity of the contents wasn’t up to the company’s standards, it was on the heads of the production company back on Bespin. There was something comfortably stable about cargo hauling for legitimate businesses. Terrik’s guild license guaranteed legal protection from accusations of ripping off the clients, and ensured an equitable investigation when things didn’t add up on either end of a run.

He thought back on the ambush on Cloud City and wondered how long the independent hauler guilds would last.

A hand slapped him lightly upside the back of his head. “You’re thinking about it again.” Tovari rested her elbow on Obi-Wan’s shoulder. “You must have driven your teacher nuts.”

He ducked his head, smiling ruefully. “It’s a difficult habit to break.”

“What, overthinking things?”
“Driving my teacher nuts. By overthinking things.”

“Ha. Ha.” She ruffled his hair affectionately; it was long enough to brush his eyebrows. “Now I’m wondering if you were investigators or something.”

Still trying to open up the sealed box of his past, Tovari’s favourite distraction. “You could say we were.”

“So what does Mister Investigator think about all this?”

He folded his arms across his chest, feeling the comforting press of his lightsaber against his ribs under his jacket. “Mister Investigator thinks we were only the targets on Bespin because we happened to be hauling for Cov Inno’. Which is worrying, because if attacks like that are really just to put pressure on the people we contract with, it’s going to start happening more often.”

She gave him a disgusted look. “You’re just a fucking bucket of sunshine today aren’t you?”

“I’ll make it up to you later.”

“Hmm. Will you, now?”

Obi-Wan met her playful leer with an innocent smile. “I’ll think of something.”

Terrik pulled the crew aside before they headed out into Illic proper. “I hate to have to say this, but I need you all to keep your eyes and ears open while we’re here. Our friend from Cov Inno’ said that wasn’t the first time one of their crews got jumped. You get any hint that things feel off, you come right back here.”

Pulkka grunted. “You’re not coming, boss?”

“Not this time. I need to make a few calls. Don’t stay out too late, kids.” He waved them off and stalked back up the ramp.

Fan sighed and glanced around at the rest of them plaintively. “Before we relax, does anyone want to come help me restock our med supplies?”

They took pity on Fanu’dar and went as a group, arranged for the supplies to be delivered to the Hazard’s hangar since Booster was there, and dragged the blue-skinned Twi’lek with them toward the nearest party district when he would have fussed after the delivery droids.

“You can rearrange the cases once we get back. Just comm the boss and ask him not to put things away,” Feid muttered, rolling her eyes. Fan tended to treat their makeshift med bay like his private domain, which was generally not a terrible thing, until someone else needed to get something.

He put up only a token protest this time, messing with his comm one-handed when Tovari looped her arm through his. Then she grabbed Bastra around the waist with her other arm and declared herself the luckiest woman on New Cov, and it was worth it to see the other human struggle with a blush response.
Pulkka pulled up beside Feid, the Whiphid’s height and bulk putting the Zabrak woman in full shade. “Is it just me, or is this place looking more sparse than usual?”

Feid nodded. “More patrols than last time we were here. I’ll see if I can’t get someone talking later.” It was always easier to get the security to share information when they thought you might not remember it post-hangover. She never got that wasted, but she was good at acting like it. She watched Bastra hesitantly put his arm around Tovari’s shoulders and smirked; the betting pool on those two had been running for over a month.

The bar they found was her favourite type: quiet, quaint, dimly-lit and a few meaningful steps off the main thoroughfare. In this case, it was halfway down a steep, narrow set of stairs between buildings, hidden in a sub-level. Illic’s domed nature meant the population had to build up instead of out, creating a delightful three-dimensional labyrinth once you escaped the tourist areas. The entrance had a low clearance and Pulkka whickered in amusement as her head brushed the door frame, but stairs led down into the larger space with plenty of head-room beyond.

The crowd was thin but composed mostly of other spacers and day workers just off shift, the kinds of people who were looking for a comfortable place to relax rather than do business. The bar’s sepia-toned atmosphere and well-scrubbed cultured-horn surfaces lent itself well to the impression of timelessness.

Feid abducted Bastra from Tovari and took him to the bar to help carry drinks while the others found a table large enough for four and a Whiphid. She ordered a round of ales from a human bartender who had the manic-eyed look of someone running on not enough sleep and too many stims, leaned back against the scuffed brass rail, and studied her younger crewmate critically.

“So what’s your deal, kid?”

He blinked his one blue eye at her in confusion. “About what?"

“If you prefer men, just tell Tovari already. Let a girl down easy.”

Bastra’s blush wasn’t pronounced enough to show, but she caught the brief heat-flush in his ears before he got it under control. “It’s not that. I-I mean, gender just-- it-it’s not an issue--” he stammered, and Feid bared her teeth in a grin. The kid’s head dropped onto his folded arms in exasperation. “Ugh, I’m never going to hear the end of it. I’ve never--” Bastra pulled a deep breath through his nose and gave her a sour glare without raising his head. “Yeah, not going there. Fuck off, Feid.”

Her grin became a chuckle and she patted his shoulder. “You’re running out of excuses, short of not liking her, and that’s one phrase I haven’t heard from you. Think you can manage carrying three drinks?” she added, tilting her head towards the foam-topped horn mugs the bartender had finished delivering.

It was nice to just relax with her crewmates in a place they knew they wouldn’t be bothered. The food wasn’t too greasy and came in enough variety to accommodate nonhuman customers, the other patrons generally kept to themselves and their own groups, and the music remained at a comfortable level for conversation. Tovari pulled out a deck of cards and a holographic scoreboard and taught them a weird game that seemed needlessly complicated. Fan tapped out in a sulk after losing the first couple rounds.

“What’s the point of a game that doesn’t involve betting?”

Tovari’s dark eyes glittered with mischief. “It does involve betting. It’s just that it’s in the card values,
you give them to the round’s dealer, and nobody else sees what your bet was until it's paid out.”

"Cheeskar poodoow," he groused, lekku twitching. ‘I'll take Sabacc, thanks.’

Eventually a couple of off-duty spaceport security guards came in, and Feid was able to coerce one of them into conversation. It seemed mercenary work was proving fruitful lately: a few different groups had been caught harassing independent traders and representatives from some of New Cov’s smaller biotech companies. Unfortunately, because they were registered as contractors, action had to be taken against the contract-issuers rather than the mercenaries; bureaucracy was leaking everywhere and getting into places it didn’t belong. The spacers had been avoiding the venues closer to the ports, and the added security was there to actively discourage the mercs from causing trouble.

Feid shook her head as the woman moved off to rejoin her squadmates. It felt like the entire galaxy had been turned off to rejoin her squadmates. It felt like the entire galaxy had been turned on its head lately.

Obi-Wan wasn’t entirely certain when the group had split up. Terrik had commed demanding Fan move his karking medical stuff out of the way, and then Feid and Pulkka had found out a musician they both liked was performing at a nightclub nearby. Tovari had looked up their latest album on the HoloNet, and the two of them had cringed at the noises that emerged from the speaker; only half of it was in the audible range for humans. So they remained behind, playing increasingly ridiculous card games until their mugs were empty again.

“Hmm. Do you think we’ve hit Booster’s definition of ‘too late’?” Tovari’s grin was pure mischief as she packed the cards back in their case. Obi-Wan found himself failing once again to place the accent that got more pronounced after she’d had a couple drinks.

He chuckled and checked the time on his comm. “Well, it’s not tomorrow yet. I don’t think Dad will be too mad at us.”

She sputtered with laughter, covering her mouth with both hands. “Oh gods, don’t let him hear you call him that! None of us would be safe.”

The narrow stairway outside had turned treacherous in the dark, lit only by light shafting from windows several levels above. Obi-Wan’s artificial eye adjusted instantly to the lighting change while the organic eye struggled to catch up, leaving him half-blind, and they tripped and giggled their way back up to the street.

Far above them, the city’s transparisteel dome turned the night sky a deep blue-green that hid the stars; instead, it reflected the city lights in a shifting haze of gold. Obi-Wan tried to imagine growing up unable to see the sky at night. Coruscant’s tireless nightlife effectively outshone the stars there, as well, but at least the sky could be seen. It had only been those times he and Qui-Gon had visited less-developed planetary areas that the stars and aurorae had been visible.

They were less than a block from the spaceport’s long, looping concourse ring when a sound raised the hair on the back of Obi-Wan’s neck. He caught Tovari’s arm and tugged her back into the arched mouth of an alley.

“What-”

“Shh. That’s not a security patrol.”
They pressed back into the shadow cast by the arch as a group of mercenaries in motley armour slunk past; a human in the group paused to glance into the narrow passage, and under the glow of the street lamp Obi-Wan was certain he recognized the man.

It seemed an eternity before they were certain the group was out of earshot; Obi-Wan released the breath he hadn’t realised he was holding. “I could swear that was one of the group that tried to shake us down in the cafe on Cloud City,” he whispered.

“They’re definitely looking for someone to pick on. I think we’re officially out too late.” They each sent a terse comm message, Obi-Wan’s to Feid and Tovari’s to Terrik, warning them that the spaceport was a risky area.

Obi-Wan was about to suggest they keep moving when her fingers closed on the front of his jacket. In the dim golden light her dark skin seemed luminous, features rounded in amusement. “So, now that I’ve got you alone…”

He ducked his head, laughing softly at himself. The idea that Feid and Pulkkka had invented an excuse to leave them alone hadn’t escaped him. “I’m not getting out of this one, am I?”

“Maybe. There’s a catch: you have to tell me you’re not interested.” Her smile didn’t fade, and as his real eye adjusted to the darkness he could see the impish crinkle of her nose. “I’m an adult, Scogar, I can handle it.”

Upon later reflection, Obi-Wan acknowledged that they’d both probably had more alcohol in their systems than they should have in order to make a truly rational decision. He still didn’t regret kissing her. The heels of her boots put them at the same height, and he didn’t even have to lean down.

Tovari made a soft, pleased sound as their lips met, pulling him closer. He shivered as her fingertips traced the rim of his ear, and his hands found their way into the thick, luxurious curls of her hair. Dizzying bliss that stretched for endless minutes, punctuated with quiet murmurs of happiness; it was nothing like his previous, hesitant (forbidden) explorations.

He didn’t notice Tovari’s hand moving until she squeezed his ass and he just about choked on his own breath in surprise.

A giggle slipped past her lips, and it was like a lever had been released. Obi-Wan rested his forehead on her shoulder, snickering silently until his stomach hurt. Tovari was hugging him, and it felt so damned wonderful.

“Have you ever kissed anyone before?”

“Yes, but it was…shit, years ago. Was it that bad?”

She pulled back a little, eyes narrowed at him in consideration, but unable to entirely keep a grin from tugging the corner of her mouth. “Hmm. You should practice more.”

The sound of someone clearing their throat behind him brought Obi-Wan’s head around. A spaceport security detail stood at the entrance to the alley, doing a poor job of not looking amused. “I know we humans are always in season, but here in Illic we prefer it if certain displays are reserved for private audiences.” The man briefly took in their rough spacers’ garb and added, “You’re not in trouble, but we’d appreciate it if you could please rent a room or return to your ship.”

Tovari’s eyes flicked to Obi-Wan briefly and she winked before responding, “Honestly, sir, we were trying to stay out of the way of one of those packs of Hutt-spawn that have been making the place unpleasant. Would you mind very much escorting us?”
One of the officers spat something vile in Huttese. “Not to kill your mood or anything, but if you’d register a formal complaint once we get you there, it’ll add to the evidence for reasons to kick them out.

They weren’t entirely sober by the time they and their new friends from Illic Sec got to the hangar, but the buzz had definitely worn off. The officers took a statement, names, captain’s name and guild license, and who they were hauling for; Booster gave them a beady-eyed glare as he added his details to the report.

“I hope your fake IDs are vacuum-proof, kids, ’cause those seals are going to get tested,” he grumbled at them once the officers had left. Tovari and Bastra blinked at him innocently until he stomped back toward the bridge.

“And get a room, dammit!”

Feid and Pulkka hadn’t returned yet, leaving the room Tovari shared with the Zabrak woman unoccupied. Tovari and Bastra kicked off their boots and hauled themselves up to her bunk, their hair just brushing the ceiling, picking at a container of fried merlie cutlets leftover from whatever Booster had ordered for dinner.

Bastra was still an enigma, although he’d slowly opened up over the past few months. Confident with machines and ships, charmingly awkward with people. Feid had guessed he was just shy until about two weeks after he’d joined them, when he’d contributed to an evening conversation with an outrageous story that had completely blown their expectations of him out of the sky. Not shy: cautious. Warily. He’d raised calculating and cataloguing his environment to a fucking art form.

“You really haven’t been with anyone before, have you.”

“Uh.” He blushed adorably and shoved his fingers back through his copper hair, making it stick out in clumps. “No. We were always too busy.”

“You're how old?”

“Twenty standard.”

She smiled teasingly. “Ah, you're still young, then.”

Bastra’s expression turned rueful as he shifted, letting his right foot swing over the meter and a half drop to the floor. “I know a lot of humans start earlier.”

Tovari waved a hand, dismissing the idea. “From what you’ve said, you didn't have a normal upbringing. Fooling around requires inclination, opportunity and time. Sounds like you didn't have much of those last two.”

“Inclination was there, at least.”

Hm. Another sore spot. She tossed the empty takeout container over the side and flopped down on her back, resting her head on his leg; Bastra’s eyebrows peaked in surprise, but at least that unhappy expression was gone. “If I told you I’m not expecting anything more than respect as a fellow sentient and a friend, would that help?”
His fingers were back in her hair, gently working the tangles out. Tovari closed her eyes briefly, smiling at how pleasant it felt. “I think I’m more worried about myself.”

“Hmm. Getting hung up on your first is a thing that can happen. I didn’t.”

“Was it that bad?” That cautious neutral tone again, like he was afraid of treading on fragile terrain.

She gave a soft laugh. “Not at all. We tried dating, but it just wasn’t what either of us was looking for at the time. We’re still friends.”

“Can I ask how old you were?”

Stomping on the urge to make the obvious joke, Tovari replied, “Twenty-one. It was a few years ago.”

“You're older than Booster.” He sounded amused and she opened her eyes to see a delightfully candid, lopsided grin on his face.

“You're the only crewmember who's younger than him, Scogar.”

“Well, shit.” He was laughing, though, that almost-silent, self-deprecating chuckle. “I’m at a complete disadvantage, then.”

Tovari rolled her eyes and sat up, bracing herself with her hand on the other side of his hips; she was well into his personal space, their noses almost brushing, but he didn’t pull back. “How about this, then: you lead, I follow. We stop when you want to.”

His one real eye searched her face intently, the blue shadowed and grey in the poor cabin lighting; the artificial eye didn’t mimic the movement outwardly. His smile, when he touched her cheek, was heartbreakingly sweet. “I think I can handle that.

——

Feid and Pulkka dragged themselves back to the hangar around dawn, ears ringing and clothes damp from the nightclub’s haze of stage fog and the vapor of a dozen semi-legal narcotics. The Zabrak woman found the door to her shared room latched, grinned like a vornskr, and went to claim the shower before the Whiphid could.

Booster emerged from his cabin a short time later, while she was rattling around in the kitchen, and barely caught the credits she tossed at him.

“Where’s Pulkka?”

“Napping.”

“I told you not to stay out too late.”

“After Bastra’s message, we figured skipping ‘too late’ in favor of ‘too early’ was a better plan. Caff?”

“Please.”

A while after Booster had gone upstairs to do a last pre-flight inventory, Bastra wandered in, hair
damp from the shower, barefoot and wearing only a clean pair of pants, and went straight to the fresh pot of caff. Feid glanced up from her datapad and gave him a deadpan, “Good morning.”

“Huh? Oh. Morning.” He squinted at the full pot for a moment like he was debating drinking from it straight before fishing a mug out of the cupboard.

“Sleep well?”

“Eventually.” He arched a bleary eyebrow at her. “Who won?”

She considered feigning ignorance, then conceded with a grin. “Booster.”

“Figures.”

Feid studied him for a moment as he doctored his drink. Bastra had never gone shirtless in front of any of them before. They all had their own collections of nicks and dings, but the scars that marred his pale, freckled skin were moderately alarming. A few looked old, like they’d been acquired early and then stretched from a later growth spurt. He was far more muscular than she’d have thought, despite having sparred with him, and she wondered for a moment if he’d actually been holding back.

“Thank you.”

The human slumped into the chair beside her and slugged back about half the contents of his mug in one go before coming up for air. “What did I do now?”

With a smirk, Feid returned her attention to the morning’s news feeds. “Not acting like a self-satisfied Huttling.”

“Tovari doesn’t seem the type to put up with that sort of behavior.”

Fanu’dar narrowed yellow eyes at Bastra’s profile as he entered. “The hell happened to you? Look like you fell in a blender.” He rummaged in the cabinet for a package of dehydrated cereal and a bowl.

The human didn’t bother opening his eyes. “You should see the other guy,” he said mildly.

The Twi’lek leaned against the counter and flicked a clump of sweetened grains at Bastra’s profile as he entered. “The hell happened to you? Look like you fell in a blender.” He rummaged in the cabinet for a package of dehydrated cereal and a bowl.

Bastra gave him a bland look through the steam rising from his caff. “You neglected to give me your comm code when I was twelve, you’ve only yourself to blame.”

“Karkin’ twelve?” Fan’s lekku coiled tightly in outrage. “Don’t ever tell me who your teacher was. I’ll shoot ‘em myself.” He dumped enough water into the bowl to soften the contents and stalked toward the stairs up to the main deck.

Feid smirked knowingly. “Where are you going?”

“To pay Booster what I karkin’ owe him!”

Obi-Wan glanced up as Terrik entered the bridge. “We set to go, boss?” The sun was just cresting the top of the wall supporting Illic’s immense protective dome, “second sunrise” casting a warm
glow against the western wall and creeping lower.

“Yep. What’s your best time to Balamak?”

He glanced at the nav calculations on the screen to his left and did a double-take in alarm. “Seventy-three hours? Wait, that can’t be right.” Without looking back, he aimed a finger at Terrik. “Not one word about addled brains, thank you.”

“What route did you put in, a sightseeing tour of the Rishi Maze?”

“Not quite. Why’s it sending us via Nal Hutta?” Obi-Wan scowled at the computer as he erased the route he’d been working on and re-ran the calculations. “Now it’s trying to send us via the Hydian trade route. Are you sure the navicomp is up to spec?”

Terrik was chewing the inside of his cheek in consternation. “Might be worth checking that it’s been updated with the latest nav package. You know how stars move.”

Grumbling obscenities at the computer under his breath, Obi-Wan pulled up the manual input screen. “Oh, there’s the problem, we had a hub system on the avoidance list. Is there any reason you wanted to steer around Daalang?”

“I didn’t put that in.”

“If I didn’t know better, I’d suspect Fan of trying to mess with me.” He reset the route and tried again. “Thirty-eight hours. That’s more like it.”

Something nagged in the back of his head, though, an itch he couldn’t relieve. When he looked up the logs, they indicated that Obi-Wan had been the one to put Daalang on the no-pass list, shortly after he’d logged in. He couldn’t remember having done so.

Stop it. Enough of that. He felt ridiculous, telling off a mindless energy field. The Force had largely left him alone -- and he couldn’t begrudge that one little warning that had kept Feid’s head intact on Cloud City -- but interfering with his actual job was something new. Obi-Wan shook himself from his thoughts and snatched his hands from the console as he caught himself opening the avoidance list again. He double-checked the route and logged it before signing out.

Nothing like this had ever happened before. Obi-Wan scrubbed at his face and sat back against the age-softened leather of his chair. A quick mental check showed that his personal shields seemed to be fine, but he still took a moment to reinforce them a bit more. The nagging faded to a whisper he could ignore, but it didn’t disappear entirely.

If it means that much to you, I’ll drop us out a little early. Happy?

Well, at least it didn’t get worse.

Pulkka growled under her breath and tossed the part over her shoulder into the growing pile of debris. Their second swoop’s laser cannon had fried itself properly during their last run on Ord Cantrell, thanks to a lucky shot and a close encounter with a low-lying shrub that had been more solid than it looked. A lot of the fittings were warped or had the sticky remains of berries heat-sealed to them.
She glanced up as she heard Booster stop halfway down the stairs. “Mind your step.”

“You picked now as a good time to work on that?”

She shrugged and peered at the focusing lens. A long twig had gone straight through the cannon’s barrel at high velocity and punched a neat little hole in the side of the lens casing, releasing all the spin-sealed tibanna. The pressure release had blown out the seam where the cannon’s barrel met the weapon housing, but they’d been dead lucky and nothing had actually exploded. “Nothing else to do while we’re in hyperspace. If I can’t use a gun, might as well fix a gun.”

He snorted to cover a laugh. “I’ll send Bastra to help you, he’s good at that sort of thing. Kid needs his hands busy anyway, staring out the front like hyperspace is going to implode on us.”

“You want me to talk to him?” The other human had been quiet all day, and even Tovari had been puzzled, saying only that he’d told her with certainty that things between them were more than fine.

“Only if he wants to talk.”

Bastra trudged down a few minutes later, his scent scattered and erratic, a deep line etched between his eyebrows. It took him a moment to blink the shadows from his eyes and gauge the technological puzzle scattered across the floor. “Are we salvaging or repairing?”

“Gonna make a kludge. There’s enough scrap between this and what’s in the workroom bins to build a new one.”

A delighted grin chased the rest of the distraction from his face. “I love this job.”

They had a fair-sized pile of cleaned and re-shaped parts ready to piece together into a new turret when a repetitive beeping sounded from Bastra’s pocket. Cursing, he fumbled with grease-stained hands to turn it off.

“Be right back. I’m dropping us out of hyperspace early.” His scent was back to that chaotic mess of uncertainty, fear and…resignation?

Pulkka straightened. There was something going on he didn’t want to even think about. “Early?”

He hesitated at the foot of the stairs. “I just…have a bad feeling. I hope it’s nothing.”

The Whiphid watched him go, her mind sorting through a dozen possibilities. She dragged the bin out from under the table and started tossing the reclaimed parts into it, conscious of when the lights flickered signaling their return to realspace.

It almost wasn’t a surprise when the alarms blared.

The seat behind her rocked, and Feid glanced back to see Bastra strapping himself in. A bluish smudge of coolant grease marked the side of his jaw and some of his hair.

“Where’s the boss?”

“In his cabin, probably taking five.” She made a suggestive gesture with one hand and Bastra smirked. It was so nice to have someone around who appreciated a dirty joke. “I thought you were
helping Pulkka.”

“We need to drop out early on this one. I’d rather be here to run the numbers myself.”

He sounded forcibly casual, and she frowned. It wasn’t like they hadn’t done this before, but he’d been on edge earlier, and seemed to still be feeling it. They watched the timer together; two seconds before the alert would have gone off, Bastra pushed the lever. The inertial surge of the return to realspace tugged at Feid’s sternum and the clouded tunnel of hyperspace parted.

It took her a moment to register what she was seeing. "Karking murishani kung!"

The screen in front of her switched over to standby as the human claimed piloting control and sent the ungainly freighter up on its side and into a dive. A set of missiles streaked past close enough to skim the dorsal shields, and the proximity alarm wailed to life.

“Feid, deflectors-!”

“On it!” She switched her panel over to fire control and defense, and slapped the communications off entirely when a crackly screech of jamming drilled into their ears. Tovari could have broken the jamming to get a distress signal out, but she wasn’t there right now.

The five ships ahead of them were mere specks against the starfield, but they were getting larger and starting to spit flashes of red and green in their direction, along with another set of missiles. Bastra turned the dive into a spiraling maneuver the YV-929 hadn’t really been designed to handle. Something smacked off the ship’s underside, followed by an ominous hissing noise and a low-pitched klaxon.

“Ohh, I don’t like the sound of that. Double starboard, Feid.”

She couldn’t spare a moment to look at the alert board where something was flashing red. “Done.” Three amber diodes lit in front of her: Pulkka, Tovari and Fan signaling they were ready at the turret stations. Feid flipped the controls over from manual to gunner with barely a glance.

A string of cursing echoed from the passage behind them as Booster clawed his way onto the bridge. “What in a Hutt’s slimy asshole is going on?” The captain grabbed the back of his chair as a sudden half-turn shoved them all down towards the floor, inertial dampers whining under the strain.

“I can’t run the calculations and fly at the same time, boss,” Bastra gritted.

“No? Then what the fuck did I hire you for?” Booster threw himself into his chair and strapped in. “Transfer control when ready.”

“Three...two...all yours!”

The ship wobbled for just an instant and then the starfield outside blurred in the opposite direction as Booster took over. A trio of Dianoga-class assault fighters screamed past, strafing the Hazard, and the turrets shrieked as their crewmates returned fire.

Booster hissed through his teeth as something else lit red on the boards. “Give me a heading, Bastra.”

“That’s a karking cruiser,” Feid whispered. She spared precious seconds to grab a log of the attacking ships’ ident signatures -- they’d probably just be junk data, but there was the possibility of tracing them still.

“Bastra!”
The Zabrak looked over her shoulder wildly. The human’s one eye was closed and his face locked in an expression of intense concentration, his hands hovering over the controls as his lips moved soundlessly. “What are you do-”

Bastra’s eye snapped open. He slapped the release on his restraints, surged forward across Feid’s station, and pulled the hyperspace controls. Something in the back groaned ominously as the ship was jerked roughly from its looping path and lurched in jump preparation.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” Booter roared. He tried to slap Bastra’s hands off the controls, and got his own smacked for his trouble as the starfield streaked in front of them and hyperspace opened up, leaving their attackers milling in their wake.

“Saving our arses. Shut up and let me focus!”

The younger human was practically sitting in her lap. Feid slid out of her chair, letting him have it, and leaned over to turn the more annoying of the alarms off. Booter looked ready to explode.

Bastra’s intense glare was fixed out the viewscreen.

“Are you fucking insane?”

The younger human’s teeth gritted audibly. “If you’ve ever trusted me before, Booter, trust me now.”

Screaming at the kid was just going to hurt everyone’s ears. Grabbing Booter’s arm, Feid pushed him toward the hold. “Go check on the others and make sure whatever it is that broke isn’t gonna kill us. I’ll keep an eye on things here.”

They glared at each other for a moment; then Booter turned on his heel with a muttered curse. Feid settled herself in the captain’s chair, facing her crewmate, and breathed deeply to settle her nerves.

“Scogar. Hey.”

His eyes were closed again. “Sorry I didn’t have time to ask first.”

She leaned forward and asked carefully, “Do you know. What you’re doing?”

Bastra’s lips moved soundlessly. “Yes. Two minutes.”

“Until we leave hyperspace?”

“Yes.”

Her lips thinned. Pulling a blind jump like this was suicidal; it was a miracle they were still alive. “Do you need me to stay here?”

Bastra’s eyes flickered open and he gave her a pleading look. “...Please?”

Two of the angry red diodes on the console switched to amber; someone was dealing with the leaks, and she could faintly hear the others yelling at each other. Sighing, Feid leaned back into Booter’s chair and shook her hands out. Her nails had dug aching gouges into her palms.

By the time Bastra pushed the lever back and returned them to realspace, another diode had gone from red to amber and Feid could almost convince herself she wasn’t on the edge of panicking. Bastra leaned over to the nav station, plugged a new heading in without bothering to run the calculations, and sent them shooting off again as soon as the ship was aligned.
He sagged back against the co-pilot’s chair, looking exhausted. “Okay. Not doing that again.”

“What the fuck did you do?”

Bastra turned from the mottled vortex of hyperspace to stare at Feid, looking troubled. “I...sometimes I just know things. I’m sorry. I just... knew it would be safe.”

She squinted at him. “I’ll let you keep that answer for now, but I’m not stupid, Bastra. Where are we going?”

He scrubbed shaking hands over his face. “There’s a…station. Carreg Morh Station. It’s in-”

“Hutt space. I know it. Why’d you send us there?”

Bastra shook his head. “I don’t know. Just that it’s...safe. We’ll still be able to finish our run within the time frame.”

They sat in silence for a moment, watching hyperspace skim past. Eventually Feid roused herself from a numb state of blankness. The poor kid looked weary, like his life had just ended. She rose and tugged on his hand. “C’mon, I’m not gonna yell at you. Let’s go see if they need help nailing things down.”

The main engines were leaking coolant; fortunately not out into hyperspace, or it would have left a lightyears-long radioactive trail a blind Gundark could follow. If they were lucky, the engine housing could be vacuumed out and sealed up once they reached a repair facility; regardless, they’d be poking along on attitude-control thrusters once they dropped back to realspace. One of the atmospheric compressors had blown and vented, and the ventral ion cannon was completely slagged into its mounting.

Booster Terrik was pissed.

The damning thing was, he was pissed at the wrong person, and he knew it.

A tap at the door brought him back to reality. “’S open.”

Feid slid the door aside and eyed him cautiously. Booster fished a second glass from the case under his bunk and poured it half full of pale red liquor, pushing it in the direction of his second in command while he reclaimed his own drink. He waited until she’d sat down on the bunk before speaking.

“He’s a Jedi. Or something like.”

“Yeah. You mad at him for that?”

“Ugh. I shouldn’t be.” Booster shoved a hand through his dark hair, glowering at nothing in particular. “I don’t care what he is, I just wish he’d fucking told me. His instincts tried to get him to steer us around Daalang altogether, and we should have listened to ‘em.” The datapad had shut itself off to conserve power; he tapped it back on and held it out. “Nav logs. If he hadn’t taken us out of hyperspace early, we’d probably be dead.”

“I know we would be. That delay before they got to us made the difference.” She pulled up the other
“What’s this?”

“They’re registered with a pack of mercenaries operating out of Nanth’ri. Currently listed on exclusive retainer to Pash’aar Operations, which happens to be a subsidiary of Punitive Security Forces.”

He was only twenty-three. Right now, he felt like eighty.

“The Commerce Guild.” Feid’s voice was flat.

“Uh huh.”

“Who the fuck thought ‘Punitive Security’ was a good name?”

He shook his head and refilled his glass. “Someone in Marketing, probably.”

She dropped the tablet and swirled her drink, watching the reflections of the cabin lights on the surface. “You need to talk to Bastra. I think he’s afraid you’ll kill him.”

Booster leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, glass cupped in his hands between them. It was empty again. “Fuck. He scared me, Feid.”

“You and me, both.” She knocked the drink back in one go. “Think he scared himself, too. Anyway, we’ll be dropping out at Carreg Morh in ten minutes. You might want to be at the helm to beg for mercy.”

“Ugh.” He followed her out, grumbling, “At least we won’t have to worry about Republic trade unions throwing their weight around. The Hutts wouldn’t stand for it.”

Obi-Wan sat on his bunk, his arms wrapped around his knees. It had taken hours for the sickened feeling in his stomach to go away; now he was hungry but didn’t feel like braving questions in the common area to get food.

Carreg Morh had been altogether too happy to send out a ship to tow them into dock -- for an additional fee, of course. The repair bill was looking unpleasantly high, and Terrik was currently running the numbers to see if it would be worth just selling the Eidolon Hazard and buying a new ship entirely in order to get on with the run.

The ship would never have been damaged at all if he’d just taken the hint and sent them on a slightly longer run.

He sighed and let his head thunk back against the wall. No, he couldn’t know that for certain; but the mercenaries’ setup had been obvious. He could second-guess his actions until the stars burnt out and it wouldn’t change what was already done. For the first time in his life, something bad had happened which he appeared responsible for, and there was no Master Qui-Gon to deflect the wrath of others with a soft diplomatic phrase that somehow managed to be both scornful and wise.

Qui-Gon.

The ache of homesickness welled up in Obi-Wan’s chest, relentless and unwelcome. He hadn’t allowed himself to really think of his former Master -- or much of his previous life -- in months.
Force, he missed them, all of them, even the goddamned Council.

Obi-Wan uncurled and slid across into the desk chair, waking up the small terminal. It didn’t have video comms, but voice worked just fine.

The blurred voice on the other end told him that he’d called in the middle of Coruscant’s night cycle. “Jinn.”

His breath caught, and for a moment he couldn’t answer. “Hello, Master. Sorry for waking you.”

There was the sharp breath of someone gaining alertness quickly from the other end. “Obi-Wan? Is everything alright?”

Qui-Gon had likely noted the tone of his voice despite the mild distortion. “I…I don’t know. I think…I made a mistake.” He described what had occurred, including what Booster had discovered afterwards. Qui-Gon listened without comment, save the occasional nonverbal cue to let him know the connection hadn’t dropped. “I don’t know what to do, Master.”

There was a soft laugh from the other side. “You could start by calling me Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan. I’m not your Master anymore.”

“But you were.” He smiled sadly. “I learned everything from you.”

“You taught me a great deal as well, you know. Obi-Wan, the Force…just is. In their own way, everyone perceives it, Jedi or not, regardless of whether they’re aware of doing so. They call it luck, instinct, skill. Anyone would tell you that ignoring your instincts is a bad idea.” Qui-Gon’s smile was audible in his tone. “The knowledge of what it really is doesn’t change that.”

“I think I’m starting to find that out firsthand.” A reluctant grin tugged at his lips. “I bet Master Yoda would have something infuriatingly simple to say about this.”

A laugh. “Quite possibly.”

Obi-Wan rested his chin in his hand and leaned on the desk, a warm curl of fond memory settling into that coldness in his chest. “I miss you all.”

“We miss you. Garen asked if I’d heard from you, the other day. You should comm him.”

He blinked. “Garen did? Really?”

“I think you underestimate how distressed some people were that you never stopped to say farewell, Obi-Wan.” There was a light tone of admonishment, but it was overshadowed by concern. “Speaking of old friends, have you spoken to Satine recently?”

Satine. He hesitated. It had been a long time since the year they’d spent protecting the young Mandalorian Duchess, but somehow she had still remembered to comm every year to wish him a happy birthday. He wondered if she had any idea what had happened, if she would be as disappointed in him as everyone else seemed to be. “No. I doubt she’d want to see me.”

“You don’t think anyone would want to see you.” That warm voice filled with fond amusement; gods, he was tearing up out of nostalgia.

“I used the Dark side in a moment of weakness, Qui-Gon. The entire Council could barely look at me. I don’t want her to see…whatever it is they saw.”
There was a long moment of pensive silence from Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan could practically hear him frowning. “Do you want to know what I see? I see a man who’s doing his very best to be a good person, despite everything that’s happened to him. I see someone who cares deeply about others, enough so that he’d be willing to sacrifice all he has to keep them safe.” There was a soft sound somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. “Even if it means Falling. I’m not angry. Not with you.”

“Disappointed?”

“No, even that. The Jedi allowed ourselves to become complacent. We thought the Sith were gone! You saw how the Council disbelieved us. Much as I hate to admit it…we are not prepared to deal with the Sith anymore, and your Falling that day was as much their responsibility as it was yours. And mine. The Council doesn’t want to admit they had a hand in that; that’s why they sent you away.”

He blinked at the unexpected heat that colored Qui-Gon’s voice. “Are you saying they’re, what…ashamed?”

“Yes.”

“Mace Windu, ashamed.” The thought dragged a reluctant laugh from him. “Oh dear.”

“He’d never admit it. My advice, Obi-Wan? Is to let the Force back in. It doesn’t care whether you’re a Jedi or not, it will still be there for you. And talk to Satine. Perhaps…perhaps Mandalore will offer you the home the Jedi would not.”

They said farewell, and Obi-Wan spent a few minutes staring at nothing, trying to build up the courage to make another call. The code she’d given him was her personal comm; he checked the HoloNet quickly to make certain he wouldn’t be interrupting her daily business. Late evening in Sundari. Unless she was out at a function, she’d likely be done for the day.

Before he could talk himself out of it, Obi-Wan typed the code in and hit Send.

In the end, Booster opted to sell the Hazard, if only to keep to their schedule. The sale was part trade, part cash; the result was a somewhat shabby but otherwise operable modified YT-1250 freighter Booster had yet to name.

The day was a flurry of activity, shifting everything they weren’t throwing out over to the smaller ship. It was a tight fit for the cargo, the crew quarters were a single room, the droids got into a furious binary argument over which got first access to the single charging station, and Fan bemoaned the loss of a dedicated medical suite, small as the one on the Hazard had been. Pulkka took one look at the space available for the crew, muttered dire things about humanoid-only construction, and enlisted Obi-Wan to help hang a curtain and put together a sleeping area for her in an alcove in Engineering.

She hadn’t even asked about what he’d done the day before; merely patted him on the shoulder and said, “Good job, kid.” Obi-Wan had the distinct impression the Whiphid had already known everything he’d been trying to deny for months.

It wasn’t until that evening, after they were well past Nal Hutta and on the long jump to Randon, that Obi-Wan found a spare moment to knock on the door frame outside the closet-sized office that had been wedged into a corner of the lounge area.
“Boss. Do you have a minute?”

Terrik glanced up. The scowl from earlier seemed ready to embed itself permanently into the young man’s features, but now that Obi-Wan wasn’t trying to shove the Force away, he could feel that the grouchy demeanor was primarily for show. Booster was genuinely concerned for Obi-Wan, which was touching. “C’mon in, Bastra. Drink?”

“If you are.”

“Course I am. Shut the door while you're there.” Terrik waited until they were both seated and cradling tumblers of brandy before saying, “You're here to tell me you're leaving, aren't you.” His mouth twitched in a wry smile at Obi-Wan's open surprise. “You’ve had a guilty look about you since the ambush. I'm sorry I blew up at you. It wasn't your fault, and you did a damned fine job getting us out of there alive.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “It still feels like it was my responsibility. I--” He found himself unable to meet Terrik’s eyes and opted instead to focus on the shifting gold liquid in his glass. “I used to be a Jedi. If I’d not been trying so hard to put it all behind me, to just be normal, I would have taken the warnings more seriously. We’d never have fallen into that trap. I nearly got us all killed.”

Terrik was silent for a minute. Eventually Obi-Wan glanced up cautiously, to find a warmth and sympathy he hadn't expected in the other man’s eyes. Sometimes it was hard to remember they were only separated by a couple years. “I was sitting right there. I could have told you to go with the longer route, and I didn't. Something tells me we’re going to have to start plotting less direct runs from now on, and it's gonna hurt to lose you.” He winked over the rim of his glass. "Anyway, I kind of had you figured out as soon as I pegged that thing in your jacket as a lightsaber instead of a knife.”

Obi-Wan started to smile. “It is technically a knife.”

The captain scoffed. “In the way a turbolaser is just a blaster, maybe. Look, I’m not gonna ask what happened to you. I don't want to know, and it's none of my business, anyway. You’ve been solid, even on our less respectable jobs you never contacted the authorities--”

“That's not my job anymore.”

“--which I can appreciate. I really only have two questions. How the fuck did scum like Jance Retten get to know a Jedi?”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “He knew my teacher first. It's not my story to tell; Jance tells it better anyway.”

“Fair enough. Second question: do you want a lift to someplace in particular?”

“Do you happen to be passing near Mandalore?”

Terrik’s expression went flat. “Tell me you're not also Mando.”

“Not in the slightest, but I have friends there.” At Terrik’s inquiring expression, Obi-Wan admitted, “If I have family, I don't know where they are, or who. I’ve never found any connection for my surname; it's possible they changed it when they gave me to the Temple.”

Terrik drew air through his teeth in a disapproving hiss. “That's just not right. Sure, we can drop you off. If you ever want to come back, or need a reference for some other captain, comm me.” He gave Obi-Wan a keen look. “Have you told Tovari yet?”

“No, not yet.”
“Then go talk to her. You know how much I hate drama on my ships.”

When he found Tovari, she gave him a level stare and then dragged him by the hand into the secondary cargo hold. The webbing that secured the crates in place deadened the echoes and provided a level of privacy that otherwise didn’t exist on the smaller ship.

“Okay, what’s going on? You’ve been avoiding everyone for days.”

“It hasn’t been days—”

“Hours. Whatever. Why are you acting like everything’s your fault?”

Obi-Wan glanced down, eyes on the lapel of her jacket. She had a metal icon stitched to the leather there, one he didn’t recognise. “...sh*t. I don’t know where to start.”

Her finger came up under his chin, raising his eyes to meet hers. She didn’t seem angry, at least; maybe sad. “You’re leaving.”

He sighed and told her the truth, or at least as much truth as he’d given Terrik. Tovari’s expression didn’t change while he spoke.

“You’ve been spying on us?” Cautious, but not angry.

Obi-Wan allowed himself a little flicker of hope. “No. I’ve just been trying to live. To not be a Jedi anymore. But...trying to avoid that nearly got you all killed.” He leaned back against the stack of crates behind him, feeling the comforting thrum of the freighter’s engines and generators in his bones. “I’ve really enjoyed this life. It’s...close to what I’m accustomed to. But I need to go somewhere where I can focus, for a bit. Get my head sorted out. Scerra had a point when she asked if I was going to settle down, maybe it wouldn’t be a bad thing, at least for a little while.”

Tovari’s eyes narrowed. “Who’s Scerra?”

He chuckled softly and rested his fingertip on the rounded end of her nose. “No drama. She’s a friend’s partner.”

“What did you do that was so bad the Jedi would kick you out?”

She’d picked up on that. Obi-Wan smiled tightly. “I saved my master’s life by doing something I shouldn’t have. It cost me.” He let his fingers ghost over the metal prosthetic fused into his skull. She caught his hand and pulled it down, clasping his fingers between her palms.

“That’s not a blaster burn at all.”

“No.”

Tovari grinned. “That's even more badass.”

Obi-Wan sputtered a surprised laugh and hugged her, wondering what he’d ever been worried about.

“Can you still use the Force?”

In answer, he focused on the small pendant on its chain around her neck, encouraging it to hover and twist gently in the air between them. Tovari’s eyes lit with delight, and Obi-Wan laughed softly. “I haven’t done anything even like that in months.” He sobered, letting the charm drift back down.

“Pushing it away was the wrong thing to do.”
She sighed. “Did Booster at least invite you to come back?” At his nod, Tovari gave a relieved smile. “So where are we leaving you?”

“I have friends on Mandalore, they’ve offered to let me stay for a while.”

Tovari stared at him for a long moment, then started to laugh. “Well, give me your comm code, Scog’ika. Next time I visit my family, we can meet up.”

Chapter End Notes

Tovari’s game is a tech version of cribbage. If you've never played it before, it is exactly as overly-complicated as it sounds.

Feid is totally my authorial self-insert character.
Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat
Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from
the Jedi Order for his failure.

Mandalore holds a few surprises for Obi-Wan, not all of them entirely welcome.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 976.09.13
Mandalore

Viewed through the cockpit’s bowed window, the city of Sundari stood out from the white sands
like a black pearl on a field of velvet. Obi-Wan remembered his last time there and wondered exactly
what he thought he would do in a place that was that clean. The city was a haven from the hostile
desert environment, but idealized to the point of sterility.

His thoughts must have been visible on his face, because Tovari leaned across from the
communications station and poked his shoulder. “You still certain about this? I grew up there, and
there's not that much to do.”

Obi-Wan glanced at her, appreciating Tovari’s warm brown skin and golden-brown curls. “You're
from Sundari? You don't look like a marble statue.”

She cracked up. “They do, don't they! My grandparents were from the farms in the North. They
were conscientious objectors to the traditional warrior ways and moved south to join the New
Mandalorians. There’s a small Northerner enclave in Sundari, but it still wasn't easy for them. In
either sense,” she muttered, a frown darkening her features.

A warrior family trying to gain acceptance among a population that had rejected violence would
have had a difficult time gaining trust. Given the regional variations in skin and hair color, they
would have been visible targets for people with a grudge. “And now you’re getting into blaster fights
with a freighter crew,” he teased, coaxing a smile out from under the clouds.

“Hey, we don’t start blaster fights,” Booster growled from the captain’s seat. “I just encourage my
people to finish ‘em.” Feid snorted a laugh.

Tovari composed herself primly. “Pacifism that does not draw the line at self-defense only gets
people killed.”
“Now you sound eerily like several people I know.”

“Jedi people?”

He considered telling her, but they’d have thought he was joking. “Some of them. A few I know from here.”

Sundari’s interior was sealed against the elements; the freighter -- which Booster was half-jokingly considering naming *Kessel II* -- was directed to a platform along the outer wall and instructed to wait until the force-field lights went green before debarking.

The air had a dry, ozone tang which he wasn’t certain was a property of the desert or the protective electromagnetic field. The field also cut the pervasive desert glare down from ‘blinding’ to merely ‘too bright’. Obi-Wan paused at the foot of the ramp and squinted out across the cratered wasteland, a lasting reminder of the Excision and orbital bombardment by the Republic Judicial Fleet seven centuries previous.

He didn't have to do this. But it felt necessary. Also, it would leave a bit more space for the others on the pint-sized ship.

The sound of boots on metal rang from behind him, and Obi-Wan glanced over as Fan wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

“So tell me, kid. I gotta know. Were you doing, like...Jedi tricks to win at Sabacc?”

It was the last thing Obi-Wan expected to be asked, and he laughed. “Not at all. I learned from a lowlife acquaintance of Booster’s back when I was younger.”

“Who, Retten? Shit. I’d ask him for a lesson if I didn’t think he’d make it cost me.” The Twi’lek hugged him. “*Ma-allesh, Bastra*. Don’t be a stranger.”

Fan was elbowed aside by Pulkka, who enveloped Obi-Wan in a furry embrace. “May you find the tribe that eases your hunt, Scogar.”

“And may your tribe be ever successful. I thank you for your guidance.” He grinned at the Whiphid’s surprise; the traditional parting phrases weren’t entirely accurate in Basic, but the sentiment remained.

She chuckled and ruffled his hair. “Jedi. You hide it well.”

Feid punched him in the arm, not quite hard enough to bruise, before offering a solid, backslapping hug. “Got something for you, kid.”

He accepted the datacard with a small frown of curiosity. When he glanced up, Booster had joined the Zabrak woman.

“Recommendations from both of us as ‘ranking officers’.” The Corellian offered his hand and they clasped. “If you get stuck…”

It was about as close to sentimental as Booster ever got. Obi-Wan nodded, smiling knowingly. “Thanks, boss.” Booster snorted and gently pushed Feid toward the boarding ramp while she swatted his hands, leaving Obi-Wan alone on the platform with Tovari.

She heaved a dramatic sigh, grinning. “I think they’re under the impression we’re a lot more serious than we are.”
He tilted his head, feeling an answering smile yanking on the corner of his mouth. “Shameless flirting, Tovari. For three months.”

“To be fair, you, flustered, was hilarious.” Her brown eyes glittered wickedly. “The actual interest happened later.”

They shared a laugh and he put his arms around her, kissing her on the cheek. “You know, in the Temple, they have a formal way of thanking older Jedi for sharing their experience.”

Tovari leaned back and frowned at him, cautious. “Oh?”

Deadpan, Obi-Wan pulled his old diplomatic poise from where he’d stashed it and said, “Thank you for the lesson, Master.”

Her eyes got huge as her cheeks coloured, and Tovari smacked his arm where Feid had punched him before dissolving in giggles. “You’re terrible!”

“Ow!” He rubbed the spot, grinning. “Couldn’t resist, not sorry.”

“Ugh, you are going to drive them mad here.” She leaned in to plant a lingering kiss on his lips. “Take care of yourself, Scogar. Or whatever your name is.”

He sighed regretfully. “Maybe someday I’ll tell you. Take care of yourself, Tovari.”

The landing platform connected to the interior of the dome via a tunnel through the solar-reactive exterior hull. Obi-Wan resisted the urge to look back, mostly out of deference to Pulkka’s tribal tradition than a fear of regret. The moving walkway deposited him on a transit platform, where an automated airbus going into the city’s center arrived a few minutes later.

The opaque exterior of the dome was deceptive: the city of Sundari itself was much larger than the dome appeared, a crystalline lattice of towers connected by walkways and strictly-regulated skylanes. The few other passengers on the bus departed at stops along the route, leaving Obi-Wan alone until the final stop at the center of the city.

A pale woman in a dress that looked like a combination of a formal suit and an elaborate windchime met him at the platform. She eyed his rough appearance critically. “Obi-Wan Kenobi?” she asked, a note of dismay in her voice.

He was going to need that old poise more than he’d thought. Obi-Wan straightened, letting old memories of training settle into his muscles. The Force wrapped around him like a cloak, guiding his responses. “I am. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

The woman’s eyebrows arced toward her hairline, and he sternly repressed a grin. No mocking the staff. “Shar Kasedi. I serve the Duchess Satine as her secretary.”

“I imagine she needs all the help she can get.”

That was definitely a smile trying not to show on her face. “There are five of us. We represent her when she can’t otherwise divide her duties. If you will follow me?” Kasedi led the way to an armored airspeeder. “The Duchess said you preferred your arrival to be discreet.”

“Considering my current appearance, I’m sure you can understand why.”

Kasedi allowed herself a laugh as she settled in at the controls, somehow gathering her skirts so that they hung out of the way. “You look very un-Jedi-like, it’s quite a skillset. No wonder they sent you
Undercover? What had Satine told her staff about him? It was a challenge to keep the bewilderment from showing on his face. “For all intents and purposes, I’m just a guest, Lady Kasedi.”

“That’s the official story, yes.”

The palace was within walking distance of the central transit station, but Kasedi took them in via the hangar in the lower levels. “As much as Duchess Satine would love to be the first to welcome you, she’s busy for most of the day.”

“I quite understand.” Things hadn’t changed much in the past six years.

“You’ll have time to freshen up—” she cast a pointed look at the scruffy stubble on his jaw “—and the Duchess’ tailor will measure you for more court-appropriate attire.”

Obi-Wan rubbed his chin ruefully. The beard, what there was of it, had done well to make him look a bit older. He’d opted against growing it longer to avoid being accused of copying Booster, but perhaps he could get away with something cultivated. “That’s very kind of her, please extend my appreciation.”

Kasedi gestured him ahead of her into the lift. “Well, we cannot have you appearing at her side as you are. Ethyne Matsuuri, our Head of Security, will brief you in two hours, once you’re presentable.” She handed him a datapad which displayed a schedule of meetings with various names he didn’t recognise. “She’ll see that you’re provided with everything you need for your work, as well as setting up your security access.”

Maintaining a bland face was getting harder. “You’re very thorough.”

Kasedi led the way down a tall, airy corridor lined with doors. Clear daylight shafted through windows under the eaves of the peaked ceiling to warm the pale blue walls. “We take the Duchess’ security very seriously, as you are no doubt aware. Your suite is here.” She pressed a flat electronic key against the security panel by the door and had him press one hand and then the other against the panel, setting it to accept his biometrics. “Make yourself comfortable; the tailor will be by shortly.”

Murmuring his thanks, Obi-Wan paused to look around the room he’d been given. *Suite* was an appropriate name for it: the door opened on a full sitting-room complete with conversation circle around a low table, a prominent desk, and a water feature bubbling placidly under the window. A double door on the left led to the bedroom; what appeared to be a thick wall between the two rooms proved to be an elaborate refresher on the outer-wall side and a walk-in closet on the interior. Everything was dressed in muted shades of green, copper, and off-white.

It was easily three times the size of the room he and Qui-Gon had shared the last time they had been at the Palace; their quarters in the Temple would have fit in the sitting-room with space to rattle. Baffled, Obi-Wan dropped his bag on a shelf in the closet and walked a circuit, exploring. A family of Wookiees could have fit in the bed without inhaling each other’s fur, and the mattress was positively carnivorous. The tub, set under a floor to ceiling window filled with frosted glass prisms, was deep enough to drown in, and the angled jets were vaguely terrifying; the separate shower cubicle wasn’t much better. Half the items in the ‘fresher’s grooming kit were unrecognizable.

As he poked around drawers and cabinets, Obi-Wan sent out a questing tendril through the Force, seeking security devices. There were motion sensors in each room and pressure alarms on the windows, all linked into the palace’s security system along with the usual fire and toxic gas detectors. The audio pickup devices concealed under pieces of furniture were less standard, and he puzzled
over them for a moment -- on the one hand, he could easily disable them; on the other, they’d likely be replaced and possibly accompanied by more foolproof systems if his tampering was discovered. In the end, he let the devices be for the time being.

He was exploring the range of HoloNet access through the desk’s terminal when the tailor arrived, announced by a gentle chime from the door. The woman and her assistant droid eyed Obi-Wan like a particularly suspect specimen under glass before curtly instructing him to take his jacket off and hold still. The assistant asked effusive questions about his color preferences and if he was particularly sensitive to certain types of fabric while the tailor ran her measurement device over him from head to foot, imperiously shifting his limbs like he was an inconvenient mannequin. Despite the droid’s enthusiasm, it was rather like being poked and prodded by the Temple healers. The tailor announced that a set of suitable clothing would be delivered within the hour, in a foreboding tone that would have made Mace Windu envious.

Dazed, Obi-Wan went to find the least-aromatic soap and figure out which dial controlled the shower.

The tailor’s warning had been accurate. Obi-Wan ran his fingers over the layers of green and grey silk and wondered what was being expected of him this time. At least the tailor hadn’t attempted to mimic standard Jedi garb, but there was still a uniform-like aspect to it.

He wasn’t certain what to think when he discovered pockets appropriate for carrying his lightsaber installed in the sleeves.

The meeting with Matsuuri did clear up some of his confusion.

“Kenobi. I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.” A tall, older woman with the darker Northern complexion, her steel-streaked hair coiled back around the stem of a single peace lily, the Head of Security was businesslike but personable as she gripped his wrist in greeting. Her hazel eyes sparkled with humour as she added, “I’m guessing you’re ready to ask what the hells is going on?”

He blinked at her for a moment before stating emphatically, “Yes. Yes, absolutely. I am utterly at a loss, everyone seems to assume I’m here for another reason entirely.”

She gave him a measuring look. “But you haven't done anything to suggest they're wrong. Thank you. Please, have a seat.” Rather than returning to the chair behind her desk, Matsuuri claimed the second of the guest chairs and shifted it to face his at an angle. “I was only appointed to this position two years ago, but I’ve read through the reports of your and Jedi Master Jinn’s previous service here. Your arrival this time couldn’t be more convenient if we’d scheduled it.”

Obi-Wan leaned forward, resting his elbow on the padded wooden arm of his chair, frowning with concern. “I’m not sure I understand. Is the Duchess’ life in danger?”

Matsuuri laughed. “When is her life not in danger? Satine Kryze is a contentious and determined figure. It's why we love her. Unfortunately her political enemies are adherents if our violent past. Are you familiar with Jubilee?”

It took him a moment to remember the Mandalore connotation. “The annual celebration commemorating Mandalore’s commitment to a more peaceful way of life?”
“The festival starts in less than two weeks. Without going into too much detail, our intelligence has suggested there is potential risk to Satine during that time. Someone who claims to currently lead the Death Watch remnants on Concordia is making a lot of noise,” she gritted. “We’re certain it’s all sound and no impact, but that doesn’t mean we’re not going to take it seriously. Unfortunately, because of the nature of the Jubilee, it wouldn’t do for Satine to have a visible security force protecting her. We will be there, of course, but we need someone less overt guarding her back.”

“You want me to be her bodyguard again.”

“If you're willing, of course.”

He sat back, eyes focusing somewhere in the middle distance as he turned his attention to the Force. The sense he received from Matsuuri was one of striking honesty, and an odd, vague familiarity he couldn't place. A deeper look showed small knots here and there, tangles of Possibility that would unravel once a thread was pulled. Several of them hovered around Satine, of course, and a few around himself and Matsuuri. Nothing indicated that going along with the plan was a bad idea.

“How do you intend to explain my presence?” he asked. It would be unusual for someone not of the royal household to be that close to Satine in such a public atmosphere.

Her answering smile had a hint of relief in it. “You are known as a friend of hers, and someone Satine regards highly; the official reason is that you're visiting to see the Jubilee for yourself. Of course, there will be speculations.”

Matsuuri’s look was far too sly for Obi-Wan’s comfort. “Speculations,” he echoed warily.

“I'm guessing you’ve noticed the listening devices planted in your rooms already?” At his nod, she continued, “We found them on this morning’s sweep: Satine’s political rivals want to know more about her potential suitor.”

It was a good thing he hadn't been offered a drink; Obi-Wan was certain a significant portion of it would have ended up in his nose or lungs. “I beg your pardon?!”

Oh, she was heavily amused. “The standing rumour is that you're here to court the Duchess. We have, of course, done everything to discourage this, which only inflames the rumormongers further. It's a convenient distraction. Anyone who's done their research on you will know you’re no longer affiliated with the Jedi Order; it helps us that your file is carefully vague as to the reason. But as a result, your rooms have been visited by the usual spies among our staff in order to get dirt on you or whatever you get up to during your stay.”

“Wonderful. I’ll do my best to drop some colorful personality where it will be noticed,” Obi-Wan drawled. “Who among the staff and security know more than that?”

“In a bit, I’ll introduce you to the Commanders for the Royal Guard and Secret Service. The Duchess’ secretaries all know, out of necessity, as do the Prime Minister and his Deputy. That’s the limit we’re willing to draw. I’m sure I don’t need to ask you not to discuss matters openly.”

Matsuuri’s smile was warm, and Obi-Wan found himself liking the Head of Security despite the awkward position she’d put him in.

“What locations are safe?”

“My office here, obviously, and Satine's chambers -- they keep trying to slip surveillance past us, but we catch it every time. I'll be giving you a couple scramblers so you can create your own temporary bubble in a pinch -- and if you're worried about talking in your sleep being overheard, these are
useful for that as well.” The innocent expression on her face indicated that sleep-talking was a minor concern.

He responded dryly, “I’ll bear that in mind, thank you.”

“Is there any other equipment you might require? We can’t provide you with lethal weapons, although you may keep your lightsaber. We trust you to be able to use your training in a non-lethal manner. You may have noticed that Hartyne is quite accommodating.”

“Is that your tailor’s name? I had wondered at that.” He tugged lightly at his right sleeve, enough to show the weight of the lightsaber hilt snugged against the inside of his bicep.

She chuckled. “Hartyne isn’t one of the more friendly people, but she does take her job seriously.”

Obi-Wan spent the next three hours being briefed on palace security, the hidden security passages and lifts he hadn’t already known about, the current state of political tensions, and getting proper introductions to Satine’s secretaries. Matsuuri saw him equipped with a disabler and the same basic kit all of Satine’s guard carried, and showed him how to conceal it among the layers of his clothes. By the time Kasedi returned and announced that he was to be presented in the court before Satine, Obi-Wan felt like a walking armory and was struggling to keep his head from spinning. He hadn’t realized precisely how much of the minutiae of their missions Qui-Gon had managed until his Master wasn’t there to do it.

As they waited in a small antechamber, Obi-Wan allowed himself a last deep breath to kill the nervousness buzzing around his system.

Kasedi patted his arm lightly. “Not what you were expecting here?”

“That would be putting it mildly. To avoid any further surprises, how are you introducing me?”

“Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi -- no ‘knight’ attached,” she added quickly, “and you will be referred to shortly as ‘Sir Jedi’ rather than ‘Master’ -- former member of the Order, and Hero of Naboo.”

He stared at her. “Hero of-- what?”

Kasedi favored him with a thin smile. “You haven’t paid much attention to the news, have you?”

“Not particularly, I’ve been busy. Are they really calling me that?”

“Your role during the conflict was recognized, although there’s no footage of you.”

“By the time the reporters arrived, I was in medical being treated for my injuries. They wouldn’t allow in anyone other than family and close associates.” Obi-Wan ran a hand over his face, feeling the calluses of his palm on the more sensitive places where he’d trimmed his beard back. The final result had looked far more like a deliberate choice than the laziness it had started as. “I can’t believe we have to do this.”

She chuckled. “The only reason you weren’t presented the last time you were here was because you arrived with the Duchess as part of her retinue from Coruscant. Welcome to proper Mandalorian formality.”

Kasedi preceded him through the door, and Obi-Wan took a moment to pull the Force back around himself and shake the nerves away. A Jedi’s serenity was more for the sake of their own peace of mind rather than for appearances, and as the edginess bled off he felt his posture straighten from a slump he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.
Satine’s throne room was smaller than he remembered, but that was possibly because he had more experience now. Diffuse golden sunlight pouring through the frosted windows made the space almost dreamlike. The people in attendance, mostly ruling class or politicians to judge from their dress, afforded Obi-Wan only idle curiosity as he was introduced, although he could sense spikes of recognition as his name was given.

As required, he ignored them, focusing solely on the woman seated in the single chair on the dais.

Satine’s face had thinned out in the past years, although she still had some of the childhood softness. An array of peace lilies woven into her hair framed her head like a halo, and her blue robes flowed like a waterfall over her knees to the floor. As with the room’s lighting, it was all intentional, making her appear to be a physical embodiment of serenity, and Obi-Wan felt his remaining eye tighten in a smile he wouldn’t allow to reach his lips.

Because of their status as ambassadors and mediators, Jedi were not required to give obeisance to a planetary leader to the same degree as the common people. Obi-Wan, however, was no longer representing the Order. When he reached his position in front of the Duchess’s seat, he bowed as any other visitor would when guest to the royal house, and waited. The ripple of surprise that ran through the crowd behind him was worth the extra effort, and he could feel Kasedi’s relief and Satine’s well-concealed amusement.

“Obi-Wan.”

The warmth in her voice went right through him to his toes as he straightened. She was smiling graciously -- Satine had definitely learned a lot in the last six years, she had a mask that would have impressed Master Yoda. “It’s so good to see you again, my friend.”

“And you, my Lady.” His memory of the conversation with Matsuuri nudged at him, and he added, “You look more radiant than ever. I’m humbled by your gracious invitation to visit.” Her pale cheeks flushed just a bit at the compliment, and he winked, glad the rest of the room was to his back.

“Flatterer.” There was just the right level of pleasure and amusement in her tone. “It was our pleasure. Please do have a seat and make yourself comfortable while we conclude the day’s business. It shouldn’t take much longer—” that was a definite barb directed at someone in the room “—and we can renew our acquaintance over tea.”

“Your Highness is too kind. I would be delighted.” He bowed again and moved off to the empty chair someone had placed for him to one side, and settled in to watch her field the remainder of her advisors and council for the next hour. There were a few flashes of irritation at his quiet presence, but most of them regarded him with idle curiosity or dismissed him as irrelevant. He preferred the second reaction over the first.

Obi-Wan hadn’t realised he’d drifted into a light trance until the shimmer of a soft chime concluded the court’s business and he was summoned by one of Satine’s other secretaries, an older man with silvering hair by the name of Rys. He followed in the wake of Satine’s retinue as the group’s size dwindled, various members departing for other duties. By the time they reached Satine’s office, it was just the two of them, her guards, and Rys.

The guards took positions to either side of the door, and as soon as it was closed behind them Satine groaned and rubbed the back of her neck, shoulders drooping from her rigid posture. “You would think I’d be used to that by now. Appearances, appearances! How are you really, my dear?” she asked, clasping Obi-Wan’s hand between hers.

He smiled and returned the gesture. “It’s been an odd few months, but I think I’m settling into
something of a routine."

“I was so worried when I heard you’d been removed from the Order. Obi, what happened?” Satine drew him over to a low table under the window where a tea service and selection of light, savoury snacks had been laid out. Obi-Wan held off on answering until after Rys had poured their first cups and departed; then he told her everything up to his departure from the Temple.

“Oh, Obi.”

He glanced up -- his gaze had fallen to his hands as he’d talked, afraid to see her reaction. There was disappointment there, unsurprising considering Satine’s regard for violence. But there was also a sad understanding, and a glimmer of optimism in her crystalline blue eyes.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you. But perhaps it’s for the better? You’ve always been such a good diplomat, Obi, but how can you be a diplomat when everything always ends in violence?” Her hand was resting on his arm -- he didn’t know quite when that had happened -- and she squeezed gently, comforting.

He laughed softly. “It wasn’t like we wanted things to go that way all the time. Usually it ended up being something much deeper than a simple negotiation that had to be dealt with before anyone could agree to a settlement. On rare occasions, someone simply didn’t want the Jedi involved because they thought they would get a worse deal. Remember that we were only ever sent in as a last resort.”

Satine frowned. “Is that what happened at Naboo?”

“That’s what it looked like, initially. But then the Sith showed himself, and it got much more complicated.” Obi-Wan paused. He hadn’t meant to go that far into the details -- the Sith were solely a matter for the Jedi to address, and that particular revelation hadn’t been given to the Senate even after the fact.

Satine was up on her feet, pacing restlessly, a coil of frenetic energy flaring her skirts behind her as she moved. “That doesn’t make any sense, Obi--”

“Really, Satine, it’s not something you need to worry about--”

“But it is!” She whirled on him, delicate features creased with concern. “You think the Sith was after the Queen of Naboo. Why would he care? And why would he reveal himself on Tatooine rather than being on Naboo during the invasion in the first place, when he was clearly working with Trade Federation forces?” Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “There is more going on here, Obi.”

Frowning, Obi-Wan rose and crossed to the window. The nanofilaments embedded in the glass which blocked viewers outside from seeing through were just visible, glimmering in the late afternoon sun. “Qui-Gon said it feels like someone wants to separate me from him. When the Sith attacked on Tatooine, he went for my Master, rather than coming after the ship while Qui-Gon was away.”

Now he was the one pacing while Satine hugged her elbows. “There’s no possible way Qui-Gon could have returned in time if Maul had come after the Queen the night before, either to kill her, or to take her back to Naboo to sign the Trade Federation’s treaty. We were all just sitting in a great chromed ship in the middle of the desert.” Never mind that the real Queen had been with Qui-Gon until he’d brought the parts needed to repair the hyperdrive; the official story was that Amidala had been on her ship the entire time. “When we engaged him on Naboo, he made certain to separate us. If I hadn’t…” he sighed and gripped the tall back of the uncomfortable-looking chair in front of
Satine’s desk until the squared edges of the wood bit into his fingers--

--the sharp, precise edge of the catwalk biting into his fingers. The red particle shields cycling, blocking him from defending his Master, too far--

“He was hunting Qui-Gon.” Obi-Wan rested his forehead on his hands, feeling the universe’s biggest fool. “And the Trade Federation’s outrageous treaty -- you should have read the terms they set, they were unconscionable…. That couldn’t only have been a front to get us there, nobody wastes that much money on a blockade simply to lure in the Order’s most notable negotiator. Yet they tried three times to kill us before we even left the system. Someone connected to the Sith stood to benefit from the Queen signing the new treaty.”

“Three times?” Satine’s expression was openly horrified.

It was all getting a bit much; Obi-Wan’s grin was slightly manic as he looked up at her. “Qui-Gon and I were waiting for the negotiations to begin when the Trade Federation had our ship blown up in the hangar and then started pumping dioxsyn gas into the meeting room. When we escaped that, they sent battle droids after us. Then they tried to shoot down the Queen’s ship on our way out of the system. I’m not including nearly getting run over by tanks or shot at once we made our way to the planet surface, because they were running over and shooting everything.”

He raked his hands back through his hair with a desperate giggle. “Oh, distract me before I start overthinking this. I’ll call Qui-Gon later and then he can do the over-thinking.”

The Duchess’ face pinched like she wanted to argue, but she forced a smile. “So I gathered from your…comments earlier that Matsuuri has told you the plan?”

That wasn’t exactly a much better topic, but it was a reasonable distraction. Obi-Wan suppressed a wince and nodded. “I’m not certain how good an idea it is, I’m sure one of your household guards out of uniform would serve just as well--”

“We assume they’re all known, already. If there are spies among the staff -- and we know there are -- then our full security complement will have been noted.” She tucked her arm into his and led him back to their cooling tea. “You’re our skifter in the deck, as it were.”

“And I need to look like I’m courting you, apparently,” he asked cautiously as he refilled his cup.

Satine’s smile was close to a grimace. “I know it’s awkward, but it does give you a credible excuse to be with me at all times. We made a good start earlier today, if we can maintain the pretense in public--”

“And here in the palace. You said yourself they have spies in your walls.”

The Duchess looked as if she wished to growl but was too civilized to do so. “I’m sorry, Obi. I hope it won’t be too difficult for you.”

Sighing, he closed his eyes. “I don’t even know how to do that without looking desperate. Or embarrassing you. What’s the protocol? I don’t want to overstep those boundaries.”

She actually blushed and focused most of her attention on the thumb-size pastry she’d selected from the tray. “Flirting is...is fine. We’re both legal age for Mandalore, so any accusations of impropriety would be laughed off. You’re not a Jedi, so they can’t accuse you of abusing your station--”

“Technically, I have no station. That’s not going to cause an issue?”
Satine blinked and the beginnings of a mischievous smile appeared. “Well. I’m sure there are some who might complain. But the worst they could do is try to challenge you to a duel—”

“I’m sorry?”

“--but I have the authoritative say in whether such a violent farce is to be permitted. Which it won’t,” she added firmly, scowling.

“Well, that’s a relief. Are there many seeking a political arrangement already?” he asked hesitantly, not certain he wanted to know the answer.

Her answering eyeroll spoke volumes. “Since I was sixteen and betrothal was permitted. While there might be benefits to such an arrangement, the potential to be drawn into another world’s conflicts would simply be too high. I won’t subject my people to that.”

A soft chime preceded Rys through the main door; the secretary offered a regretful smile. Satine sighed.

“That would be our signal to get ready for dinner. Rys will help you; Hartyne should have seen to some more appropriate evening wear for you.”

“More clothes?”

She giggled at his horrified expression. “Unlike the Jedi, normal people don’t wear the same thing every day. I’m making a personal goal to properly civilise you, my dear.”

Obi-Wan cast a pleading glance at Rys, who looked far too amused under his professional straight-face.

The rest of the week passed in a blur of political and social functions; it was a rare day that Satine wasn't required to entertain or be entertained by dignitaries and charity organizers. Obi-Wan accompanied her dutifully, being an attentive companion whilst keeping his senses extended for hints of hostility. His role as bodyguard wasn't yet essential, but he viewed it as good practice.

His only truly free times were at night and during the day when Satine held court or council sessions; Obi-Wan took advantage of those daylight hours to meditate, read, and contact old friends. Garen was overjoyed to hear from him, and spent an hour describing the number of ways he was trying to make his flight instructor’s hair fall out.

“Mostly from him yanking on it repeatedly out of frustration.”

“You're incorrigible, Garen. There are better places to stunt than in the hangar. Under the coastal platforms, for example.”

“Ooh. I hadn't thought of that. Ten credits says I catch a fish on the viewscreen.”

“Twenty says you get tangled in seaweed.”

He used the secure comm terminal in Matsuuri’s office to contact his former Master. Qui-Gon as well was happy to receive a call -- at a reasonable hour of the day, this time. Obi-Wan shared the thoughts he and Satine had discussed. His former Master looked disturbed at the idea he might have been
explicitly targeted by the Sith, and promised to look into the backing behind the Trade Federation’s blockade.

“I need to speak with Queen Amidala about another matter as well.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t help but grin. “That one little thing I mentioned when I was half-delirious on painkillers and antibiotics in their medical ward? Really?”

Qui-Gon winked solemnly. “We’ve been discussing the best way to handle it.”

“The Council will have tookas if they find out.”

The Jedi Master scowled. “Precisely why I took the issue to Padmé. She does have something of a personal stake in the matter, as it stands. This is about what is right, not what the Code says.”

The partnership with Anakin sounded like it had been good for them both: the boy was making friends among his agemates, something Qui-Gon had been worried about, and Qui-Gon seemed to be genuinely happy for the first time since well before Naboo. He still wouldn’t discuss what had been troubling him for so long, but his smile was genuine and relaxed. Once Obi-Wan had told Qui-Gon the plot he’d been unwittingly dragged into, they shared a laugh and his former Master had offered some suggestions to make his role more convincing.

Anakin thought the whole thing was hilarious.

“I betcha ten credits you’ll hafta kiss her. In public!” His little round face scrunched up in distaste and Obi-Wan laughed.

“Do you even have ten credits right now? Qui-Gon told me you spent all your stipend on tools.”

The little imp grinned at him. “I will once you lose the bet!”

“Watto was a bad influence on you, young man. I’ll be having words with your Master about your habits.”

Some of the Royal Guard remembered him from his first visit, and eventually Obi-Wan was invited to use their training salles. This inevitably led to lighthearted sparring matches with a number of the Guard and some of Matsuuri’s Secret Service officers.

“Now that’s just cheating!” one of the spectating guards yelled when Obi-Wan pulled a basic aerial to land behind his current opponent, a member of the Royal Guard roughly his own age. The padded end of his staff knocked the other man’s feet from under him. To his credit, the guard turned the fall into a roll and came up with his staff couched in an offensive shield, end forward to keep Obi-Wan back.

Obi-Wan laughed gently. “I can limit myself, if you prefer?” He speared the staff toward his opponent’s forward knee; the guard intercepted, then spun his stave up with a curse to deflect the opposite end of Obi-Wan’s as it arced toward his head.

“With all respect sir, please don’t.” The other man was breathing hard, sweat soaking his sleeveless tunic. “A lot of those Death Watch bastards -- hah! -- use jetpacks. It’s nice to train against someone like that without worrying we’ll set the room on fire,” he added between gasps.

Obi-Wan took pity on the guard -- with his training and the Force running through him like a live current, the exertion was barely enough to wind him. He pulled his weapon back to a neutral upright position and bowed, offering his hand. “I’m happy to be of service, then.”
The guard sagged somewhat against his staff as they clasped hands. “Menniya Koiros. When did they start you training like that?”

“As soon as I was old enough to follow instructions and hold a lightsaber.”

They passed the staves on to the next pair of guards and moved to the bench along the wall. Koiros accepted a bottle of water from one of his friends and poured part of it over his bristle-short blond hair before taking a swig. “So how old was that, then?”

Obi-Wan sipped at his own water. “Three, maybe four Standard.”

Koiros’ friend, a woman a bit older than him with a soft halo of flaxen curls named Lykani, cursed softly. “Got a long way to go to catch up to that, Neya.”

“I’ve also been a field Jedi’s Padawan for seven years,” Obi-Wan admitted. “We see a bit more combat than the average Jedi.”

“You’ve gotta be about my age, though,” Koiros insisted. “If they had you guarding the Duchess when you were, what…?”

“Fourteen.”

Lykani threw up her hands with a laugh. “We don’t even start at the Academy until thirteen. I can’t believe you walked away from all of that, Kenobi. That was your entire life.”

He hesitated, considering his answer. The vast majority of sentients wouldn’t grasp the nuances of his departure from the Order. “It wasn’t by choice. I did something we’re explicitly trained against during the battle on Naboo.” Every time the admission passed his lips, it grew easier. More distant, like it had happened to someone else. He met their wide-eyed astonishment with a rueful smile. “I was later told the conflict had been my Trial of Knighthood, and that I’d categorically failed.”

The woman sputtered. “But...you must have been one of their best!”

He smiled, but there was little humour in it. “There’s more to being a Jedi than fighting and diplomacy. I nearly washed out of training on several occasions.”

“How does any Jedi expect to succeed, if you had that much trouble?” Koiros scowled and ran a hand over his head, brushing water from his hair onto the floor.

“It’s not meant to be an easy way of life. Because of our ability with the Force, we’re expected to maintain a great deal of discipline. There’s a philosophy to how we interact with the world around us that must be upheld,” Obi-Wan explained. The philosophy had always been the most difficult aspect for him. He and Qui-Gon had argued so often about his Master’s cavalier approach to maintaining the Code, when that was the part that always landed Obi-Wan on the Council’s bad side.

“So what now? Will you go home?”

Obi-Wan wasn’t expecting the ache that hit him in the chest at Koiros’ question. His heart clenched, and it took all his training to keep the reaction from showing in his expression. “The Temple was my home. That’s partly why I’m here,” he added, forcing a smile. “The Duchess was kind enough to invite me to stay for a while, since I really have nowhere else to go.”

Lykani made a grumpy sort of thoughtful noise, resting her elbows on her knees. “Ever wonder what would have happened if they hadn't been a bag of dicks?”
“You mean if they’d let me stay?” He leaned back against the wall. “Well, my Master would have Knighted me and then taken a boy we found, Anakin, as his next Padawan. And then all the Initiates in the temple would have been trying to get my attention, hoping to become my Padawan. I wouldn't have been ready for that. Too much responsibility, I’d want to settle into a new routine working without my Master first.”

“Well, what if you hadn't failed your Trial?” The other man’s eyebrows were pinched down over his nose like he wanted to belabor the point with the Council. Obi-Wan suppressed a smile at the thought of that particular argument.

“Oh. I...sometimes I have visions of the future. It’s a Jedi thing, and not the blessing it might seem,” he said with a grim smile. “So I know exactly what would have happened: my Master would have died. I’d have killed the bastard who killed him. And then I’d probably have taken Anakin as my Padawan, since the Council would have kicked him out otherwise. I’ve been there. I wouldn't wish that on any child. Especially not a recently-freed slave. And that would have been so much worse than the alternative.”

The two of them were morbidly fascinated. “How so?”

“The two Padawans nobody else wanted, working together?” Obi-Wan laughed shortly. “Council scrutiny would have been obscene. I’d have felt the need to prove myself to them -- as if I haven’t been trying my whole life already -- and probably wouldn't have been able to give Anakin the time and attention he needs right now.” All with Qui-Gon’s death weighing on his shoulders, knowing he’d seen it and not done all he could to prevent it. “Qui-Gon is much better-suited to that job, he has far more experience.”

The frisson of outrage from Lykani was strong enough for Obi-Wan to sense without trying. “They really would have risked losing one of their Masters for the sake of you passing your Trial?”

He shook his head. “The usual response I got when I told them of my visions was ‘always in motion, the future is.’” Lykani and Koiros snickered at his imitation of Yoda’s crabbed voice. “After a while I stopped telling them and just started acting on it, instead. If the Force is going to warn us of something momentous that our choices can alter, maybe we’re supposed to try to change them.”

A ripple of laughter and cheers from the guards around them drew their attention back to the salle; one of the women sparring had pinned her opponent and latched on like an angry voorpak, and her opponent was tapping out, looking exasperated.

With a smile he wasn’t quite feeling, Obi-Wan excused himself to prepare for whatever event he was being subjected to that evening.

Chapter End Notes

The Legends and Canon backstory for Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan guarding Satine are slightly in conflict; I’ve gone with the Legends version of events.

The chapter had to be split in half for length. The next one will be more upbeat, I promise!
Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Obi-Wan reprises his role as bodyguard for Satine Kryze. It isn't quite what he expected.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcum and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.09.22
Mandalore

“It’s wonderful, darling, but what is it?”

Satine laughed and tightened her arm around Obi-Wan’s. “You should see your face, dear.”

A burning, tingling sensation was spreading like acid across his tongue, searing the insides of his lips. He eyed the orchard-owner who was presiding over the display of produce, looking far too pleased with himself at Obi-Wan’s expense, and wheezed, “What sort of devilish fruit have you created?”

“We’re calling them jaton. It’s good, isn’t it? Hybrid of a kadja fruit and a kiton berry. It’s got the sweetness of both, the acid of the fruit—”

“And the berry sneaks up and sears your throat out after it’s far too late to change your mind,” Obi-Wan finished for him. The handful of people nearby who overheard him laughed, and he couldn’t help but join them. “It’s evil. You should sell them to Coruscant as a delicacy. A sauce made from that would work with merlie steak.”

“Once we get a solid crop going, that’s the plan. Core-worlders will buy anything exotic,” the man said with an exaggerated wink.

Smacking his lips and trying to regain some feeling as the sweet, almost smoky flavour faded, Obi-Wan led Satine lead him on to another of the myriad fruit stalls spread across the square. Whatever he had expected of Jubilee, this wasn’t it: the glassy, blocky city had become a colourful muddle of awnings and flags, the public parks and squares filled with produce from the New Mandalorians’ allied farms, craft and art displays, tents housing everything from magic shows to performance arts. The air was filled with music from live bands and flecks of glittering, iridescent confetti. Teams of
cleaning droids, managed by volunteers in blue jumpsuits, meandered unobtrusively through the crowd scooping up litter as soon as it hit the ground. Obi-Wan had only seen the human workers step in when citizens who were either drunk or too young to know better attempted to use the droids as amusement rides. The entirety of Peace Park itself had been given over to a group from Keldabe sharing a condensed, rather generalized selection of the widely varied Northern clan cultures for the Southerners who formed the majority of Sundari’s population to gawk at.

The Duchess pulled him over to a display from Sundari’s culinary academy, the light tingle of a pest-repelling force field momentarily making his hair stand on end. Qui-Gon’s advice about dropping frequent endearments and chaste physical touches had been sound: when cornered by reporters, the majority of the questions centered around Obi-Wan and Satine’s supposed relationship, and only a few came close to asking about his departure from the Jedi Order. Some of them had done their research a bit too well, though.

Obi-Wan repressed a wince at the memory and let Satine distract him with a bite of something savoury that somehow soothed the remaining capsaicin and acid burn. It was midday and the food displays were doing a brisk business. Satine was not attending as Duchess in the technical sense, but she was still the appointed leader of the New Mandalorians, and the stall owners would drop everything to focus on trying to impress her, always ready with contact codes and offers to send sample platters to the palace.

“Better?” she asked with a teasing grin.

Obi-Wan responded in kind. “Significantly, I can feel my lips again.”

Satine hummed thoughtfully. “Good.” It was all the warning she gave before placing a lingering kiss on his mouth. Her own lips were soft, sweet from the juice she’d been drinking, and a pleasant buzz curled its way down Obi-Wan’s spine. He leaned into it briefly before pulling back. Every onlooker was cooing with delight and that was definitely the sound of a reporter’s camera drone getting excited.

Ignoring the blush that was definitely settling in his face, Obi-Wan laughed softly and murmured against her cheek, “You’re making my job very difficult.”

The Duchess had a wonderful low chuckle as she whispered back, “Shut up and enjoy the attention.”

“I owe a ten-year old ten credits now, no thanks to you.”

She gave him an amused look and tucked herself back against his side as they moved on. Even when she was meant to relax, Satine kept a schedule to ensure she visited everything. Obi-Wan found her level of organization intimidating, but was still taking notes.

Despite their playful attitude toward each other, Obi-Wan had all his available attention extended into gently filtering through the abundance of emotion and intent drifting through the city. The day was pleasant, Sundari’s interior atmosphere set to allow warm rays of sunlight through to brighten the festival. The spirit of kinship kept even contentious tempers at a lull. The Force felt like a lazy river, tripping lightly over the sparkling bubbles of children’s youthful intensity.

They were talking to a woman whose specialty involved tiny spun-sugar sculptures when a surge of dark satisfaction flowed past. Obi-Wan let his attention drift outwards, seeking. That had been the sense of a hunter spying prey. He couldn’t identify a source, or even a location.

“Obi?”
Mentally shaking himself, Obi-Wan smiled. “Sorry, darling. I was lost in thought.”

Satine handed him a small, crystalline sculpture of what he suspected to be a MandalMotors shuttle inside a hollow sugar globe on a stick. Commercialism still abounded. “What do you think?”

“Is there a pilot inside? How did you even paint that?”

The woman beamed and began a long explanation of her process, showing the brushes she used -- their contact surfaces hair-fine -- as Satine listened intently. Obi-Wan feigned attentiveness and stretched outward again, but the surge of predatory pleasure was gone.

It was late by the time Satine was able to extract them from the festivities. Obi-Wan was looking bright-eyed and cheerful until about two seconds after they were safely hidden behind the closed door of her sitting-room; then he sagged with a groan into her sofa like he never wanted to move again.

“I don’t know how you handle that all day, Sati.”

She laughed tiredly as she pried the shoes from her aching feet. Specially-designed insoles only helped so much when you were standing for nearly sixteen hours straight. “Practice, darling.”

One of her secretaries, Meryta, entered with a light tea service in her hands, followed by Satine’s dresser, Cerrian. The whipcord-thin older woman scowled at the shoes strewn on the floor before meeting Satine’s best innocent smile and shaking her head.

“Sit, my lady. Let me at least get the flowers out of your hair before you drop petals everywhere.”

“You always have the best priorities, dear.”

Sometimes Satine wished she could stride everywhere and slouch in a pile of bones like everyone else, but the lessons from childhood on Kalevala had been hammered in stiffly. Only in self-defense training had she been encouraged to explore her full range of movement, and her formal clothing -- even the more casual outfits such as the one she’d chosen that morning -- was fairly restrictive.

Despite her own exhaustion, Satine held her back straight and perched on the edge of her favorite chair as Cerrian set about pulling the numerous concealed pins that held her hair and its entwined flower stems in place. Meryte took pity on them both and poured cups of pale red herbal tea.

Satine had to wait to retrieve her cup until Cerrian was finished plucking things from her hair and had departed with an armful of drooping lilies; Obi-Wan, she noticed, had waited with court-perfect politeness. They both had deeply ingrained training preventing them from true self-expression, and the thought saddened her for a moment.

They sipped their tea in companionable silence, both quietly decompressing. Satine took the time to review the things she had heard from her people throughout the day -- she had a recording of it all, of course, the tiny audio pickup disguised as one of her hairpins, but the recording would only ever be used to refresh her memory later, if needed. She had been taught from an early age how to sharpen her memory, to improve her recollection so that she had little need to rely on notes and prompts. Most sentients were better-disposed towards those who at least seemed personally invested enough to remember their names and occupations.
She did strive for a level of investment, but there were limits to what a human brain could retain before overstimulation set in. So she did what she could, and trusted to discreet bits of technology to make up the rest.

One of her memories snagged her attention and she focused on it, trying to recall details. Spun-sugar treats flavored with floral extracts, child-style sweets aimed at adult consumers. Obi-Wan’s face, pinched in a slight frown under the shaggy copper hair her stylist despaired of taming, his blue eyes distant.

“Did you sense something this afternoon, Obi?”

He glanced up from the uj’ayl-sweetened bread he’d been nibbling at. “I thought I had, but it was gone before I could figure out where it was. Or who. Nothing further happened, but that isn’t reason to relax.”

“Indeed not.” Satine refilled their cups and finally picked up the datapad Meryta had left beside the carafe. “There were a few incidents today -- there always are, mostly injuries from falls -- but none near us.” The day’s report was followed by the usual list of petitions for judgment, funding, and development permissions. Life and politics carried on despite the holiday. She set the ‘pad aside and took a moment to appreciate her friend.

In six years, he had changed so much, and yet so little. Obi-Wan had never been one to sit back and allow others to choose a direction for him; he might be entangled in a situation others had set up -- she felt a guilty twinge at having sprung that surprise on him, but the security of communications had been important -- but he would still carve his own path through it.

His hair, not quite long enough to tuck behind his ears and resistant to whatever her stylist had vainly sprayed on it that morning, was falling into his eyes again. Satine dearly wanted to brush it back, but she was also aware that the easy familiarity they had developed as children -- teenagers, yes, but still children -- was possibly too intimate for the adults they were becoming.

“You’re being ridiculous. You kissed him earlier.”

But even that had been for the sake of subterfuge, despite the genuine feeling behind it; Obi-Wan was certainly aware of that.

Satine cleared her throat softly. “You should have become an actor, dear.”

Caught off guard, Obi-Wan sputtered a tired giggle. “Isn’t that what politics is: high-stakes acting? Regardless of personal feelings, you need to pretend to be someone else in order to support the needs of your people.”

“But who determines what those needs are?” she countered with a wry grin.

He huffed a sigh that ruffled the hair over his eyes. “One would hope that would be guided by common sense and an understanding of social movements, but an authoritarian would claim their personal feelings are wholly in the best interests of their people, regardless of what the people truly need.” Whatever he was about to say next got caught as a thoughtful frown tightened his eyes for a moment. The matt-silver cybernetic on his face was still jarring to Satine, although she was practiced enough not to let it show.

She knew he could tell, though. “Is something troubling you, Obi?”

Her friend shook his head in puzzlement. “It’s only half a thought. I’m not sure where it was going.” He still looked somewhat disturbed, though.
Satine smiled gently and gave in to the urge to brush his hair back; Obi-Wan leaned into her touch tiredly. “It’s been a long day. You should get some rest before you turn into Qui-Gon Jinn.”

He blinked at her in consternation, his brow furrowing in much the same way as his former master’s had, and she had to fight to hide a smile. “I don’t think there’s much risk of that happening. But you’re right.” Obi-Wan stood, hesitated, and leaned down to kiss her gently on the lips, softer and somehow more innocent than what they’d shared in front of the crowd earlier that day. They were both smiling when he drew back. “Good night, Satine.”

“Good night, Obi-Wan.”

The rest of the week was as much a whirlwind as the first day had been. Obi-Wan barely had time for a restrained workout in the training salle whilst Satine dealt with her court business in the mornings before they were required to be seen among the festival-goers.

He was starting to understand just why Qui-Gon had spent so much time meditating when they were on assignment. There was so much to absorb while he was in the thick of things that it couldn’t be analyzed in the moment. After the first day’s error of not meditating before trying to sleep -- he’d lain awake for a useless, frustrating hour before realising his mistake -- he made time in the evenings, and turned his morning workout into a slow meditative kata. There would be plenty of time once the week was over to work on technique; the overwhelming nature of being a public, political face needed to be addressed first.

If there was one thing he was certain of, it was that he despised being a public, political face. The particular whir of a camera drone was beginning to invade his dreams.

The sensation of a lurking hunter had returned several times over the tenday; Obi-Wan could find little pattern between the times and locations it occurred. Sometimes it felt like being caught on the current produced by a passing deep-sea predator, an alert but passive intent; other times he had the distinct impression of a great feline slinking upon an unwary target, laser-bright focus just skimming past him.

Matsuuri’s people, dressed in fine if common clothes and circulating through the crowds, reported no incidents corresponding with what Obi-Wan was sensing, which made everyone more concerned.

The Head of Security pulled him in for a meeting on the final morning while Satine was mediating the latest stage of a contract dispute that sounded as if it had been ongoing for years.

“Given that everything has gone about as perfectly as it can this entire week, we’re certain that if something is going to happen, it will be tonight during the closing ceremonies.” Ethyne Matsuuri was pacing fretfully, the delicate fabric of her knee-length tunic threatening to tangle around her legs as she moved. “I don’t think I can say enough how helpful you’ve been this week, Kenobi. Even though it’s rather added to my stress levels,” she added with a rueful half-smile.

Obi-Wan leaned against the back of one of her chairs, understanding her meaning. “I just wish I could locate the source,” he said, frowning. “I can’t tell if it’s one person or a dozen, there’s just no sense of self-awareness. Kind of like your agents, really.” At her raised eyebrows, he explained, “They’re well-practiced at blending with the crowd, to the point where they’re not really thinking about how they look to others. Everyone else always has a level of narcissism, an awareness of how
they might be perceived and a desire to be noticed. I can only pick your people out of the crowd because I made the effort to get to know them earlier.”

“And that’s what’s making this other person -- or people -- difficult to track.” Matsuuri absently patted her hands over the soft curls of her hair, currently piled up around the stems of three lilies in defiance of gravity. “I haven’t known Death Watch to be that subtle in the past. Could be someone else.”

He caught her meaning immediately. “Would they stoop to hiring a professional?”

“No. That’s not their style,” Matsuuri growled. “Death Watch want the notoriety of having an active hand. I’m going to have my data-miners look into some things during the day. For which they’ll love me, I’m sure,” she added with a chuckle. “Nobody wants to miss the final day. Your schedule has you and the Duchess returning to the Palace to prepare for the closing ceremony. She has a speech to give and will have a proper honour guard again, which will leave you free to do some more discreet poking around. Come see me as soon as you return, we’ll hopefully have an idea if someone’s levied a private price on her head.”

“I’m surprised you don’t keep track of that already.”

She nodded, leaning back against the front of her desk. “Via public contracts, yes. Private ones are much more difficult to dig up; we’ll need to start with identifying any known bounty hunters who have been recognised in the city, then backtracking their known comm code connections.”

“And if they have comm codes registered under alternate IDs, you start checking the same known location IDs for connections that include large financial transactions?” It wasn’t that the scale of the transaction changed the call’s data load, but the transaction itself appended a content file to a call’s channel which could be verified easily if even one of the banks involved had passed the Republic’s stringent vetting process. Sentients operating outwith the Republic’s laws could make use of banks run by the Hutts or private money-handlers, which would make transactions harder to trace -- the identifying codes would be randomized and untraceable, and on one occasion Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had encountered one operated by a Weequay organization that encrypted everything in a series of complex layers that had taken weeks to decipher.

Matsuuri smiled grimly. “Are you certain I can’t convince you to accept a permanent position on my staff?”

It wasn’t the first time she’d broached the subject, and he tilted his head in mild amusement.

“Tempting, but it doesn’t feel quite right.”

Had he known what the day’s highlight was going to be, Obi-Wan might have begged off.

“Could we not have come here earlier in the week?” he muttered to Satine, wincing as children’s high-pitched shrieks of delight assaulted his ears.

The Duchess was smiling dotingly at the shaded park full of families, small-scale rides and features designed to distract tiny ones and give their parents some rest. “Honestly, Obi. This is the best part of Jubilee. I’ve been looking forward to this for ten days.” And with that, she disengaged from his arm and moved into the chaos, quickly finding a gaggle of children whose roundabout required a fresh push.

No wonder she’d opted for trousers over skirts today, he mused with some resignation. The majority of the rides were unpowered manual swings and low-riding repulsor vehicles -- slow-moving and easily controlled to prevent accidents. Citizens in fancy costumes paused to perform sleight of hand
magic tricks and paint tiny faces in bright colours, and Obi-Wan realized that they were performers who specifically worked children’s parties -- still a display of their craft, even if it was taken less seriously than the artists in other parts of the city.

A tug at the hem of his tunic caught his attention; a youngling who couldn’t have been more than two Standard clung to his leg, smudging the remains of violet facepaint on his knee.

“Can I help you?”

The youngling bounced emphatically with a huge grin. “Up!”

Sighing, Obi-Wan reached down and caught their tiny hands, placing the child on his shoulders and using a light nudge from the Force to keep them upright. Sticky fingers grabbed his hair and his eyes watered.

He soon found himself Force-pushing around a trio of older children riding small repulsor scooters under the watchful eyes of a few parents. An older man, possibly someone’s grandfather, clapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Those skills of yours are dead useful!”

Obi-Wan laughed as he made the three scooter-riders weave around each other, the children cackling dizzily. “I doubt this is anything like what our teachers intended us to use them for. We were often chided against using the Force for frivolous purposes.” The scooters drifted as he let them go, and one of the kids flopped backwards onto the soft, cultivated grass with a giggle, letting another toddler claim the toy.

“Frivolous, huh?” The other man squinted against the sunlight. “That’s a matter of opinion.”

A sudden image of Master Dooku trying to wrangle these younglings appeared in his head, and Obi-Wan chuckled. “It is. Certainly, not all Jedi feel children’s amusement is a worthy cause. But I remember tickle wars in the crèche where the only rules were no direct touching and that stop meant stop. A lot of basic skills are learned through play.”

On impulse, Obi-Wan scooped up one of the lightweight, palm-sized balls that littered the area and knelt on the grass. With a little nudge, the ball drifted up from his hand, hovering in midair. The children nearest were fascinated and clustered around, poking at it. Obi-Wan let the ball glide where it was pushed, maintaining its height at toddler eye-level.

Then he started to let it sag. The response was immediate: the nearest child tried to bump it back up in the air. Each time he started to let gravity do its job, a child would try to keep it from falling. It became a game of Force-less Keep High as he slowly released his hold. The older man, crouching just outside the cluster of children, looked amused.

“You did that when you were their age.”

Obi-Wan sat back on his heels, lightly keeping the ball from whizzing out of control when a child smacked it too hard. “It’s the same principle. They learn self-control, coordination, and teamwork.” He laughed and caught the ball before it could fly into his face, tossing it back into the group. “We just happened to have more than limbs to work with.”

He turned and caught Satine watching with a fond, smug little grin. She tilted her head at him as if to ask, So, aren’t you glad we saved this for last?

It had been a good idea -- playing with younglings was physically exhausting but far less mentally wearying than spending several hours trying to dredge up enough personal interest in various industries to ask intelligent questions. Obi-Wan sighed, rolled his eyes playfully, and nodded back.
Eventually the children tired of the game and dispersed to other amusements; Obi-Wan met Satine at the small refreshment stand nearby and accepted a cup of juice from her with a grateful smile. “I keep forgetting how much energy little ones have. Where does it all go once we get taller?”

“Clearly we spend it all on worrying what others think of us.” The Duchess indicated with a tilt of her head to where a journalist and his crew were entering the park. “Case in point. Dust your smile off, dear.”

“Wonderful,” Obi-Wan gritted through something that was more a grimace than a grin. “If I never have to answer another question about babies again, I will die a happy man.”

Satine was laughing at him -- politely, but it was definitely at his expense. “They meant well.”

“The hells they didn’t,” he grumbled. “They were practically asking if you were pregnant already.”

She sighed and patted his arm. “Be grateful the rest of my family is still on Kalevala and not available to ask nosier questions of you. I’ve already received an alarming message from my aunt, and being interrogated by Dela Timure is not a situation anyone deserves. See you after the ceremony?”

“Of course.” Obi-Wan kissed her cheek and made his way to Matsuuri’s office, trying to brush the worst of the paint crusts from his clothes. The Head of Security bit her lip on a smile as she let him in.

“Children’s area?”

“Who thought filling balloons with glitter was a good idea?”

“Please don’t sit there. We’ll never get it off the upholstery and I do have appearances to keep.”

They shared a laugh and Obi-Wan pulled his mind back to work. “I didn’t sense anything at all today. Well, other than the paparazzi speculating on our combined fertility. But that’s a different level of malevolence.”

Matsuuri nodded in sympathy and handed him a datapad. “My people found a handful of known bounty hunters who may be active in the city right now. They may also be elsewhere on the planet, however. It’s known that several call locations on the Northern continent home.”

“The Duchess doesn’t have a problem with that?” he asked absently as he looked through the information Matsuuri’s people had dug out of the recesses of the HoloNet. Whoever her slicers were, they were thorough.

“Of course she does, but they’re not just mercenaries. They’re farmers and foresters with large extended families, and their more violent activities happen offworld. If you visit one of the clans, they’re polite, civil, and not a soul will lay claim to owning a set of beskar’gam.” She hesitated, and Obi-Wan glanced up to see a troubled frown pulling her lips to a thin line. “Well. We know they have it. They’ve tangled with Death Watch remnants on more than one occasion. Forcibly ejected a number of them from the villages and cities like Keldabe. Can’t identify them through the masks, of course, and when it’s over the armour disappears back to wherever they’re hiding it.”
“You think they’re a threat?”

She grinned humorlessly. “Only if you try to tell the Aka’liit what they can do with their lives. We let them govern themselves, and given their enmity with the Kyr’tsad, we’re not concerned about an attack from that quarter. Not at this time.”

“No bounties on Satine, then?”

“That we can tell.” She accepted the datapad back and handed him a thin leatherette folder. “If anyone questions your authority tonight, show them that. You have temporary access to everything my security officers do, until the Jubilee ends. Try not to abuse the privilege?”

Inside the folder was the holographic seal of the New Mandalorian Secret Service, complete with his name and a serial number. Obi-Wan felt his eyebrows go for a hike up his forehead. “So much for the illusion of me courting Satine.”

“If you have to take action tonight, it will be over regardless. I’ve had a set of more common clothes delivered to your quarters; you should try to blend in as much as possible. If you need to investigate anything during the ceremony, comm me first, no matter how minor it seems. I’ll have backup teams on standby.”

He chuckled. “In that case, I need to do something about all this glitter.”

It made him quail a bit, but he did eventually shave most of his facial hair down into a minimal style that was more popular among the Mandalorians visiting from the colony worlds. Obi-Wan’s copper hair already set him apart from the larger Sundari population; short of dyeing that, there was no way to avoid standing out a bit. Examining himself in the mirror, he fussed at his shower-damp hair with a comb and pot of styling compound until he no longer resembled the many holos of himself that had been taken over the course of the week. The end result was more port worker on a day off than visiting Core-worlder, but it did the job. There wasn’t much he could do about his eye, but the brushed-metal surface wouldn’t reflect much light.

One of Matsuuri’s people let him out through a discreet staff entrance far away from the media swarm just as the sun was setting, filling the dome with enchanting red-gold light. Panels embedded in the walls and along the footpaths cast a blue-green glow reminiscent of certain bioluminescent plants in the deepening shadows. The crowds were thin, joyfully inebriated, and slowly drifting in the direction of the squares where large screens had been set up to broadcast the closing ceremony events beyond Peace Park.

Obi-Wan paused behind a bank of manicured shrubs and took a moment to shake the tension from his limbs. The Force stirred at his questing touch, and then it tugged him down into a trance deeper than the one he’d been using throughout the week.

Millions of points of light, each one a living soul, flooded into his awareness, and the sheer level of connection overwhelmed him for a moment. He pulled back with a gasp and then reached out again. Slower, this time, more carefully. The soft consciousness of non-sentient animals he filtered out immediately. The sea of Mandalorians’ emotions remained, and he trailed fingers through the glow, sending ripples out across the surface. Most didn’t come back, but a few did, bringing a sense of determination and purpose.

He quickly sorted out the presences he could identify as members of the Royal Guard and Secret Service -- Obi-Wan hadn’t been wasting his time among the barracks merely socializing.

There were two he didn't recognize, and their focus was currently honed to razor sharpness. Obi-
Wan pulled out of the trance and sent a quick message to Matsuuri.

With the crowds clustered in the squares, acquiring transport to one of the higher parks overlooking Peace Park was easy. It had been set up as an open-air cantina, a large screen facing the temporary bar displaying a projection of Satine as she spoke passionately to her people of their past, present, and future. Her magnified voice echoed through the city.

Obi-Wan followed the sense of dark intent around the back of the bar; it was an open-fronted temporary structure, with the rear half divided into storage and a public ‘fresher. The shadows there were deep, only the small strips at ground-level showing the silhouettes of planters. A clear view of Peace Park lay beyond the guardrail.

By the time he realized he was in trouble, the barrel of a disruptor was pressed to his temple. His breath caught, hissing between his teeth.

“Hands where I can see ‘em, di’kut.” The voice was deep but feminine, with a smoky rasp -- and very amused. He hadn't even sensed her in the shadows. Movement in the darkness alerted him to the presence of someone else, pressed back against the rear wall of the bar. His heart pounding, Obi-Wan lifted his hands.

A crack of white light, almost blinding in the growing twilight, split the wall as a door opened, and a man emerged from the ‘fresher. The soft snap of a disruptor was lost amid the distant roar of the crowd cheering for Satine, and the figure slumped bonelessly to the ground. The other lurking shape slipped forward to catch him and make sure he didn't bounce his head off the duracrete.

Obi-Wan chuckled ruefully. “Well played. You’re bounty hunters?”

The brunette woman crouched over the unconscious man looked up from her exploration and clearing of their target’s pockets. “Depends, pretty boy. How much do you care?” Her voice had a creaky, broken quality that spoke of old damage.

Before he could reply, the one keeping him at gunpoint laughed in disbelief. “Kriff. I know you. You’re Kryze’s little elbow ornament. Shouldn’t you be down with your girlfriend?” She came around into his field of view and the diffuse blue-green lighting revealed a solidly built older woman barely shorter than Obi-Wan, dark hair shading to steel bound back in a series of long plaits that lay tight to her scalp. Both women were dressed in the deep blue jumpsuits of the volunteers minding the cleaning droids.

Obi-Wan’s nerves settled as the nature of the situation revealed itself, and he summoned an easy grin. “Clever idea, service staff are practically invisible. As for how much I care: is he your target?” He gestured with his chin toward the prone figure on the ground.

The second woman was patting him down, snickering under her breath as she noted -- but didn’t remove -- the tools he carried. “Not just decorative, are you? Yeah, he’s ours. Private contract.”

“Well then, in that case, I don’t care at all.”

She arched a scarred eyebrow at him and he shrugged. “It's none of my business if he pissed off someone who could afford to make it worth your while. Maybe if I still represented the Jedi, I’d feel duty-bound to step in, but there’s only one person I’m guarding right now, and it's not him.”

“I like him, Sikkaah.”

With a snort of laughter, the hunter tucked her disruptor away and gave Obi-Wan’s hands a light slap down. “You like anyone who knows where to draw the line, cyar’ika. Stop trying to adopt people.”
“Get over here and help me, then. I don't want to break this guy's neck.” Between the two of them, the women negotiated the blond man’s limp form into a rubbish bin on a wheeled cart, latching the lid firmly. The steel-haired woman eyed Obi-Wan sharply.

“What's your report back to your handler going to be, Jetii?”

After a moment's consideration, Obi-Wan shrugged again. “As far as I'm concerned, there's nothing to report. Thank you for keeping things as non-violent as possible. I'm certain some people will appreciate the effort.”

Both women favored him with heavily amused looks.

“You sure, Sik’ika?”

“Stop it.” She gave him a squint-eyed glare; the dim light glittered from her eyes like flint. “Hope we don’t meet again, Jetii.”

“Mando’ad draar digu,” he quoted softly, drawing startled glances. “And neither do Jedi. Have a pleasant evening.”

Obi-Wan backed around the corner of the building, knowing better than to show his back to the two hunters, but waited until he was back on the fringes of Peace Park to report in to Matsuuri.

“False alarm. Nothing to worry about.”

Chapter End Notes

Mandalore is far more diverse than the Clone Wars series depicted and they can take that out of my cold dead claws.
Sundari suffers from a 1990s-level hair-bleaching fashion epidemic.

Aka’liit -- Mandalorians who remain true to the pre-Excision traditions; literally "faithful"

Cyar’ika -- sweetheart, love

Kyr’tsad -- Death Watch

Mando’ad draar digu -- (adage) "A Mandalorian never forgets"
Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Anakin makes a few new friends while Qui-Gon picks up the final threads left hanging from the Naboo Crisis.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The twin suns glared mercilessly on the scrap yard, shimmering from myriad bits of metal and baking the back of her neck and head, a dry heat that wicked away sweat the moment it formed. Shmi ignored it with stoic resignation, a long lifetime of servitude having trained out all urge to express discomfort, and bent further over the defunct droid. Its processor was irretrievably fried thanks to a deliberate blaster shot from an irate spacer, but the limbs and inner workings could be salvaged for parts.

With Anakin’s departure, Watto had piled the duties carried by her son onto Shmi’s thin shoulders; the Toydarian had made the mistake of betting against her son in the Boonta Eve race, and even with the proceeds from selling the winning pod, her master was unable to quite make up the loss enough to purchase another slave. She might not have the same magic touch with mechanicals, but Anakin had learned everything he knew from her first.

She was only in her early forties, but years of hard work and harder living in the parched climate had aged her before her time.

The battered chrome arm separated from its socket at last, and she capped off the leads to prevent damage. Tatooine’s sand, unfit for industrial applications, was oxidizing and could wear down the contact points to unusability. She had just set the limb with the others on a tattered net and started work on the couplings for the remaining leg when Watto’s voice rose from the front of the shop, screeching unintelligibly in Huttese.

“SHAG CHEEKA!”

Cursing softly under her breath, Shmi heaved the droid on top of the pile and wrapped the net around the mess, hauling it off under the cover of the scrap yard’s partial roof. Whatever her master was upset about, leaving the droid to overheat in the sun wouldn’t improve his mood.

Watto was arguing with a tall, reedy customer as she entered, as composed and unobtrusive as she could manage. The Huttese was flying fast and thick, but she recognized haggling when she heard it.
Watto’s yellow eyes caught sight of her and narrowed. He gestured impatiently for her to come closer.

<<You’re trying to rob me, scum! She is too skilled for me to let her go for anything less than seventy-five!>>

What? Her expression carefully neutral, Shmi studied the customer. They stood shrouded entirely in an unseasonable dark cloak made of extremely fine material; the cost of the fabric alone might well be worth more than what Watto needed to purchase several extra hands. Their face was concealed within the shade of the deep cowl, but a pale, pointed chin and thin lips were visible; that mouth was currently pulled back in a disagreeable frown.

“Fortu!”

A humanoid droid with its chassis painted a solar-resistant matt red ambled into the shop. “How may I be of service?”

The customer ignored the droid. “42-N7 is particularly skilled with mechanics, electrical, and cybernetic systems, in addition to being able to perform diagnostics without requiring additional equipment.” His Basic emerged heavily accented with a glottal quality a human throat couldn’t possibly produce. The droid began to rattle off its qualifications, but the man talked over it, “Sixty plus the droid should more than compensate you for the loss, and hold you over until you can...hire a replacement.” The level of distaste encapsulated in the word 'hire' was not lost on Shmi, but as the property in question, speaking up would likely cause more harm than good.

The droid’s head tilted curiously but it wisely withheld any comments, seemingly expecting this particular unpleasantness.

Watto snarled, baring his shattered tusks at the cloaked man, wings flailing to bring him up to eye level. “Sixty-five!”

“Done.” The man reached under his cloak and withdrew a leatherette pouch that clinked heavily and a datapad; even his long hands were covered in black gloves. If Watto was suspicious that the man had that precise amount in the pouch already, he said nothing. He and the shrouded man slapped hands on the deal and the pouch and ‘pad disappeared quickly into the lockbox behind the counter. The shrouded man gestured for Shmi to precede him out into the blinding heat.

“Come, woman. We will collect your things on the way.”

Reformation Year 976.09.22

Coruscant

Anakin Skywalker awoke sharply, cold sweat prickling over his skin.

Qui-Gon scowled at the screen, wishing not for the first time that Obi-Wan was still there to coerce useful results from the computer database. His former padawan had always known which keywords
would be most effective.

The list of pirate assaults on guild haulers was immense, and he had little idea how far back to look, or how to convince the system to display a simple map of trends. The hauler guilds had eagerly provided more information than he knew what to do with, and yet it was only half the information he needed. Of particular interest were those attacks that had been preceded by rejected overtures of partnership, but there was no way of knowing all the instances had been reported. It might have been the source company that was approached rather than the haulers themselves, or the captains might have intended to report once they reached their destination before being destroyed en route.

Nothing was worse than trying to assemble a puzzle with missing pieces.

“Qui-Gon?”

He glanced up at the tone of the young voice. He’d given his padawan permission to call him by name in private, knowing the associations of the term master were less than positive. Anakin stood in the door from his room, pale under his fading tan, arms wrapped tightly around himself, eyes haunted.

“You're up...” Qui-Gon glanced at the chrono “...early,” he finished, perturbed. The pile of data had eaten most of the night, and the Jedi Master suppressed a curse.

“I had a dream.”

That was never a good phrase to hear from a child in the Temple. Qui-Gon crossed to the couch and settled in, inviting Anakin to join him. “Tell me about it.”

His padawan took a seat but huddled up just out of reach, pulling his knees to his chest. “It was Mom. I dreamed someone bought her from Watto.”

Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed with concern. “Could you tell when it was happening?”

The boy’s face scrunched up in thought. “I know it was afternoon, from the shadows. But you mean present or future?”

“Oh the past, even. No?”

Anakin shook his head. “Things don’t change day to day there the way they do here. I don’t know.”

A growl of frustration threatened to build; Qui-Gon closed his eyes and studied the emotion for a moment before releasing it with a sigh. “I would take you back to Tatooine if the Council would give us leave, but they would never approve it.”

There was a whispered curse in Huttese, and the Jedi Master forced himself to suppress a smile and gently remind Anakin that he’d have to practice keeping such reactions contained. He was getting better, but that didn’t mean good things to Qui-Gon. Anakin had been overjoyed to be able to freely express himself, once he’d learned that it wouldn’t result in a cuff to the ear, but now he had to restrain himself for a different reason. Qui-Gon would never have asked for special treatment for Anakin’s sake, but the child needed time to recover.

Recover.... There’s a thought.

Anakin was already looking heavy-eyed again. Smiling, Qui-Gon helped him back to bed. “I swear to you I will do what I can to look into this. In the meantime, if you have any other dreams, set your datapad to record and tell it every detail you can recall as soon as you wake up. Everything you saw,
Pulling the blanket back up to his padawan’s shoulders, Qui-Gon said softly, “All Jedi do. You never know when a dream might hold something important. Some Jedi are naturally very precognitive, like Obi-Wan. I have visions, as well. You’re not alone in this, Anakin.”

Qui-Gon left the datapad on the shelf beside Anakin’s bed and returned to the computer terminal to send two short messages. He quailed a bit over sending the second, knowing he’d receive a well-deserved reaming from Master Uiirda when the timestamp was noted, but it couldn’t be helped.

Etain caught Anakin as they were leaving class, practically bouncing with excitement. “Ani, you have to come with me for lunch today, there’s someone I want you to meet!”

He tilted his head to look up at her sideways. “The last time you said that, it was a derbit you found in the garden.”

“Psh.” She waved a dismissive hand. “No, he’s a padawan, from Tatooine. Master Ki-Adi just brought him to the Temple a few days ago. He had to go through the same testing hells you did so he’s not in any classes yet, but Master Kast asked me to help show him around.” She grinned and nudged him with her elbow. “He’s a little older than us, but maybe having someone else from Tatooine around will help him feel more at home?”

“I don’t know about that,” Anakin muttered. It sounded like this other padawan had lived a very different life. Tatooine might be an abrasive dustball that got its grit all up in your business, but it was still a whole planet, not a village. He hadn’t even known everyone in Mos Espa.

In the commissary, they grabbed three trays and loaded up with what they could of the good human-palatable offerings, and Etain led the way to one of the courtyards on the same level. A boy a bit older than her was sitting on a large flat rock overlooking the patterned sand of a meditation garden, dark hair hanging in a long plait down his back.

“Hey, A’Sharad. Hungry?”

The boy twisted, revealing a pallid face that had rarely seen the sun marked with intricate black tattoos. “Uh. Etain, right?” He smiled as he accepted the tray she offered. “Are we allowed to eat here?”

She shrugged and claimed a spot on the rock; there was just enough room for the three of them to sit facing each other. “As long as we don’t make a mess and aren’t disturbing anyone, we can eat anywhere. This is a nice garden but it’s not used often.”

“I like it. Reminds me of home.”

Anakin eyed the sand and made a face. “Too much like home.”

The older boy laughed. “Spoken like someone with experience. I’m A’Sharad,” he added, offering his hand.
“Anakin.” Their hands clasped and Anakin noted the roughness of the other boy’s palm, chapped and callused from heavy gloves. “Etain said you’re also from Tatooine.”

A grin split A’Sharad’s face. “You, too?! You're definitely not from one of the tribes, though. We never bare our skin under the suns,” he explained at Etain’s questioning look. “I don't have to worry about being kicked out of the tribe here because it's a different sun. Location is important.”

“You were a Raider?!” Anakin blurted, nearly spitting his mouthful in amazement. “I didn't think they were human.”

“I still am a Raider. I just happen to also be a Jedi like my father.” His expression darkened for a moment before he shook the shadows away. “And while Tuskens are the main race, they’ll adopt others into the clans. Both my parents were human Raiders.”

“Wizard! What’s it like? Er. Can you talk about it?”

A’Sharad narrowed his eyes, looking stern. “I could, but first you’d have to be adopted into the tribe, and then you’d have to kill a krayt dragon because you didn’t grow up one of us.”

“Oh, now you’re just blowing sand up my exhaust,” Anakin scoffed, with a spacer’s hand gesture that was incredibly rude and made the older boy’s eyes go wide.

The three of them laughed. Etain’s eyes glittered triumphantly at having got the two of them talking. Anakin hesitated to talk about his life on Tatooine -- he’d mentioned some of it to Etain, but wanted no pity. It was a relief when A’Sharad reacted with disgust toward the practice of slavery rather than trying to sympathise.

A’Sharad had grown up outside the Temple, like Anakin, but because his father had been a Jedi, he’d been raised as an Initiate. He grinned shyly as he admitted that all the Council’s tests had found him well-trained and suited for induction into Temple life.

“Lucky,” Anakin grumbled. “I don’t think they’d have let me stay at all if Qui-Gon hadn’t insisted.”

“Your Master is Qui-Gon Jinn?” A’Sharad’s excitement was infectious and chased off Anakin’s momentary melancholy. “He and my father were close friends. I...do you think I could meet him?”

“Sure! I bet he’d like that.” Anakin pulled his communicator from its pouch on his belt and paused as he noticed the notification light blinking. Fortunately, it hadn’t been a missed call, just an automated message. He frowned at the update to his Temple-held account. Why would someone send him ten credits--?

His memory caught up with him and the others stared in concern as he nearly fell off the rock howling with laughter.

The corridor outside the Councilors’ offices was quiet. Nearly everyone had departed for lunch or social events, and the soft hum of the atmospheric systems was just audible. Qui-Gon stepped from the lift and took a moment to compose himself before making his way down the hallway. A passing MSE droid warbled at him in recognition, and he nodded politely to it; Anakin had been making friends with the little cleaning units almost from his first day.
The door to Mace Windu’s office opened as he neared. Qui-Gon settled his expression into neutrally pleasant; Mace’s summons had been curt, and he was clearly not in a mood for bullshit.

Which meant it was time for Qui-Gon to bullshit like a master.

Mace leaned back in his chair and regarded the other Jedi Master over steepled fingers as he entered.

“Do you want to see me?”

A long moment of silence stretched, fragile as spun glass; finally, Mace dropped an aggrieved sigh into the space between them. “This is you, Qui-Gon, and knowing you as well as I do, I really should not be caught quite so off-guard by anything that has your name attached to it. But here we are.”

He leaned down and picked up a crate that had been hidden on the floor behind his desk; it landed on the surface with a hefty thump and a rattle. “This was delivered to the main entrance this morning by a courier who could not or would not give the identity of the sender. They only said it’s for you. We’ve scanned it, of course; it’s not a security risk. So can you kindly, in simple words, explain to me exactly. What. The hells.”

The lid unlatched easily. Inside, held securely by expanded foam packing material, lay a Mandalorian buy’ce. Qui-Gon lifted the steel-grey helmet out and turned it over, examining the scuffed blue trim and yellow device painted on the right side of the dome. In shaped slots underneath the helmet were a hefty pair of customized DE-10 blasters with the scopes removed, power packs separated and slotted in beside them. The grips had been replaced with bone panels etched with Mandalorian script.

A datachip fell out of the helmet as he tilted it, skidding lightly across the surface of the desk.

Mace arched an eyebrow. “I’m not touching that.”

It wasn’t encoded; plugging the chip into his datapad produced a simple, rather terse message.

*Getting involved was kriffing stupid of you. But I owe you one for Roz’s sake. Montross is no longer a problem.*

“Care to explain that?” Mace’s voice could have frozen magma.

Qui-Gon replaced the helmet in the crate. “I think we can consider the matter of Senator Trell’s murder effectively resolved.”

“I don’t see any indication of the man being brought before a court, Qui-Gon.”

“I didn’t say the resolution was satisfactory, Mace. Just effective.”

The other Jedi Master’s lips pinched tightly with displeasure. “Qui-Gon…”

He released a sigh through clenched teeth. “There was a personal matter standing between two Mandalorians, Mace. I don’t need to remind you how getting in the way of such things typically ends.”

Mace’s fingers drummed on the surface of his desk for a moment before he waved a hand at the crate. “Take it. A Mandalorian sent it to you. Best not displease him. But before you go, there’s a matter I need you to take care of.”
Qui-Gon glanced up from replacing the lid on the crate. The tone of his voice, “What’s wrong?”

Mace held out a shimmering plastine business card. “I need you to contact this... person, and answer their questions in a manner that befits a representative of the Order.”

Qui-Gon tapped the contact point on the card and a small holographic animation formed in the air above it, displaying the logo of one of the galactic HoloNet newsfeed corporations for a moment before it burst into a haze of tasteful sparkles and re-formed into a journalist’s name and contact details. A list of their journalistic credits and highlights scrolled at the bottom.

“Why do I need to speak to a reporter for the Order, Mace?”

Mace sighed, his eyes narrowing to displeased slits. “It seems some of Obi-Wan’s... activity is drawing attention. Honestly, could you not have advised him against returning to Mandalore?”

Qui-Gon tapped the card’s contact point again impatiently, closing the hologram. “Mace, if the Council had wanted Obi-Wan to hide under a rock for the rest of his life, you shouldn’t have removed him from the Temple. The only people he knows outside the Order are rogues and politicians; regardless which he chooses to associate with, he will draw attention, particularly after his apparent heroism on Naboo. But as he is no longer a representative of the Order, we have precisely zero control over what he chooses to do with his life. Perhaps you should have considered that before cutting him loose!”

His voice had tightened as he spoke until it was a growl issued through gritted teeth; he felt the scowl drawing his brow low as Mace leaned back in his chair, eyes wide. Taking a moment to recompose himself, Qui-Gon said softly, “I will speak to them -- I will accept responsibility for all such correspondence if it suits you -- but all I can truthfully tell them is that Obi-Wan is his own person and that his actions no longer represent the Jedi Order. I know that is not what you want me to say, but it is all I can say.”

After a tense moment, Mace sagged. “I’ll take what I can get at this point.”

Qui-Gon hesitated before picking up the crate. “Before I go, Mace. Is there any way I can obtain an interview with Minister Gunray? It pertains to my current investigation into the roots of the Naboo Crisis.”

“A lot of people want an interview with him right now,” Mace grumbled. “He invoked an obscure clause which makes his official statement before the Senate the only legally permissible comment he has to offer on the entire situation. I’m glad we even got the name of the Sith apprentice out of that. I wish we could pull him in for a full inquiry -- particularly considering they were working with a Sith Lord -- but the Trade Federation did their research before taking actions against Naboo.”

“And so many other times.”

They exchanged a resigned, commiserating look.

“Take your Mandalorian souvenirs and get out of here. And comm that reporter before they comm us again.”

“Erected nearly four thousand years ago, the Convocation Center was constructed after the end of
the Great Sith War, on top of the ruins of the original Senate Hall--” The echoes of the tour guide’s voice slapped back to them across the vast plaza dotted with towering humanoid statues. The group was clustered at a sightseeing stop at enough range from the Senate building to appreciate the sheer monumental scale of it. The dome’s vast armoured cap, two kilometers across, held thousands of offices suspended over a full kilometer drop.

A’Sharad Hett cast a sideways glance at the other padawans, some of whom were snapping holos, others who had connected their datapads to the localized information plinth and were paging through an interactive exhibit. Etain was one of the former, but instead of merely taking pictures, she was sketching what she saw with a stylus on her ‘pad.

He had to look for his other new friend. Anakin was standing off to one side, half listening to their guide as he took in the view. A small frown pulled at the corners of his mouth. A’Sharad sidled over until he could rest his elbow on the kid’s shoulder.

“Stare harder. It’ll melt any time now.”

Anakin twitched but didn't shrug his arm off. “I’ve been here before. Qu-- Master Qui-Gon brought me. He said his duty would sometimes bring us here, and that I should be able to not stare like a nerfherder.”

“So why *are* you staring? If not like a nerfherder?”

“One of Master Qui-Gon’s friends used to be in charge, but then something happened and they voted to kick him out. Qui-Gon said his friend hadn't done anything wrong, but politics made him look bad.”

The older boy nodded although his friend was still facing away. The afternoon sun warmed the back of his shoulders gently through the tan fabric of his padawan’s tunics, and he still marveled at being so exposed under an open sky. It was not a wholly comfortable feeling. “Politics is ugly like that. You can be the best person in the world, but if someone with power doesn’t like you, they can make others think you’re the worst sort of monster.”

Anakin craned his neck to look up at him. “Does that happen among the Raiders, too?”

“Not in my tribe, but we saw it happen with one of the others. Three good hunters were killed before the rest of their clan split from the tribe to join ours.”

The tour guide finished his spiel and between him and the supervising Jedi Masters, the padawans were herded back into the tourist transport. Etain budged between Anakin and A’Sharad, holding her datapad so they could both see the page.

“Know why they abandoned the Senate Hall before the Sith War? A Sith Lord invaded it!”

The page showed a flat holo, monochromatic from age, a high perspective that was clearly taken from a standard security recorder. A human with long dark hair and a lightsaber faced off with a Krevaaki Jedi holding a staff, while another human in manacles was restrained by guards almost out of the frame. The legend underneath the image identified them as Sith Lord Exar Kun, Jedi Master Vodo-Siosk Baas, and Fallen Jedi Ulic Qel-Droma.

Etain scrolled the page down, her index finger covering Kun’s face. “Qel-Droma was on trial for leading an attack on Coruscant. Kun killed his former Master, freed Qel-Droma, and started the war. Nobody wanted to use the Hall after that, and it got bombed later.”

A’Sharad felt a chill settle in his gut. “You mean they put a new building in the same location a Sith
killed a Jedi Master. That’s...great. I bet there’s all sorts of energy from that still hanging around.”

“I know, right?”

Anakin’s nose scrunched up. “I don't get it.”

“Big uses of the Force create ripples that can linger for centuries,” Etain said in a hushed voice. There was enough chatter from the other padawans in the group that she probably wouldn't have been overheard, but A’Sharad understood wanting to not say such things too loud. “And especially if they’re really Light, really Dark, or someone really strong died. This was all three at once. Who knows how that could affect people who are in close proximity to it for a long time?”

“You mean all those senators.”

“Yeah.” A’Sharad tugged absentely on his braided hair. Master Ki-Adi hadn't yet formally claimed him in front of the Council, and he was the only student without a slender braid or some other status marker. “Wonder if there's someone who’d know. We’d definitely be in the Wastes if we tried to explore on our own.”

The transport deposited them on a landing platform near the Senate Building’s entrance; despite the sun’s angle, the broad dome cast the platform in shadow. A squad of Senate security guards flanked the group, keeping an eye on potential stragglers, as the guide led them through the atrium, explaining the highlights of both architecture and displays. The atrium was more like an immense, multi-leveled art gallery that stretched the full width of the building’s base and showcased permanent and transitory works from member systems’ most acclaimed artists.

Considering the fidgeting among the younger padawans, A’Sharad found himself appreciating their guide’s perfunctory presentation and insistence at moving along. An older Mon Calamari girl grinned and nudged his elbow.

“You're broadcasting.”

A’Sharad cursed softly and applied attention to his shields. “Thanks. Sorry.”

“Don't worry about it. Most of the rest of us are feeling the same way, I think.”

Despite the vast, open nature of the hall, sonic dampeners had been placed to reduce echoes, and their quiet conversation didn't reach far beyond the space between them. Etain moved in on A’Sharad’s left while a much taller human boy leaned over the Mon Cal padawan’s right shoulder with a massive grin. “Personally I think this is a test to see how well we’ve learned the lessons about patience, serenity, and maintaining a pleasant face despite the boredom.”

The older girl rolled her eyes. “Don't be ridiculous, Garen.”

“Tell me you're not finding it a little trying.”

“Shush, you.”

Etain craned her neck to look up at an installation floating above their heads, thousands of coloured glass shapes lit from within like stars. “Bringing the youngest ones may have been a mistake. It's only a matter of time before the smuggled candies end up places they shouldn't.”

That explained the telltale aromas of chee melon and kuiberry A’Sharad had been noticing during the trip. “That’ll make things exciting for the next tour group. Is this a regular thing?”
“Nope.” Garen shook his head. “Master Clee says it was an invitation from the Senate. Something something, bring the Jedi and the Senate closer in cooperation, something, introduce the younglings to the functions of government, etcetera.”

“A bit too young, in some cases,” Etain muttered. Anakin was looking around with a bored, uncomfortable expression as they followed the tour guide; the older girl caught him with an easy arm around the shoulders. “Having fun yet?”

He shrugged. “It’s impressive and all, but don’t we have classwork and stuff to do?”

A’Sharad grinned. “Think of it as an excuse to not be sitting around all day with what’s-their-face kicking the back of your chair.”

The Mon Cal girl patted Anakin’s shoulder. “Pretend you’re your master and do what you think they’d do.”

Anakin brushed a hand over his bristle-short hair; A’Sharad privately hoped they wouldn’t make him adopt the same awful, low-maintenance cut. “I don’t think my hair’s long enough for that.”

“Oh! You’re Anakin, aren’t you?” The older padawan’s tone brightened. “I’m Bant. Obi-Wan is a good friend of ours.”

To his credit, the young padawan caught her word choice. “Is?” he asked, squinting suspiciously.

Garen squeezed between Bant and A’Sharad to shake Anakin’s hand in greeting. “Yeah, is. We’ve spoken with him since he left. Want to hang out later, when we’re done pretending to have sticks up our backsides? We can talk about that stunt you pulled on Naboo.”

The older boy had to be almost twenty Standard, but his braid was ringed with red cords indicating a focus on piloting skills. He and Anakin would probably start talking stick jockey and leave everyone mystified at the jargon. The younger boy’s grin in response was infectious, and the group of them were caught slightly off-guard by the clear voice that carried over the general murmur.

“Well! I’m glad to see so many of you enjoying your visit!” An unassuming older man in fine but modest robes emerged from the double doors the group had been brought to. “Come in, come in. No need to huddle up so!”

He stepped aside and made shooing motions, as if herding a cluster of tookas, and the supervising Masters ushered the padawans into the large, circular office. They were in the heart of the Senate Building, directly beneath the Convocation Chamber, and A’Sharad guessed that the broad “windows” lining the walls were actually screens receiving live feed from cameras on the outside of the dome. The room would feel stifling and enclosed, otherwise.

“It’s a shame the Council decided to accept my invitation! As some of you may know, I am Chancellor Palpatine, formerly the senator from Naboo.” The man’s watery blue eyes flicked over the crowd of padawans, but it seemed to A’Sharad he was looking for someone in particular. “After the Jedi very kindly assisted us with that terrible blockade by the Trade Federation, I realised that there needs to be a closer bond between the Jedi and our government. You see, the Jedi are perceived by many to be cloistered monks or magicians, when that cannot be further from the truth; when you attain Knighthood, you will provide a vital and important service to the Republic.”

It wasn’t A’Sharad’s imagination; the Chancellor was fully unaware of the smallest padawan in the front of the group picking their nose and had focused entirely on Anakin. He cast a fleeting glance at Bant and Garen. Bant’s large eyes were half-lidded in what looked close to a frown, while Garen
seemed to be paying more attention to the robed Chagrian standing a few paces behind the Chancellor with an expression that was only a hair shy of smug.

At least the Chancellor wasn’t resorting to baby-talk, but it was clear most of what he was saying was going right over the heads of the younger padawans and a few of the older ones who would probably never become diplomats. A’Sharad wished he’d get on with it.

At last the Chancellor stopped talking and their group was ushered out and into a lift which took them to a viewing gallery overlooking the deep bowl of the Senate chamber. The blast-proof transparent material that made up the window had the telltale shimmer of a holography disruptor, preventing unofficial visual recordings from being taken of the Senate sessions.

Etain got a sly look and pulled out her datapad and stylus.

The afternoon session they’d been invited to watch was mercifully short -- a three-way dispute of systems’ legal jurisdiction within a sector had to be witnessed and mediated. What was otherwise a tedious session turned entertaining when the senator from one system threatened to regurgitate another senator for their nestlings’ dinner and a shrill argument broke out.

A’Sharad leaned close to the older padawans in order to be heard over the younger padawans’ laughter. “Is it just me or does the Chancellor keep glancing up at us?”

Bant had a flat expression that did a good job of making her look unimpressed. “He’s entirely too pleased with himself. This whole thing has the air of being staged. Or at least set up so he can be the calm in the current.”

“Not just me, then. He gets to look like the only adult in the room for our benefit.”

Garen snickered. “You and Obi-Wan would so get along.”

The Senate session ended before the youngest padawans could start raising havoc. Despite their masks of serenity, there was a definite gleam of relief in the eyes of both Masters. As they filed down the corridor back to the atrium, A’Sharad could have sworn he heard the baffled warbling of a Mouse droid getting a dropped half-eaten candy stuck in its intake port.

The interview with the journalist went about as well as expected; Qui-Gon deflected a number of prying queries into Obi-Wan’s personal life, as well as some wild and increasingly improbable speculations regarding his departure from the Order.

“If Obi-Wan chooses not to discuss such matters, then it is not my place to divulge further personal information. I’m sorry, I realise you’re only trying to do your job, but those are questions you need to ask the man himself.” He was both pleased and deeply amused that his former padawan had so rapidly developed both discretion and an effective battery of evasive statements. The maturity he had seen long before was beginning to shine through.

It had taken another hour before he could extricate himself from the journalist’s questions and return to his work. Hopefully that interview wouldn't be too drastically edited.

“Yes, thank you. Your cooperation has been invaluable.” Qui-Gon signed off and leaned back in his chair, watching the received file process. Another non-conglomerate with trouble making its
deliveries, another pile of data to sort through. He checked the time and took a moment to compose himself before putting in a final call.

The secretary on the other end smiled at him. “Master Jinn! Wesa were starting to wonder if yousa would call today.”

“I’m getting so predictable, am I?”

The Gungan bared his teeth in a grin. “I’ll let Her Majesty know, please hold.”

He didn’t have to wait long before the connection was transferred. Queen Amidala had come from a formal session, if the quality of her makeup and headdress were indicators. Sometimes he would be connected with one of her handmaidens instead, if Padmé was occupied with state matters, but this time it was the Queen herself whose Jedi-level serene expression cracked into a massive smile.

“Master Qui-Gon! How are you today?”

He smiled in return. The girl -- young woman by the Naboo’s standards -- was easy to like. Qui-Gon had a certain paternal level of affection for her that would possibly give the Council a collective fit if he mentioned it. “I’ve had a few surprises, good ones. But largely more of the usual. I was wondering if I might prevail upon a few of your diplomatic contacts. The Jedi might be respected, but we are not entirely trusted, and there are a few sources who claim to know less than we know they do.” He let his frustration show on his face; small companies were always eager to cooperate, but larger ones with political ties would often play coy and offer information as if it were priceless jewels: one at a time and sparingly.

Padmé’s expression was an intriguing blend of thoughtful and mischievous. “I could provide some names, but perhaps it would be better for you to attend a meeting we will be holding here? I can put in a formal request, if that would make matters easier.”

That caught his attention. “It would, indeed. It would be a good introduction for Anakin into representing the Order in a low-pressure diplomatic setting.”

Her grin widened. “Exactly my thoughts. Have a good evening, Master Qui-Gon.”

“And you, Padmé.”

Anakin returned somewhat later than usual, owing to the padawans’ trip to the Senate. The boy was both hyped up and pensive, and responded in monosyllables when asked about the trip. Qui-Gon waited until they were having dinner to ask, “What’s on your mind, Anakin?”

His padawan frowned at his plate and mushed the food around a bit. “We’re not supposed to have attachments, right? But we’re allowed to make friends. Aren’t friends also attachments?”

Ah. Qui-Gon suppressed a grimace. He’d been arguing this point for years already. “That...is an unfortunately-worded rule. Attachments can potentially prevent a Jedi from making the best judgment for a given situation. If the well-being of a friend is at risk but not connected to our duty as diplomatic representatives, it can be difficult to put our personal feelings aside and focus on the larger picture.”

His jaw clenched as he remembered his beloved Tahl and his own admittedly abominable handling of the situation on New Apsolon. “The issue is not so much the attachments themselves as it is how we handle them. Loving is a very Light emotion, it’s very selfless, but the fear of losing something or someone we love is Dark and selfish; it can drive desire to keep and possess and smother rather than respecting another’s autonomy and individuality. Your friendships are a good thing, Anakin, and it
makes me glad to see you building connections with your agemates.”

Anakin seemed to accept his words easily, but his eyes narrowed. “The Council said being worried for Mom was a bad thing.”

That particular memory almost made Qui-Gon growl. The Council’s leading statements to induce an emotional response had been the worst sort of interrogation. “They implied as much. Children can become very attached to their parental figures; it’s one reason why the Order prefers to search for those who are exceptionally young.”

“But do the kids ever get asked if they want to go?”

And wasn’t that just the worst aspect of it all: younglings could not be considered legally responsible for those decisions, but their own wants should still be taken into account. There was never going to be a satisfactory answer to that line of questioning. “If they’re old enough to be asked. Often their parents offer them because the Order can provide a better life.”

The contents of Anakin’s plate were beginning to resemble an abstract painting. “A’Sharad is fifteen and grew up with his dad. But they’re letting him stay.”

There it was. “A’Sharad’s father was a Jedi, and raised him with the Jedi traditions alongside those of the Tuskens.” Qui-Gon sighed. “His father was also killed recently, and I regret his loss. He was a dear friend.” He tapped the table to get Anakin’s attention and locked eyes with the boy when he finally looked up. “That does not mean that I intend to seek out and kill the bounty hunter who ended his life. That is an urge your friend will need to meditate on and release, and it will be so much harder for him because he was there when it happened.”

Anakin stuck a spoonful of swirled glop in his mouth without seeming to taste it. “So it’s not that they didn’t like me worrying about Mom, they didn’t like how I answered about it.”

“You were still being tested, yes.”

His padawan scowled. “That wasn’t fair of them.”

“I agree.” He was about to expand on the matter of objectivity when his comm unit chimed. “Hold that thought.”

The connection was from Mace again. What’s happened now? “Jinn.”

“Qui-Gon, we’ve received a request from Naboo for you to attend a meeting concerning the recovery and resolution from the Crisis earlier this year. The Council has decided to grant the request, since it ties in closely with your current investigation.”

Anakin’s head had whipped around to stare at Qui-Gon as soon as the word ‘Naboo’ registered. It was a challenge to keep the knowing smile from his voice. “Very well. When is it scheduled, and are we taking one of the Order’s ships or getting a ride?”

One of Mace’s patented put-upon sighs echoed tinnily through the comm. “You can pick up an Order shuttle from the hangar in the morning. However, since your padawan is still adjusting to Temple life, we feel it would be best if he remains behind. The Chancellor has requested Anakin join him for Senate sessions, since he seemed so interested during today’s visit.”

That was a definite frown on Anakin’s face, but the boy quickly tried to smooth it out. Qui-Gon shook his head, more for Anakin’s benefit. “You want him to adjust to the Temple by getting special treatment from the leader of the government, Mace? That seems rather contradictory, don’t you
think? I’ve been introducing Anakin to the research aspects of Jedi investigations, and if this meeting is in any way relevant to my work, he should be there.”

“The Chancellor has…requested his presence.” The implication that the Chancellor might change that request to an order hung in the air like a foul smell and made the back of Qui-Gon’s neck prickle.

“And the Chancellor may have it. Once we return from Naboo and I’m able to accompany them. As my apprentice, Anakin’s well-being is one of my primary concerns, and the media’s notorious tendency to latch on to sudden developments — such as a lone child being in direct attendance of the leader of the Republic — would not be favorable.”

The note of relief in Mace’s next sigh couldn’t possibly have been Qui-Gon’s imagination. “Alright. I’ll inform His Excellency. No detours this time, Qui-Gon.”

“Would I ever?”

Theed was just entering into the cooler months of the year, and all the city’s lush greenery had turned golden. Creeping ivy drew lines of crimson fire up the old stone walls, and the parklands had paled to pastel blue-green. Anakin shivered despite the new jacket Qui-Gon had given him to wear over his tunics, and hoped the Naboo heated their buildings. The small lightsaber, the first he’d ever constructed, bounced awkwardly at his hip, but he was too proud of that accomplishment to shift its position.

One of Padmé’s handmaidens, the blonde girl whom he tentatively identified as Eirtaé, met them at the spaceport below the city with a small security escort and an enclosed speeder.

“Master Jinn, Padawan Skywalker. It’s good to see you again.”

Anakin had a panicked moment where he forgot what he was supposed to do before copying Qui-Gon’s shallow bow of greeting.

“Likewise, Mistress Eirtaé. Captain Panaka.”

The uniformed man smiled a bit more warmly, now that his Queen’s life was no longer at risk, and escorted them to the speeder. To Anakin’s relief, there was a heating system, although not quite adequate to match his comfort level. The Temple’s artificially controlled environment had done little to help him adapt to cooler climates.

Eirtaé led them through the palace to the residential wing, a place with lower ceilings and thick carpets that swallowed sound. A set of double doors opened onto an airy room filled with comfortable-looking chairs; two of the three people waiting within stood as they entered.

Qui-Gon bowed and Anakin quickly matched him, thinking with relief that this was a better place to make that mistake twice than in front of the entire karking Senate.

“Your Majesty.”

The Queen laughed. “We’re not being formal here, Master Qui-Gon. Ani, it’s good to see you again.”
As he straightened, Anakin caught a flash of genuine happiness from Qui-Gon.

“Finis! I was hoping you’d be here.” Jedi Master and former Chancellor shook hands warmly, exchanging teasing barbs with casual ease.

“Master Valorum has kindly enlightened me as to the level of obstruction he had to deal with regarding Naboo.” Padmé’s tone was wry, an embarrased flush colouring her cheeks. She was wearing only the barest formal makeup and a simple robe over loose trousers gathered at the ankle, a very different, more private aspect than Anakin was accustomed to seeing. He offered her a shy smile, and she rose to give him a hug in greeting. “You must have grown ten centimeters since I last saw you. How do you manage that?”

“Must be the Force. I’m hoping it can make me taller than Master Qui-Gon someday,” he joked.

“I hope not! We’d all get stiff necks trying to look up at you,” she teased, and dropped a kiss on his cheek. Anakin desperately hoped his face hadn’t just matched the colour of the wall hangings. “I want to introduce you and Master Qui-Gon to someone. This is Esquire Kardin Lo, a good friend of Master Valorum.”

“Friend’ may be phrasing it too casually.”

A spear of ice ran down Anakin’s spine and exploded in his stomach as his breath caught painfully. He knew that voice, with its half-swallowed, almost clicking tone and staccato words.

The third person in the room, who’d been standing by so quietly he’d vanished into the background, was a towering figure taller than Qui-Gon, pallid and reedy with an elongated bald head. Dark robes hung from his shoulders, making him appear to be a shadow that had somehow extruded from the floor. Spindly hands folded placidly at his waist. “Finis and I became acquainted during work to resolve the incident over the Malastare Narrows two years ago.” His thin lips turned up in an unsettling semblance of a smile which didn’t reach his dark eyes. “When you expressed the need for someone with skills managing large amounts of data, Finis contacted me.”

Qui-Gon bowed politely. “Forgive me, Esquire. It surprises me that a Muun would find no conflict of interest in helping us, given the ties between the Trade Federation and the Banking Clan.”

Lo’s fingers flicked and fluttered in an unreadable gesture. “We are not all subject to the Banking Clan, Master Jinn, and for my part I find great interest in where the Trade Federation’s funding ebbs and flows. Queen Amidala has shown me the last collation of data you sent to her, and I am impressed with your thoroughness. You possess great skill, for a human.”

A flash of amusement coloured the Force around Qui-Gon, but he kept it from his features. “Thank you. That’s a tremendous compliment coming from one of your people.”

“Esquire Lo has kindly agreed to join our staff for the time being, and has been graciously accommodating of some of our more unusual requests,” Padmé explained. “The meeting won’t be for another few hours, but I thought you would like to get acquainted beforehand.”

Qui-Gon retrieved a datacard from one of his pouches before taking a seat. “The latest construction I’ve put together. It’s rather more intensive than the previous one.”

The Muun’s long face showed its first genuine emotion, an expression Anakin could only interpret as eagerness. “I look forward to reviewing your latest work.”

“Anakin.”
He looked up; Padmé was still on her feet. She held her hand out to him. “You’ll probably find this
incredibly dull. I managed to get a friend of yours to come up from the hangars for the afternoon, if
you’d rather see Artoo.”

“May I?” He glanced at Qui-Gon for permission. The Jedi Master exchanged a glance with Padmé,
then smiled and nodded.

“Go ahead.”

Padmé led him through another set of doors at the rear of the room into a larger space that hosted a
variety of musical instruments. A series of excited welcoming beeps resounded from the acoustically
tuned walls.

The Queen’s voice held a giggle, and Anakin realised his tension over the tall man in the other room
had distracted him from noticing her excitement; she was nearly giddy with it. “Here we are.”

“Ani?”

Anakin’s mouth fell open when he saw who was waiting there, clean and well-dressed and cared for
and safe. He was across the room before he could really think about it, diving into her arms. “Mom!”

Chapter End Notes

**Surprise! ^__^**

*shag cheeka* -- slave woman

derbit -- a small lizard frequently kept as a pet
During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

On Mandalore, Obi-Wan runs into an old friend at a new party.

You may have noticed the rating has gone up. This is the point where stuff gets dark and I start adding trigger warnings. Jump to the bottom for the full list.

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

It was raining, fat drops impacting the cracked pavement hard enough to soak pedestrians up to the shoulders. Even with the heavy poncho she was drenched, and her hood was only just succeeding at keeping the water out of her eyes. Rainy season on this godsforsaken rock was a physical representation of misery.

“Come on, come on,” she growled, smacking her knuckles against the door again. The building was supposed to be abandoned; it wouldn't do for the Protectors to see someone visiting.

The door slid open a handsman, and a beady dark eye glared through. “Were you followed, rookie?”

“Of fucking course not, but that won’t remain the case if you leave me out here til another patrol passes.”

A heavy snort blew rancid breath into her face as the door opened the rest of the way. “Watch your attitude, kid. If you want to keep your skin intact, you’ll learn some proper fucking respect.”

“Aren’t you glad I have my priorities in order.” She tossed her dripping poncho onto a hook by the door and unslung the heavy bag from her shoulder. The Besalisk returned to his seat at the table, grunting in annoyance as she dropped the satchel onto the solo card game he’d been playing. “Check it before you get distracted again, Béla.”

The bag’s contents were mostly datapads bearing written contracts; there was a pouch of mixed dataries and trugut which the Besalisk counted through twice before rebagging the lot. “Take it through to the boss.”
She grabbed the satchel and slapped the control to open the door into the larger warehouse, pausing when Béla added grudgingly, “Good work, human. Keep it up and maybe you'll make it further than messenger girl.”

Zora flicked water from her jaw-length red hair with a snort and let the door slam behind her.

“I've hardly seen you for the last few days, Obi. What's going on?”

Obi-Wan pushed back from the desk with a sigh. “Did you know the average rate for reported assaults -- targeting civilians and criminals alike -- has risen three hundred percent in the past ten years? And somehow nobody ever seems inclined to investigate.”

“Yes--”

“They take down the information, provide the relevant details for loss coverage, and file it away, and it just disappears.”

“Obi.”

“It's ridiculous! It's not just ship-to-ship crime, people are being attacked or outright robbed face to face, and a significant number of reports indicate it's more than just random chance--”

“Obi!” Satine slapped the surface of his desk, the sharp crack of her palm on wood derailing his rant. “Is this about that huge file you received last week?” It had been an actual physical delivery rather than a HoloNet transfer, thousands of files on two datacards -- cards, there was simply too much information now to fit on smaller formats -- delivered directly to Sundari’s Royal Palace via courier.

Obi-Wan scrubbed his hands through his hair, frowning at the screen. “Tangentially. Qui-Gon’s friend appended a number of correlating reports--hello there.” He blinked as the Duchess pushed between him and the desk to sit on his lap, thought process stumbling as the scent of her perfume triggered some incredibly pleasant memories.

She smiled back and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, twining her fingers into the hair that brushed his shoulders. “Hello, darling. You should take a break for a while.”

“Oh, I should?” He curled his arms around her, snuggling her against his chest with a teasing grin.

Satine gave him a coy, speculative look and hummed thoughtfully. “Yes, you should.” Her mouth found his, sweetness hiding intoxicating heat, and he purred into the kiss.

“I...suppose I can...hmm. Spare a few minutes for you?” he murmured. Satine’s tongue darted into his mouth, curling temptingly against his for a moment and drawing a delighted gasp from him. Obi-Wan cupped one of her breasts through the multiple layers of fabric and she arched into his touch with a pleased murmur.

“Darling, if that's where your hands are going--” her breath caught as his lips found the side of her neck “--there's a perfectly suitable bed in the next room.”

“Is there?” Obi-Wan ran his teeth lightly over her skin, careful not to leave marks, making her shiver. “How convenient.”
A few minutes turned into something more than an hour. Satine giggled at his voiced concern for disrupting her intensive schedule.

“Obi, if I’d only had a few minutes, I wouldn’t have suggested the bedroom.”

The soft air in the room made the drying sweat prickle on Obi-Wan’s skin, and he tugged a light blanket over the two of them as they cuddled. “That is true. Still.”

“Hush, dear. We don’t have to get ready for another hour.”

His fingers paused in their idle toying with her hair, which lay in loose flaxen curls across his chest. “What day is it?”

“It’s the sixteenth,” she answered airily. “I knew you’d probably have forgotten.”

“Blast. Are you certain you need me there?”

Satine rolled over, folding her arms across his chest and resting her chin on the back of her hand to look at him; Obi-Wan shifted his arm around to trace nonsense patterns on her back. “It’s only the Count and Countess Varynes’ sixtieth anniversary, darling. Low-pressure, but as you are essentially part of the household—”

“Hmm. Royal Guard’s personal torture device.”

She hid her face against his chest, snickering. “You do put their skills to the test.”

“A few of them have picked up some clever tricks. It’s nearly a challenge.”

“So modest, Obi.” She patted his shoulder, her pale eyes warm with affection. “You’ve no reason not to be there, darling. Shake a few hands on the greeting line, then find a corner to decorate if you don’t feel like making small-talk. It can’t be more difficult than what you had to do as a Jedi.”

“As a Jedi, the barbs were usually up-front, rather than cloaked in pretty words,” he chuckled.

The mood shift was swift and shocking; Satine scoffed, glaring at him. “Must you see threats in every corner, Obi? Have you considered the possibility that not everyone is a threat to someone else?”

He resisted the urge to facepalm. “That’s not what I— It was meant to be a joke.”

“It’s not a joking matter, Obi!”

Obi-Wan gave up and scrubbed a hand over his face. Satine’s low tolerance for gallows humour rivalled that of Master Depa. “You cannot deny that it happens, Satine, more than it should.” There was no heat in his reply; it was an old argument, treading familiar ground. “Just because you have actively eschewed violence doesn't mean everyone else will do the same.”

“We are civilised people. We're better than that!”

“And yet, someone attempted to poison Carim Vale three weeks ago.” The MandalMotors designer had been understandably horrified, as had their host and Sundari Coreworks exec, Sul Yenn. The nearest they could surmise was that someone wanted to frame Yenn for the attempt; Obi-Wan had sensed only baffled outrage from the corporate entrepreneur, removing him from the suspect list.

Satine had forbidden him from getting involved further.
She sat up with a disgusted growl, the blanket falling down around her hips. “We must still lead by example—”

Obi-Wan pushed himself up to lean against the headboard, wondering how this happened every time. “I’m not…. We’re not having this argument again, Sati. We’ve been over this before.”

“And I hold out hope you’ll eventually listen to what I’m saying instead of parroting back what your Order has told you.” Satine dragged herself upright and bent to search through the clothes on the floor for her things.

He squeezed his eyes shut, exhaling sharply through his nose in an effort to find a more objective angle; despite the shame that still burned when he thought about the Order, it was difficult not to take her jabs at them personally. “I’ve literally been shot at because my boss refused to deal with a conglomerate,” he said carefully. “There’s no level of civility, Satine, short of rolling over and letting ourselves be bullied into an unfavourable employment, that would have resolved that issue.”

The garment she’d picked up was his shirt; Satine scowled and tossed it at him. “There is always a way to avoid violence, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You just need to stop being so blinded!” She disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door firmly; a moment later he heard the shower start.

Obi-Wan rested his elbows on his knees for a moment and let his head hang, feeling drained but not in a good way. Satine’s intentions were good, noble even; he appreciated the idealism even as he recognized that it would only function in theory. Many Jedi -- largely those who rarely left the Temple and their studies -- were of a similar mindset, wondering why the first impulse for the majority of the galaxy was to fight.

The question they should have been asking is why anyone would have no choice but to defend themselves in the first place.

After three months, the best he and Satine had managed was arguing in circles, orbiting the common ground without ever reaching it. He was starting to wonder if common ground even existed. Satine hadn’t liked fighting, but neither had she condemned him or Qui-Gon for doing their jobs when they’d been assigned as her bodyguards six years previous. The devastation wreaked upon the New Mandalorians by Death Watch during that time, however, had left her shaken and more determined than ever to enforce the pacifism of her predecessors.

With an exasperated sigh, Obi-Wan dragged the shirt over his head and went looking for the rest of his clothes.

By the time Satine had emerged, fully dressed and looking less irritated, he’d straightened the mess they’d created and returned to puzzling over the data. She studied him from the doorway, hands on her hips. “Are you coming tonight?”

“My dear,” He quirked a grin at her. “But only because you asked so nicely.”

“Terrible man.” Satine pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Hartyne will be by shortly with something formal for you.”

“I can't wait.”
The warehouse was colder inside than it was outside, a clammy chill that seeped through armour and clothes to settle on the skin, and it reeked of mold and effluent. The interior had been turned into a grid of enclosed holding cells made from modular large-cargo shipping crates arranged in blocks of four. They hadn’t yet done any planetary raiding -- just a few passes on the main spacelane routes for easy targets, waiting to see whether the local security would take notice and react. The operation was still in the process of setting up, and most of the cells were empty.

The few that were in use, however....

Zora gripped her rifle a bit tighter as she passed the one where someone was sobbing. Whoever it was had been throwing themself against the door earlier when she’d arrived, the screamed threats and begging muffled to incoherence by the insulation in the cell walls.

The door of another cell shuddered as she passed on her rounds, and it was all she could do not to flinch. Why they didn’t just keep the merchandise zonked out in stasis capsules, she would never understand; Béla had said something about slaves being more valuable when they weren’t staggering and blinded from hibernation sickness. The others seemed to have developed selective deafness to the sounds of misery; everyone who wasn’t on watch was currently holed up in the common room with cartons of greasy takeaway food, laughing over a sabacc game.

The worst part had been restraining them for Jinis to implant the little thermal detonators in the backs of their necks. The human medic had used a local anaesthetic “to keep the screaming down,” but pressing a terrified child’s face down onto the cold metal table had been almost too much to bear. Somehow she’d managed to keep it lidded until she was in her own room -- barely a closet with a bunk squeezed in -- before losing her shit, knees hugged to her chest, weeping silently under the bare light fixture.

*Be patient. Be cold. Be smart. You can do this. People are counting on you.*

Not for the first time, she wondered how long it would take for the poison of the industry to claim her soul.

---

Obi-Wan couldn't even remember if he’d previously met the elderly couple hosting the party. Satine had given him the usual crib sheet of names and faces to memorize so he wouldn’t look a complete boor; nearly all the names on the list were Kalevala elites who’d made their homes among the New Mandalorians and been elected to positions in government.

He had claimed space at a small elbow-height table to one side of the ballroom, running through the latest list in his mind and picking notables out of the crowd. The chamber was a tall, fascinating addition to the outside of the high-tower residence, suspended like a growth of synthesized crystal from the western wall; trapped sunlight cast rainbows across the overly-dressed crowd. Sometimes it seemed the social elite held functions simply for the sake of showing off material wealth; he was willing to bet everyone in attendance had their garments made solely for the evening, and the serving droid had offered a five-minute description of the pedigree of the drink he had chosen.

Qui-Gon would have enjoyed the production value, he thought. His former master had a great deal of amused appreciation for Master Dooku’s stuffy lectures on etiquette.

“So it's ‘Obi-Wan Kenobi’, is it?’
A surprised glance to his right revealed a woman in a dress that was elegant in its simplicity, warm dark skin and sparkling, mischievous eyes under a charmingly haphazard chestnut updo.

He blinked, utterly blindsided. “Tovari?”

She grinned at him and moved in for the hug he offered, following it up with a kiss on the cheek. “Hello, ‘Scogar’. I was hoping you'd be here!”

“What are you doing here?”

Tovari stepped back and touched the crested silver brooch holding a half-cape pinned to the left shoulder of her gown. “Representing my department.” She winked. “You're not the only one with secrets, you know. I’m an agent for the NMITC. We’ve been concerned with the reports we were hearing from freighter crews; I joined up with Booster to see if there was truth to it.”

He rested his elbows on the table, at once delighted to see her and utterly bemused. “Obviously, there was.”

She scowled and leaned against the table. “Too obviously.”

“How long have you been back, then? How are the others?”

Tovari toyed with the stem of her glass, frowning. “Booster's not having a good run. Jobs have dried up, he's had to cave and start accepting more...questionable cargo, shall we say. Last I knew, Feid and Pulkka were still working with him, but Fan had a strong moral objection to smuggling and left.” She nodded in response to Obi-Wan’s raised eyebrows. “Yeah, caught us all off-guard. He didn't elaborate on his reasoning, though, and we didn't press.”

“Something in his past, maybe.”

“That's what we thought. But anyway, I was willing to stick around, get some data on how the non-guild work is being affected, but then I got recalled.”

Obi-Wan grinned. “Booster had you figured out from the start, didn't he?”

She rolled her eyes in chagrin. “Second week I was there, yeah. Made me explain myself or he was going to leave me in the arse end of Hoth. I’m not a cold-weather type, so it seemed a justifiable risk.”

“Wait.” He aimed an accusing finger at her. “You’re a government agent. From Mandalore. From the Interstellar Trade Commission. And you asked me if I was spying?”

“I wanted to be certain I hadn’t been made two ways.”

He gave a short laugh, eyeing her mischievously. “Well, I do hope you enjoyed the one, at least.”

“Well, I-- Wait. Was that a dirty joke?” She gave him an exaggerated look, pressing her free hand to her sternum. “I’m shocked. Utterly horrified, I think my heart just failed.”

They shared a laugh, and Obi-Wan realized he felt truly relaxed in a way he hadn't since ending up as an unexpected political prop. It was a wonderful, freeing sensation. “Why were you recalled?”

There was a long pause as Tovari glanced around. She scowled and motioned for him to follow her out onto the balcony, slipping her hand over his elbow as if Obi-Wan were escorting her. In a low voice, she said, “Unexpected promotion. My direct superior was already under investigation for
embezzling department funds; then he up and disappeared on the last day of Jubilee. Nobody's heard from him since. Someone needed to handle the role; I happened to be the most qualified.”

Obi-Wan’s mind flashed to the wiry man with thinning blond hair he’d watched the two bounty hunters cart off. He’d not shared the details of the false alarm even with Matsuuri -- learning as a Padawan where jurisdictional boundaries lay had been headache-inducing on more than one occasion.

“Speaking of Jubilee….” She had that crinkled-up adorable mischievous look on her face, and Obi-Wan realized he was likely about to regret some of his decisions.

He leaned back against the waist-high balustrade, resigned to his fate. “Come on, then, let's get the teasing over with.”

“You just about charmed the drawers off the local media, from the way they were talking about you. How’d you get your Mando’a accent so clean?”

Obi-Wan explained his previous experience on Mandalore; at some point, Tovari snagged more drinks for them from a passing server.

“No wonder my aunt is so complimentary about you.”

He blinked, the then felt dull as he found that connection which had been teasing him for months. “Matsuuri is your aunt?”

She gave him a bright grin. “She's great, isn't she?”

“If that's a brief way of saying 'somewhat terrifying even when she's being nice' then yes.”

Tovari prodded his shoulder with a smirk. “Ass. I noticed you were hidden-in-full-view security. That's Aunt Ethyne’s brand of subtlety. But inquiring minds desperately want to know if you and the Duchess were shagging--” Obi-Wan inhaled part of his drink and coughed ”--because those were some heavy glances.”

Obi-Wan wiped wine from his beard; luckily it was a pale colour that wouldn't stain. “Did you deliberately time that question for a moment I was drinking?”

“Hmmmm maybe.” The woman looked completely unrepentant.

“We weren't.”

The entirety of Sundari’s solar needs could have been filled for a week by the brilliance of her grin when she noticed his deliberate omission. “How utterly scandalous of you, Scogar! I can't wait to share that with Feid.”

“Dreadful woman. My reputation will be in shambles because of you.”

“Well, it's not like that would take much effort,” Tovari retorted. Her face was still aglow with affectionate malice as he clutched at his heart, wincing.

“Oh! I'm not certain my ego survived that one!” They were both giggling like idiots, and Obi-Wan felt a rush of fondness mingled with regret. It just felt so damned good to trade barbs with someone without worrying the teasing would be interpreted badly, and he wrapped his free arm around Tovari in a loose hug. “Ugh, I’ve missed you. All of you. Tell them I said they're a pack of inveterate scoundrels? Scruffy inveterate scoundrels.”
“Oh, can’t forget the scruffy part.” She squeezed her arm around his waist briefly before leaning back against the rail beside him. “Teasing aside, I’m glad you and the Duchess get along so well. She needs someone with sense to balance her out.”

Obi-Wan frowned and looked down at the fragile glass in his hands. “Well. Mostly.”

“How?”

He risked a glance; Tovari’s expression was somewhere between cautious and concerned. “I don’t know if I--”

Tovari’s hand touched his arm. “Scogar. Obi-Wan. If something’s troubling you, it’s not good to bottle it. That shit’s not a fine vintage.”

The comment made him laugh, and she quirked an eyebrow, acknowledging the humour but still serious. He hesitated. It really was a personal, private matter; on the other hand, the cycle had been running for months unabated, despite his various attempts to defuse things. And he trusted her, he realised; not just as someone who could obviously maintain confidence, but as a friend.

“We argue. Quite a bit, actually. Satine thinks the Jedi advocate for violence -- which they don’t, but she’s only been witness to myself and Qui-Gon being the two field Jedi that were sent in when all else had failed. And despite how useful my skills have been, she wants me to stop. Entirely.” He caught Tovari’s eyes, surprised at how adrift he felt. The understanding he found there was grounding. “You know I can’t do that; I told you what it was like the last time I tried.”

Her eyebrows creased in the middle. “I remember.”

“It just keeps happening. I warn her to be cautious, she tells me I’m paranoid, or actively looking for things to fight. I make a joke at the wrong moment and she thinks I’m being critical of her policies. I’m almost starting to wonder if it really is just me, but every time I consider what I’ve been through and what I’ve seen, I know it isn’t.”

Tovari’s lower lip caught between her teeth as she looked away. “I…damn. This feels kind of selfish, because I like you a lot, but...can I offer a critical opinion?”

“Please.”

“It sounds like she doesn't respect you. The only way to stop the argument cycle is to let her win.” She threw a glance of fond exasperation his way, and he wondered what his expression revealed. “Don’t look at me like that, Scogar. Satine’s an authoritarian. A benevolent one, yes, but she still believes she knows what's best for everyone and that the galaxy would be best served by listening to her.”

Obi-Wan regarded her with frank astonishment. “I-- You think so?”

Tovari gave a soft laugh that held little humour. “I’m a government agent, it’s my job to understand how it functions. People like Satine don’t just leave that mindset at the office once the day is over, it’s their entire life. I wish I could offer you something more positive to go on, I’m sorry.”

He thought about it for a moment. “No, you...I think you’re right. I don’t know why I didn’t notice that.”

“Because you’re too close to things to be properly objective. All that Jedi stuff about avoiding attachment might be onto something,” she added with a wink. “Ugh, enough of this being moody. Want to do something fun?”
“Yes, absolutely. Please.”

Tovari slipped her hand into the crook of his arm again. “We’re going to find a good vantage point and make fun of the silly overblown outfits everyone is wearing. There’s a stair up to the mezzanine somewhere.”

Laughing, Obi-Wan let her lead him back into the ballroom. “You’re absolutely terrible and this is why we get along so well.”

The next morning, he arranged a moment to have a word with Matsuuri. She gave Obi-Wan a critical appraisal as he entered. “Have a seat, Kenobi. What can I do for you?”

He dropped into one of the chairs and ran a hand through his hair, trying not to slouch. “Give me something to do. Please.”

The older woman’s brow arched elegantly. “Surely you can’t be that bored running my people into the salle floor.”

“Ugh, that’s just it, though. I’m taking out my pent-up energy on them.”

“If you find it reassuring, I’ve heard no complaints from anyone.” Her smile, however, was knowing. “The Duchess wants to keep you in comfort, and you're not used to it.”

“I’m not meant for comfort, Ethyne. I spent most of my missions with Qui-Gon running, getting shot at, and hiding in muddy ditches.” Obi-Wan sighed. “When you needed someone to watch Satine’s back, I had something to do. Your network indicates the threat has faded, so I’m no longer operating in a protector capacity, and it upsets her when I try to do so just to keep my skills sharp.”

“You could take a tactical advisory role--no?”

He was shaking his head. “I’m not Mandalorian, and correct me if I’m wrong, but that's a political role?”

She nodded. “You think that role should be held by a Mandalorian?”

A reluctant smile crossed his face. “Perhaps nobody would object. But then again, anyone who considers Satine’s government to be an opponent might be within their rights to accuse the Jedi Order of interfering and suggest that my departure was a convenient ruse.” Obi-Wan hesitated, then added ruefully, “And Satine and I would likely have irreconcilable ideas of how to handle situations. She's more adamant regarding her policies of nonviolence now than she ever was when we first met.”

Matsuuri was nodding, a thoughtful expression pursing her lips. “We have a strong policy of nonviolence, yes, but that doesn't mean we will sit by and allow others to commit atrocities in our sector. There is an initiative, a quiet one, that could benefit from your skills and experience.”

“I'm listening.”

“We’re aware of a slave trafficking ring setting up on Concord Dawn. They’re trying to put up a front of being a legitimate business, but our information indicates they’re straight-up raiders,” she
said, her eyes flinty. “Much as we would like to take them apart wholesale, their main base is on Nar Shaddaa; the best we can do is kick them out of the Mandalorian Sector. If you're interested in helping break it up, I can put you in contact with the Sector Security branch dealing with it. I will warn you, the work is...grim.”

Obi-Wan’s expression hardened. “I’ve seen grim, Commander Matsuuri. I'm willing to see if they want me there.”

“Oh, they will. You may want to leave your lightsaber behind, though.”

He nodded understanding: it wouldn’t do to have a perceived Jedi involved. “It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve handled a blaster.”

What followed was one of the most cagey, coded-language comm conferences Obi-Wan had ever sat in on. The subterfuge would have been amusing but for the real risk of the connection being decrypted by the targets. Commander Ojira seemed delighted -- it was hard to read his expression under the perpetually heavy-lidded, sleepy affectation -- and offered to send someone to collect Obi-Wan that afternoon.

Satine was less than thrilled. “You’re doing what?!”

“I’m helping MSS with a planetary operation. My skills might be able to help their team stay alive and find any hostages that might be hidden.” He tried to keep his tone level and reasonable.

She wasn’t fooled, eyeing his return to common civilian clothes with distaste. “Violence, Obi! Are you so-so...so addicted to adrenaline that this is your only recourse?” Her tone turned mournful as she slumped on the end of his bed. “Why couldn’t you just take up swoop racing, instead?”

The laugh that bubbled up was involuntary, and she glared at him; Obi-Wan set his bag aside and sat beside her, holding his hand palm-up in invitation. After a moment, Satine sighed and gripped his fingers tightly.

“Darling, I know how you feel about it--”

“Then why are you--”

“Because I can be of use.”

Satine stared at him for a long moment. “Of use? Obi, you’re not useless.”

He squeezed her hand gently. “But I feel like I am. There’s nothing for me to do, I’m not able to be content sitting around reading books and sparring with the guards and going to parties. That isn’t who I am, Satine. The Jedi are meant to be the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy, and I may not be a member of the Order any longer but I still feel the need to work for that goal. Helping MSS with this task? That’s justice. Helping shut down people who are taking and selling other sentients as slaves, Satine? That’s peace. I don’t understand why you object to my getting involved in a situation where you have no qualms about other Mandalorians.”

She released his hand and reached up to cup his face; her fingertips felt cool on his cheeks. “Because I’d be worrying for you, darling. I have read the reports, I know how dangerous this Krayn and his organization can be.” A frown pinched Satine’s face and she whispered, “I don’t want to see another scar on you and know that I could have prevented it.”

Obi-Wan clenched his teeth on an argument that wouldn’t have improved the moment and instead leaned in to kiss her forehead softly. “I swear to you, I will do everything in my power to come back
The trip from Mandalore to Concord Dawn was relatively short, but Obi-Wan still took the opportunity to take a nap; it reduced the disorientation of landing at an earlier local time than they’d departed from. He lurked under the cover of the shuttle with his hands tucked into the pockets of his leather jacket for warmth, watching the chilly drizzle just beyond the hull and trying to stay out of the crew’s way as they unloaded crates onto the collection dock.

A large speeder with official emblems on the sides pulled in and a group of people in blue uniforms climbed out. Three of them moved to start transferring crates to the rear of the speeder while the driver stepped up to exchange words with the shuttle pilot. Eventually a hand was aimed in Obi-Wan’s direction, and he straightened as the speeder’s driver ambled over.

The driver was human, a shade taller than Obi-Wan and on the stocky side of muscular, with a perpetual five o’clock shadow and curling dark hair turning grey at the edges. He sized Obi-Wan up, dark eyes narrowed appraisingly, before holding a hand out. “Kenobi, right?”

Obi-Wan took a chance, clasped the man’s forearm, and was rewarded with a spark of surprised approval through the Force. “Yes, sir.”

“Cort Davin. Come help us get this stuff loaded and I’ll introduce you to the others.”

Nituyn was a dark-skinned human woman a bit older than Obi-Wan and built like a small tank; “Glee” was her father, balding and wiry. Chagan was a Devaronian man with part of one horn broken off and capped in silver replicating the shape of the missing part; he gave Obi-Wan’s cybernetic eye a curious inspection for a moment. They waited until they’d left the hangar to start any real conversation.

“Worked with the Protectors before, kid?”

Obi-Wan shook his head honestly. “No, sir, although I’m aware of your reputation.” The speeder’s repulsor cushion smoothed out the ride over the cracked, mud-washed road, but there was enough unevenness in the duracrete surface to make things interesting. He took his cue from the others and hooked his fingers over the grip-bar on the ceiling.

“Be a new experience for you, then. Ojira told me you’ve done similar work before this?”

“If you mean coordinating with local security, then yes.” He offered a lopsided grin. “I know better than to tell you your business.” That earned him a pleased grunt.

Chagan was studying him again. “You look kinda young, kid. What are we using you for?”

Davin overrode anything Obi-Wan might have said. “Save it until we get to the station.” The rest of the drive happened in silence save for rain spattering off the roof.

Balaciya wasn’t the largest city on Concord Dawn, but it was one of the oldest, and it sprawled organically outward from the spaceport. If he’d not had the Force to guide him, Obi-Wan was certain he’d have rapidly lost all sense of direction. The station house was an older duracrete structure that had been added on to repeatedly over its lifetime, and the exterior had three different architectural styles competing for territory.
They got the supplies unloaded in the garage and then Davin pulled them all into his office upstairs. It was a tight fit; Nituyn ended up perched on the edge of her boss’ desk while Obi-Wan just picked the least cluttered corner to lean against.

“Right, for those of you who haven’t been paying attention, we have a slaver problem. The last thing we want is these aruetii’se setting up shop; we’ve had reports of civilian vessels disappearing and even caught a couple distress beacons before they were disabled. We know what they’re up to, we don’t need any more kriffin’ evidence. I got someone on the inside giving me intel, and even though there’s only about twenty of ‘em, they’re too heavily armed for just the four of us to deal with until now. Ojira sent our skifter over here,” he pointed at Obi-Wan, “to help with that.”

Obi-Wan found he suddenly had everyone’s attention. Resisting the urge to smile, he said, “I was told you needed someone to sneak in the back and make sure the problems are taken out of the equation while the rest of you are storming the gates. I’m your security; you’re my distraction.”

Nituyn folded her arms, smirking. “You sound awfully confident of that.”

He mimicked her pose although not the expression; confidence was one thing, cocky was a quality that came with a higher price tag. “I know what I’m capable of.”

Davin’s lip twitched. “Being able to trust each other to do our damn jobs is more important than keeping anonymous with your team, kid.” He tilted his chin in Obi-Wan’s direction whilst keeping his eyes on the others. “Kenobi here is a former Jedi.”

Chagan twisted in his seat. “Can I finally ask what happened to your eye?”

“Lightsaber.”

The Devaronian winced in sympathy. “And the other guy?”

“Last I saw him, he was on ice in a Naboo morgue.” Obi-Wan glanced back to Davin. “I left the fancy sword at home.”

“Probably for the best.” Davin drew their attention back to his desk, where he placed a portable holoprojector. “Our insider mapped the place for us, but they admit there’s probably some security devices they’re not aware of since they’re not that far into the organization yet. I want to make this absolutely clear: my informant is looking out for their own safety. It’s not our job. They need to keep from blowing their cover so they can get more dirt on these bastards, so do not assume that anyone who surrenders is a friendly, and don’t go askin’ if they are. If you kill someone, oh well, they shouldn’t have got into the business. If you knock ‘em out, make sure you search ‘em and cuff ‘em before moving on. If they’re down but not out, same thing but do a medical check to make sure they don’t bleed out, ‘cause that looks bad.

“Expect deadly force and be grateful if you get less. Krayn’s a nasty customer. We’re not expecting him to be there himself, but his second-in-command is a Wookiee named Gaarrhaka and he’s been spotted around town. Big pale bastard, dyes red into his fur to look scary, assume he fights nasty. Don’t go toe to toe with him if you can help it, you’ll get your neck broken and I get a stack of paperwork to deal with.

“No heroics. The prisoner cells are located here, and we got confirmation of twenty-six captives as of last check-in. Don’t release anyone until the fighting’s done. They’ve all been mined and we don’t know if leaving the cell is a trigger.

“Other than that, it’s business as usual: pop the lid, take ‘em out in the chokepoint. Now you--” he
pointed at Obi-Wan “--you’re gonna have the risky job of hunting down the ones think they’re going to play it sneaky. No Wookiee arm-wrestling for you, either. Once we’re done here, we’ll get you kitted up, so don’t worry if you left your good beskar at home.

“Questions?”

Obi-Wan was given a basic dark blue uniform jumpsuit with Protector insignia but lacking rank patches, and a set of body armour that bore a vague resemblance to traditional beskar’gam, down to the boots and gloves. The metal was bare but matte-blued to reduce shine, and once the carapace was secured it fitted like a close embrace. Glee gave him an amused glance as he shimmied to get the feel of the encumbrance.

“Never worn armour before, kid?”

He gave the older man a grin. “No, just robes. Even in a war zone. Not the wisest of ideas, but Jedi aren’t intended to be combatants.”

“That’s just plain suicidal,” Glee said with a snort. “Even Jedi wear out in a fight, don’t you?”

Trying not to grimace at too-recent memory, Obi-Wan nodded. “Slower than most people of our respective races, but extended combat is wearying.”

“Tired fighters make mistakes. We’re not going out until the wee hours, remind me to set you up a cot so you can get some rack time with the rest of us.”

Davin popped a secured locker at the back of the room and returned with a full-coverage helmet. “Here, kid. Let’s cover that pretty, recognisable face of yours.”

They showed him how to fit it, align the contact points at the back of his suit collar, and seal helmet and suit together into a contained environment; his own breath was harsh and loud within the close confines. The view through the broad T-shaped visor was better than he’d expected; a soft chirp in his ear alerted him to systems booting up for the first time since the helmet had gone into storage.

Glee demonstrated how the leads connected with the vambraces on his own armour; it took Obi-Wan a moment of fumbling to do the same, and his helmet’s HUD flared to life with equipment diagnostics. Suit integrity, exterior environment details, location coordinates, target tracking, a bird’s-eye map showing where his teammates were located relative to one another. As soon as the audio configured itself, the others’ voices poured into his ears for a comms check and the HUD added a list of who was speaking.

More diagnostics flashed past almost too quickly to register, and then the HUD blanked into a succession of calibration tests followed by an ident prompt. It took another forty minutes to get everything configured properly and get him checked out on a variety of weapons, by which point Chagan had left and returned with food from a nearby deli.

Obi-Wan followed the others’ example and peeled himself out of the armour but left the upper part of the jumpsuit wrapped around his waist. Nituyn handed him a paper-wrapped sandwich and container of some sort of spicy soup. “First we eat, then we sleep, then we make some hutuu’n’se fucking sorry they landed here.”
“Eyes up, people!”

Heads turned; Zora looked up from the weird marbles game Jinis was trying to teach her. Béla’s bulk filled the doorway, his primary arms folded across his chest while the secondaries propped fists on his hips. ‘Boss and crew’s on their way in, they have another load. Jin, get medical set up; Klyne and Go’ra, you’re on the main entrance. I want eight of ya down for control and load-out, the rest of ya on patrol in case someone gets loose. Anyone slated for rack time, we still need you. Let’s go!”

Zora checked the charge on her blasters and shouldered her rifle, heading for the door. Béla’s heavy palm on her shoulder stopped her.

“Going on patrol, kid?”

“Yeah?”

He scowled and shook his head. “You always pick patrol. I want you helping with load-out this time. If I didn’t know better I’d think you were trying to avoid the hard part of this job. Get on with ya.”

Stifling a grimace, she followed the others around to the rear of the warehouse.

As soon as they opened the back of the transport, Zora found her hands clenching. Kids. It was fucking kids, a class from a Kalevala academy if the uniforms were any indication. If she hadn’t spent so long training a blank, vaguely callous expression into her face, it would have given her away entirely as she was handed a girl who couldn’t have been more than thirteen. All the kids’ wrists were stun-cuffed in front of them; the more-resistant ones were dazed from repeated shocks, and the rest were wide-eyed and silent with terror.

The girl stumbled and Zora caught her around the upper arms before she could fall on her face, mostly-carrying her toward the rear office that had been set up as Jinis’ medical theater.

“What are you going to do to us?”

Hating herself, Zora shook the girl roughly. “Shut up.”

The kids were forced down into a seated line against the wall; they’d get to watch Jinis sticking bombs in their classmates’ necks, and Zora couldn’t fucking take it any more. Feeling like the worst sort of coward, she furtively checked to make sure there were enough guards in the room and slipped out.

Gaarrhaka’s human co-pilot was hanging around outside looking bored. Zora sidled over. “How the hells did you guys land fourteen kids?”

Lenka was an ugly son of a rancor with a blaster-scored face; he smirked, revealing the gap where three of his teeth had been melted to stubs. “Class trip or something. We convinced the kids to take a little detour. Of course, the teacher and the pilot were less willing, so it was the old spacewalk for them. And we got a cute little shuttle out of the deal, Dot’s taken it off for refitting and a new ID.”

“Wondered where she’d got to.”

“Should I tell her her girlfriend was looking for her?”

Zora snorted. “Dot doesn’t know me from Jabba.”

Whatever he was about to say next was cut off when massive furred hands landed on their shoulders.
from behind. Gaarhaka stuck his head between theirs, and it was all Zora could do not to cringe. [If you two are done flirting, get back to work,] he rumbled.

Lenka turned and offered a salute that in any military would have earned him latrine duty for its sloppiness, but it was genuine. “C’mon, Zora, help me shut down the loading dock.”

She had just re-parked the speeder with its nose pointed out when they heard a definite explosion from the front of the building. Lenka stared at her with huge eyes from where he stood near the door controls as the voice screeching over the comm cut off with a gurgle.

“Shit!”

Zora scuttled to the door, peering out into the warehouse. “Think we need to stay here to keep watch on the back door? Lenk-?” The words died on her lips as the garage lights died, leaving the only light in the room the dim triangle that fell in through the door from the warehouse’s failing dome lights.

She slid carefully away from the door with her back to the wall, casting the business end of her rifle across the room. From the silence, Lenka was down, unconscious if not dead. Her eyes would adjust to the darkness in a minute, but that was time she didn’t have. Breathing carefully, she slipped into a light trance.

The flare of warning from the Force was almost too late; by the time she had the gun pointed in her attacker’s direction, a soft gust of air past her face spoke of a near miss. The rifle shot buried itself in the duracrete ceiling as an armoured figure crashed into her with a hand clamped over her mouth.

They stood frozen for an aching moment as Zora tried to piece together what had happened. She’d pulled her aim at the last possible second.

Why…?

A helmet speaker clicked beside her ear; the voice that came out was flattened from the vox, but familiar. “Siri?!”

Slowly, Obi-Wan released his hold on the woman. Her hair was the wrong colour and there were odd marks like tattoos on her face, but her sense in the Force was so familiar. Siri Tachi had been an integral part of their group of friends despite being younger by several years; this was the absolute last place he would have expected to find her.

She stared at him, and the lightest, tentative brush of the Force nudged at his mind; it felt rusty, as if she hadn’t used her skills in a while. Carefully, Obi-Wan dropped his shields just enough for her to sense him.

Siri sucked in a harsh breath and whispered, “Obi-Wan?!” before throwing her arms around his shoulders. They clung to each other for a moment, shock warring with relief.

“What are you doing here?” He desperately wanted to pull his helmet off so she could see him, but it would send up an alert to the rest of the team, who had blasted the front door off its mooring and were making messy work of the entry office.

She pulled back a little and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. “My Trials. I’ve been assigned to take Krayn’s organization apart.” Siri peered around his shoulder into the shadows of the
garage. “Is Lenka dead?”

“No, but he’ll have a hell of a migraine when he wakes up in an hour.” Obi-Wan sighed. “I...shit. I have a job to do, Siri. And so do you.”

She rubbed the back of her head where it had hit the wall and he apologised. “No, it’s alright. I’ve been operating on shutdown because I don’t know how I’d manage with my senses turned on. I’ll just fake being knocked out for a while like Lenka, you do your thing.”

“My comm code hasn’t changed. Do you still have it?”

“Yeah?”

“Use it if you need it. Alright?” He hugged her again -- carefully, because armour bruises were not kind -- and she arranged herself into a comfortable sprawl on the gritty duracrete of the loading dock.

“Obi-Wan? Be careful. There’s twenty-eight of them here right now. And a bunch of new prisoners.”

He nodded understanding. “Take care of yourself, Siri.”

Obi-Wan slipped out into the larger warehouse, extending his senses. If they had any Force sensitives -- other than Siri -- the shields he’d wrapped around his mind would keep them from noticing his presence. Davin’s latest update had been eleven targets accounted for; Obi-Wan added two to the tally and updated the expected number to twenty-nine.

The best part about having the active HUD, he realized, was that a lot of the usual comms chatter was unnecessary; it left him distraction-free to seek his next target.

The man was sheltering around the corner of one of the cell blocks, sweating steam into the cold air and muttering fearfully; Obi-Wan knocked him out with a quick disruptor jolt to the neck, stripped the slaver’s weapons and a set of tools hidden in his belt, and left him cuffed and snoozing face-down. He wasn’t certain if he liked the disruptor’s location in his left vambrace, but it did leave his hands free.

His team’s tally was climbing and they’d moved further into the warehouse proper. Obi-Wan wiped out another two slavers with a move that would have got him censured in the Temple salles, dodged a vibroblade in the hands of a Twi’lek who’d tried to sneak up on him, and shattered the woman’s knee with a savage kick. She went down with a shriek, but still tried to ram the knife into his gut. Sparks flew as the active blade skidded across his armour, and a controlled hook to the side of the slaver’s jaw laid her out on the floor beside the others.

Obi-Wan crouched to search and cuff the three and used the time to take a steadying breath. He was not accustomed to fighting without a blade, and it was far more brutal than he’d been prepared for.

The rest of the slavers were either near the entrance trying to hold the Protectors back, or clustered in an office on the ground floor. He shuddered at the sensation; fear and desperation tainted the Force around that room, more so than anywhere else in the building. A number of captives were in the room with the slavers; Obi-Wan updated the team’s info and requested instructions.

Davin’s voice came almost immediately. “That’s gonna be ugly, they’ll probably try to use them as hostages. Got any tricks up your sleeve that would draw them out, or reduce their numbers?”

The scanned layout showed only one door into the room. It had once had a large window in the front, but the gap had been filled with more duracrete. The ceilings, however….
Obi-Wan sorted through the tools available. “Do we have anything for cutting through metal?”

“Right vambrace, fusion cutter.”

“Perfect. Make a racket for me, would you?”

When the chambered-durasteel floor section dropped through into the office, it took a significant portion of the suspended panel ceiling down with it. Obi-Wan followed the plug down into the rising cloud of plaster dust and terrified shrieks, landing low and shooting two of the slavers in the face before they could recover.

The woman crouched near what was clearly an operating table stepped back with her hands raised; he shot her anyway, kicked back into the stomach of a man trying to tackle him and then whipped the mass of his left vambrace across the slaver’s face. The man’s nose shattered, spraying blood through the dust-choked air.

He might have felt guilty for killing rather than disabling as he had with the others, but his pulse had roared up into his ears the moment he’d recognized the captives in the room as children.

The chrono in his HUD indicated five seconds had passed. Obi-Wan turned in place, certain he was forgetting something.

A pile of shattered plaster panels exploded with a roar, and he lurched back to avoid a slashing set of claws that would definitely have torn through his armour.

Right. Wookiee.

He ducked to the left under a long arm and caught a glancing follow-up blow on the side of his head that still shot sparks into his vision; without the helmet, he’d have been knocked unconscious.

Shooting the bastard only made Gaarrhaka more angry. A massive hand caught Obi-Wan around the throat and hauled him bodily off the floor, smashing the top of his head into one of the remaining ceiling panels. The blaster dropped from Obi-Wan’s dazed fingers and he scrabbled at the hand that gripped him, hearing the reinforcement in the collar of his suit crinkle under the pressure.

Gaarrhaka pulled him close, a nasty light in the Wookiee’s eyes. [Nice of you to volunteer, Protector scum.] His other hand pulled a device from one of the pouches on his bandolier. [Call your friends off, or you all get to find out how much damage a slave’s control-det does.]

One of the children shrieked, clawing at the bandage taped to the side of his neck. The others hadn’t understood the Wookiee’s speech, but their friend’s panic made it obvious.

Gaarrhaka bared his fangs in a savage grin, pulling Obi-Wan in until the Wookiee’s breath fogged the front of his visor. [Do it.]

Obi-Wan lashed out with the fusion-cutter, still queued up in his right vambrace. The beam didn’t quite sever the Wookiee’s hand, but it did enough damage that the kill-switch dropped to the floor as Gaarrhaka roared. Obi-Wan was hurled back against the operating table, which crashed over onto its side. The slaver clutched at his wounded arm for a moment before stalking forward.

[Never mind. You’re dying first and then I’m killing everyone else. Make the Protectors look real good, won’t--] The Wookiee’s words ground to a halt and he looked bewildered as he clutched at his throat.

A snarl baring his teeth under the mask, Obi-Wan thrust his hand forward, tightening his invisible
grip on the slaver’s throat as he climbed to his feet. “No.” The Force poured through him, a roaring waterfall capable of crushing anything in its path; with a scream of rage, he rammed the slaver back against the wall, watching with satisfaction as the Wookiee’s struggles grew weaker.

Something impacted Obi-Wan’s shoulder, searing heat spearing into his skin; he turned with a growl and caught a second blaster bolt that snapped his head back and sent him sprawling. Dimly, he was aware of someone approaching; a sharp kick to the faceplate left him dazed.

Siri’s mental voice sneaked into his mind. Sorry about this Obi-Wan. You left me an opening. I know you’re trying to do the right thing, but you need to get some help, or the Dark is going to swallow you.

By the time his vision cleared, the Wookiee and Siri were gone. Glee and Davin appeared in the door.

“You alright, Kenobi?”

He groaned and heaved himself to a sitting position. His brains were rattled, but it didn’t feel like a concussion. “I’ll survive. Look out for Gaarrhaka, he’s likely headed for the garage. Check the kids...I did what I could to avoid getting them hurt. Some of them are mined, there’s a switch around on the floor--”

Glee held up a palm-sized box. “Found it.”

Cleanup took hours. Every captive was given an on-site medical scan and had their bombs deactivated by the emergency teams that had arrived once the Protectors called the all-clear; every unconscious slaver was either loaded into the armed speeder for transit to a holding cell or taken under armed guard to the hospital for treatment. Obi-Wan moved mostly on autopilot, troubled by what he’d done -- or nearly done.

Once you start down the dark path, forever will it dominate your destiny.

He rubbed his temples, pushing the memory of Yoda from his mind. The ancient Master might not be entirely right, but he’d had a point; the times Obi-Wan had really used the Force since Naboo, it had felt...not stronger, but wilder. More intense.

Less controlled.

It might not have been Dark by intent, but his grasp on the emotions affecting his actions was more tenuous than he liked. Siri was right: Obi-Wan needed help.

Chapter End Notes

TW for: toxic relationship, human trafficking, child slavery
During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Sometimes you just need to call home.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

Reformation Year 976.11.21
Sundari, Mandalore

The place where Siri had shot him, through the gap between plates on the back of his right shoulder, was blistered and sore with an ugly burn, but otherwise undamaged. Obi-Wan winced as he applied a cooling salve to the area, grateful for the armour he'd been wearing. Concord Dawn's beskar veins were poor, leaving the Journeyman Protectors reliant upon the more common durasteel plating. What little beskar the planet possessed was fashioned into armoured fabric that was impact-resistant, difficult to cut, and dissipated the worst of a laser bolt's energy, although repeated strikes would eventually burn through. It might not withstand a lightsaber, but it was definitely an improvement on the standard.

And it kept being shot at close-range from being debilitating.

The Protectors had insisted he keep it -- as Davin had said at the time, “Armour does nobody any good stored in a locker.” The neck reinforcement had been repaired -- “Exactly what did I tell you about arm-wrestling Wookiees?” -- and division patches carefully removed from the sleeves, and the full set had gone into a bag for him to take back to Mandalore. Satine had given the case a beady glare through her bright smile as he stepped off the MSS shuttle and kissed her in greeting.

“What’s that, darling?”

“A gift of appreciation from the Journeyman Protectors.”

Her lips had thinned into a disapproving line when she’d taken a look inside later.

Now he perched on the edge of the counter in his suite’s ‘fresher, twisting awkwardly to reach the part of the burn along his shoulder blade. Satine entered without knocking, her hands full of medical dressing and what looked like a container of actual bacta, and paused.

“Come down from there, darling,” she huffed. She looked like she was torn between laughter and
exasperation. “I knew you’d probably got yourself hurt. We do have a medic here in the palace, you know.”

“Yes, I know, but medics fuss more than they need to.” Obi-Wan offered a grin, knowing he looked a bit more rakish than usual -- his hair was falling into his eyes again.

Satine chuckled and made him turn around so she could smooth bacta over the burn. “And you do so hate being fussed over.”

He did his best to avoid wincing; her fingers were gentle, but the burn was tender. He supposed he ought to be grateful it wasn’t the numbness of potential nerve damage instead. “There are others who need the attention more urgently. I just need help reaching.”

“Oh, is there something the Force isn’t capable of doing as well as a pair of hands?”

Meeting her glance in the mirror over the sink, Obi-Wan said, “Several things, not all of which are suited for polite conversation.” Satine blushed brilliantly, caught between amusement and embarrassment.

He regretted it a moment later when she pressed a bandage over the burn, hissing through gritted teeth as his hands gripped the edge of the vanity.

“There. With that much bacta, it shouldn’t scar.” It was Satine’s turn to catch his eye in the reflection, a quelling look on her face. “Have you learned your lesson, darling?” She didn’t wait for a response as she turned and left.

Obi-Wan sighed and reached for the scissors to trim his beard, starting gingerly but gaining confidence as the bacta’s painkilling properties started to work. A lesson had been learned, although likely not the one the Duchess was referring to.

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The little bistro had its outer walls open to the fresh air and bright early sun, but the interior was shadowed and lit with ambient orange light from behind shield-shaped fixtures on the walls. The lunch crowd was light, but that promised to change soon. Tovari could tell that Scogar -- Obi-Wan, she reminded herself, but it was so difficult to think of him that way -- had never been in this part of Sundari before, and it wasn’t hard to understand why: it wasn’t called Little Keldabe without reason. As far as she knew, Satine had never bothered to visit. The pinched vowels and rolled Rs of the Northern accent filled the air alongside the scent of palaks’a and hukaat’alayi frying in the street-vendor carts, making her nostalgic for a part of her homeworld she’d never seen.

How ridiculous to have never visited. It was on the same planet, but may as well have been in another universe. She’d be as much an oddity there as she was here in the place she’d been born.

Tovari insisted on an inside table for them, making sure Scogar sat with his back to the rest of the room, and once the host had departed she leaned forward to say softly, “The media is out in force today. You have no idea how bonkers they went when you disappeared for four days.”

Her friend blinked at her in bafflement. “Me?”

One of the human servers, Rald, came over and greeted her, introduced himself to Scogar, and left a menu and two glasses of water for them. Tovari waited for him to be out of earshot before
continuing, “Yeah, you. It’s ridiculous. My aunt said your friend was close to pulling her hair out. So now you’re back, and unanswerable questions are being asked.”

“And this is why I kept that helmet on while I was away.”

“Smart of you. Anonymity might be something to consider.” They took a moment to order food and Tovari rested her elbows on the table. She’d come from work and was still dressed sharply in the kind of suit she only wore so the Southerners she worked with would take her seriously; for his part, Scogar had dressed plainly if well, nothing close to the overwrought court-garb Satine’s tailor had foisted on him. He never looked comfortable in that flouncy stuff, anyway.

She resisted the urge to touch his hand where it rested on the table; the vultures from the gossip rags had enough sordid speculations as it was. “So tell me, Scog’ika, what’s bothering you?”

Sighing, Scogar leaned back in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose between his steepled fingers. “So...I’m not certain how much Jedi philosophy you’re familiar with–”

“Just the clichéd stuff they use in all the holos.”

“Right. I believe the simplest way to put it is that I nearly lost my shit and killed someone. I’m not certain they weren’t deserving of that fate, but...I don't know what it would have done to me had I succeeded.”

Tovari held up a finger in a silent request for a moment to consider. She sipped her water and frowned at the unlit candle in the centre of the table. The Jedi stuff was something she was only passingly familiar with, and although she was touched Scogar trusted her enough to want to discuss it, she wasn’t certain she’d be of any help. “You’re in contact with your former teacher, right? You don’t think he’d be a better person to talk to?”

“He might understand the consequences better, but...we were trained under the same philosophies. It’s very absolutist in its own way and, well...it’s why I’m no longer a Jedi.” His smile was lopsided and a little sad. Scogar never had explained what had happened, although the mildest of HoloNet searches had provided plenty of detail about what happened on Naboo. Someday she might get the full story from him, but she wasn’t going to push at what was still a healing wound. “The problem with being raised in a temple is that you lose touch with how the world beyond the walls sees things.”

Tovari’s eyes were drawn to Rald’s approach and then beyond the young man’s shoulder. She squinted. That was definitely a too-blond Southerner head lurking near the vendor across the street. “Here’s our food but don’t turn. Someone’s got a camera drone aimed at the back of your head.”

“Oh, wonderful. We should have met in your office.”

They nodded politely to the server as he departed and Tovari grinned. “And pass up the opportunity to introduce a friend to proper civilization? I come here once a week when I’m on-planet, partly to support my people and partly to outrage the Southerners I work with who wish we’d just integrate already.”

“Well, proper civilization smells delicious.” Their plates were a riot of colour, the spiced braised meat topped with finely-chopped herbed fruit. Tovari showed him how to layer everything onto the small, thin slices of toasted bread and enjoy it properly. He fumbled a bit and got sauce on his fingertips, which he licked clean without apparently considering what a horrific tease that was.

*Enough drooling, woman.* Tovari cleared her throat politely. “So. What you’re wondering is if the
risk of breaking your old rules is worth it?"

That self-deprecating lopsided grin came back. “Being kicked out of the temple is a good threat to
make a young apprentice behave, but that particular worst case has already happened. Are the
behaviour guidelines necessary for life as a normal person?”

She aimed a slice of bread at him. “Now you’re talking morality versus prescriptive behaviour. Those
are two different things. People largely don’t care why you do something as long as the result is
positive. If you’d killed...that guy,” she stumbled a moment, trying to not say anything specific to
maintain the illusion that she was not out with Sundari’s resident former Jedi; the media had systems
capable of reading lips. Nosy bastards. “You’d likely have been thanked for it. You may also have
landed a target on your back from his boss, but that’s a risk any lawman takes, Force-user or not. If
you’d caved and asked your team to back off, people would have got hurt, possibly he’d have killed
his hostages anyway.”

Scogar looked troubled. “Hurting myself would have helped in the long run.”

None of that, now. “Would it truly be self-harm, though? That’s what your temple says, but that’s
because it runs counter to their prescriptive behaviour, not their morality.”

He shook his head. “Morality and adhering to prescribed behaviour in the Order are the same thing.”

“Ah, now we’re getting somewhere.” Scogar blinked as her in surprise and she grinned tightly. “I
know your teachers would say otherwise, but that’s an aspect of religion, not common life. People
do a lot of good things for shitty selfish reasons. Sometimes good reasons lead to terrible things,
despite the best of intentions, and it’s the results that are remembered. It doesn’t matter how
wonderful a person was, if their actions caused trauma to others; those other people will still be hurt
after the apologies are made.”

Giving a quiet sigh of consideration, Scogar took a moment to collect his thoughts; Tovari let him
muse in silence. Eventually he shook himself back to reality. “I’ve been so concerned about my
initial brush with the Dark side, I didn’t consider whether I might still be using it unintentionally.”
She tilted her head in curiosity and he explained, “The Force simply exists, and what we think of as
Light and Dark ‘sides’ are really two parts of a whole. Despite having good intentions, I’ve been
drawing on some emotions the Jedi would consider Dark -- anger, frustration. For a moment,
probably hatred. I didn’t recognise them as being negative at the time because I was focused on how
we were doing something good.”

Tovari gave her friend a gentle smile. “Those things you call Dark emotions are common every day.
Anger tells us when something’s upsetting and is somehow registering in our brains as being wrong.
How do the J-- your people deal with that?”

“In theory, Jedi are meant to analyze how we’re feeling and then release the emotions into the Force
so we can deal with the situation objectively. I--” he inhaled sharply through his nose, something
approaching regret crossing his face. “I haven’t been doing that lately.”

“Why not?”

“It seemed unnecessary. If I wasn’t going to be a Jedi, why should it matter? But,” he sighed. “I’m
still a Force user. An admittedly strong one, and I ought to have better control than that.”

She winked at him over her glass. “Sounds to me like you know what you need to do, Scog’ika.
Your teacher’s suggestion to come here might have been more in the hope that you’d be able to
figure things out where it’s quiet. Maybe now he’ll know where you can go to learn better control.”
Tovari hadn’t been kidding about the media circus; not knowing exactly what the cover story was for his absence or if Commander Ojira even wanted his involvement publicly known, Obi-Wan had to smile politely and advise them to direct their questions to the Duchess’ public relations people. Tovari had a magnificent soulless smile that was more like bared teeth. It grew even wider when they were asked how they knew each other.

“We’ve worked together in the past. Jedi Kenobi and I were just catching up.”

The speeder she’d called for before they left the restaurant didn’t take long to collect them, but it was long enough. Someone from Satine’s PR team hurried out onto the platform to meet them as they arrived. “Please, please, can you not go out in public without warning us!?”

It took a couple slow breaths for Obi-Wan to drop the desire to snap at the man; he looked genuinely frazzled and distressed. “I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten your name—”

“Aythan.”

“Aythan, right, I’m sorry. Were our responses wrong in some way?”

“What? Well, no, but...ugh.” The man ran a hand through his pale, bristle-short hair. “Look, it’s documented public record that you and the Duchess are a couple; you can’t just be alone in public with another woman or the gossip—”

“In that case, I can’t be seen alone with anyone,” Obi-Wan huffed, irritated. “That’s ridiculous, Aythan. I’m not a pet.” From the corner of his eye, he caught Tovari’s grimace, so quick it could have been mistaken for a twitch. But that’s what I am, isn’t it? Damn.

He took a moment to compose himself while Aythan fumbled for words and continued to dig himself a deeper hole. “Aythan. I’m sorry. You’re just trying to do your job. This is a matter Satine and I need to discuss between ourselves without expecting her staff to act as translators. I know I don’t have much of a schedule for you to track, but I’ll warn you if I make plans in the future.”

The other man looked nervous but relieved. “Thanks, no, that’s fine, we appreciate it, Jedi Kenobi. You two know each other?”

Tovari, the picture of manufactured serenity, nodded. “We served on a ship together while I was gathering information. We really had no idea who each other was until I came home.”

“Ah, well, that’s good, thanks. If you’ll excuse me....” Aythan trotted off, muttering into his datapad’s audio recorder.

Obi-Wan pinched the pressure points on his forehead against the impending headache. “If it isn’t one thing, it’s another. I’m beginning to get quite tired of this, Tovari.”

“Beginning to?”

She had a point. He turned and offered her a hug which she accepted with a pleased smile. “Thank you for helping me escape the palace for a bit, it was delightful. I think…I need to meditate for a bit.”

Meditation didn't provide any stunning insights, but it helped to settle his mind as he waited for Qui-
Gon to respond to his texted request for a comm call. Obi-Wan had asked for his dinner to be sent to his suite, something he often did when he was puzzling over Qui-Gon’s research results, and was just finishing when the comm chimed.

Obi-Wan activated the scramblers he’d placed around the latest set of audio snoopers and realized that he was genuinely excited to talk with his former teacher again. It put a grin on his face as he accepted the connection.

“Good morning, Obi-Wan. Or is it evening there?” Qui-Gon was still wearing a loose sleeping shirt, a steaming mug of tea sitting at hand.

“Close to it. Good morning, Anakin,” Obi-Wan added when a round face topped with blond hair peered over Qui-Gon’s shoulder. The spiky Padawan cut seemed to suit Anakin much better than it ever had Obi-Wan.

“Hi, Obi-Wan!” Anakin had an opened ration bar in one hand and carefully set a cup of juice on the desk beside Qui-Gon’s tea. Obi-Wan cringed inwardly as the boy dipped the ration bar in the juice; he’d done so himself at that age, when the tough bars had hurt his baby teeth as they loosened, but it hadn’t improved the flavour.

Qui-Gon shifted his chair over so Anakin could crowd into the pickup range beside him. “You seem very upbeat today. What have you done this time?”

The crinkle of humour at the corners of his eyes belied the bland expression, and Obi-Wan shook his head, amused. “Oh, trying not to drive Satine’s staff to tearing their hair out.”

Anakin found that hilarious. Qui-Gon smiled indulgently as Obi-Wan launched into the finer details of not being a public embarrassment to a high-profile public figure.

“You never told them about Garen?”

Taken aback, Obi-Wan sputtered for a moment. “I never told you about Garen! And anyway, no, they only assumed and never bothered to ask.”

“You didn’t have to tell me. Masters just know about these things.”

“What about Garen? He’s fun, by the way.”

Obi-Wan struggled and failed to stop a laugh. “We dated for a short while before deciding we’d drive each other insane. And he is a lot of fun.” He caught Qui-Gon’s amused-but-horrified-but-amused look and relented. Filthy jokes around impressionable young preteens weren’t necessarily the wisest of ideas. “It was completely against the rules for Padawans, but then I also kissed Siri once—”

“I didn’t know about that.” Qui-Gon looked indignantly and Obi-Wan winked at him. Masters didn’t see everything.

“Has Garen got you into trouble, yet?”

That was a decidedly fishy look the kid snuck Qui-Gon’s direction before he drawled, “Nope, we’re too good to get in trouble.”

Obi-Wan bit his lip on a grin and his former master turned to give Anakin his full attention. “There are ways to suggest that you simply haven’t been caught which are not so obvious, Padawan. Do we need to review the basic diplomacy texts again?”
Watching them banter gave him a pang of nostalgia, but not homesickness; it was a warm ache with only a hint of the old melancholy, and Obi-Wan found himself grateful that Anakin had that same connection he had once treasured. Speaking of which…. “How was the trip to Naboo, by the way? You neglected to send any sort of proper message along with the files,” he chided, giving Qui-Gon a mock-stern look.

“We were in something of a rush at the time. My apologies.”

Anakin was practically bouncing, jarring both cups, which Qui-Gon pushed back from the edge of the desk. “Qui-Gon said it was your idea to get my mom out of slavery!”

“Hmm.” He smiled fondly at the memory. “I was very out of my head on some very good drugs, right after surgery, but I recall it seemed like the most important thing in the galaxy. I grabbed Qui-Gon—”

“Literally, both hands. On my head. It was awkward.”

“It really was. And I told him he absolutely needed to find a way to get your mother free and somewhere safe.”

“And then he passed out.”

Obi-Wan laughed. “They were really good drugs.”

“She’s here on Coruscant, now! And she has a job, and they pay her and stuff! We have dinner together sometimes. Next time you visit, we should all get dinner together.”

Oh, to be that young and optimistic. “Anakin, I’ve never met your mother. She wouldn’t have any idea who I am.”

“Psh, Qui-Gon tells her all about you.”

Aiming a raised eyebrow Qui-Gon’s way, Obi-Wan murmured, “Does he, now?”

The faintest flush was colouring his former master’s cheeks and Obi-Wan forewent a laugh in favour of maintaining that uncomfortable eye contact. It wasn’t often he managed to discomfit Qui-Gon, and he intended to make the most of the moment.

Qui-Gon cleared his throat. “I had mentioned you before, when we stayed with her on Tatooine. She’s asked how you’re doing.”

“Yes, I understand I’m a great source for comedy at the moment.”

Qui-Gon chuckled. “Merely because it’s so unexpected. I thought you might have opportunity to relax there, but it seems quiet is not what you found.”

Obi-Wan pinned Anakin with a look. “Always remember that ‘may you live in interesting times’ is a curse, not a blessing. Interesting does not always mean pleasant.”

Anakin nodded and inhaled the last of his ration bar. “I hafta go to class. Bye, Obi-Wan!”

“Have a good day, Anakin.” He waited until the boy had left and settled back in his chair, squinting at his former master. “Something’s bothering you, Qui-Gon.”

Qui-Gon scowled over his teacup. “Am I that easy to read?”
“We lived together for seven years. Maybe not by others, but I can tell.”

The lines between Qui-Gon’s eyebrows deepened. “I’ve been fighting the Council with regards to Anakin.”

“More notably than usual?”

A smile tugged at the corner of his former master’s mouth. “Yes, actually. Anakin is struggling with some of his education -- I was prepared for that, and he’s getting help he needs. It would help more, though, if his spare time could be spent in the Temple rather than the Senate dome.”

Obi-Wan straightened in his chair, frowning into the comm pickup. “The Senate dome? Why in blazes…?”

“It’s at the Chancellor’s request.” He scoffed. “Well, request should probably be amended to something shy of an order. To his credit, Mace is unhappy about this, but feels his hands are tied.”

Alarmed, Obi-Wan leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. “What’s going on there?”

“The Chancellor wants to socialise with Anakin, it seems. I’ve taken up tutoring advanced courses in interspecies diplomacy, and a few promising duellists, so that I have a reason not to be sent on solo missions. I’d prefer to be there with Anakin when Palpatine invites him for tea.”

“I bet he loves that.”

This time Qui-Gon looked smug. “He tried to talk me out of it the first time, but honestly I like having a reason to lurk on Senate sessions without being accused of Council interference. It helps me stay current with the politics, and I can bring it up in the diplomacy classes later. I do wonder what sort of political points the Chancellor is trying to score in having Anakin around the Senate, though, and with whom.”

“Has he given any reason at all?”

“He claims to feel grateful for Anakin’s role in liberating Naboo…although he never seems to want to speak with me about it, nor does he ask after you.”

Obi-Wan huffed. “It seems some heroes are more special than others. I’m offended.”

“You are not. Although Lott Dod does rather look like he’s tried to eat a cactus every time he sees us there. It’s delightful.” Qui-Gon’s grin was just shy of wicked.

“What does the Chancellor talk to Anakin about? I can’t imagine they have that much in common.”

“How frustrating the political process is, mostly; I’m sure most of it goes right over Anakin’s head. He asks about Anakin’s friends and classes, and does an excellent job feigning interest.” Qui-Gon shook his head. “Honestly I’m not certain what the man expects to hear, but he asks every time anyway. I’ve advised Anakin to not mention his mother to anyone, including the Chancellor; the Council still has no idea she’s here, and I’d like to keep it that way as long as possible. I don’t trust a politician to keep information like that to himself.”

“How do you explain Anakin visiting Shmi?”

“It’s not difficult.” Qui-Gon folded his arms, looking pleased. “I contacted Master Uiirda some time ago about therapists who might be familiar with both Jedi and former-slave repatriation. Anakin has regular appointments, and Shmi started going on her own after we’d mentioned the visits. It gives...
Anakin an evening a week after his appointment to see his mother, at any rate, and Doctor T’ko agrees this is a good thing.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.” The boy’s energy hadn’t been quite enough to overwhelm the unchildlike deference he’d held toward authority figures -- more than just respect but fear in the way he’d suddenly rein himself in and apologise profusely. The Council’s absolutist attitude towards their decisions couldn’t possibly have helped.

“It is. So what can I help you with, Obi-Wan?”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “I can’t just comm to catch up?”

“It’s been nearly three months, Padawan.”

He winced; guilty as charged, and the use of his former title, with that much warmth, made his heart ache. “In my defense, I didn’t feel I’d done anything worth talking about. There hasn’t been much going on until recently.” He gave Qui-Gon the only vaguest outline of what had happened, conscious of security matters, although he did mention Siri’s involvement. Council methods be damned; she needed more than one person knowing what had happened to her.

Qui-Gon’s expression didn’t change from one of parental concern as Obi-Wan talked. It gave Obi-Wan a bit more confidence to admit how dreadfully he’d lost control; had it been any other Jedi, he might have hesitated. But Qui-Gon had been there for him before.

His former master was silent for a long moment once he finished. Obi-Wan resisted the urge to fidget, but Qui-Gon’s gaze had focused through the pickup and somewhere past Obi-Wan’s right shoulder. At last the Jedi Master said softly, “You want to learn to use the Dark side of the Force.”

“On Naboo. When we faced the Sith. I let him maneuver us apart.”

“I had noticed.”

Qui-Gon’s mouth turned down and his brow pinched in an expression that showed far more regret and self-loathing than Obi-Wan had expected. “I had a vision, a dream, during the journey from Tatooine. Maybe it occurred because meeting Anakin tangled his life’s thread with ours. Maybe it was simple proximity to him...”

“You don’t really think he’s the Chosen One, do you? Belief in prophecies and destiny isn’t something Living Force adherents consider worthwhile.” He was mostly teasing, but did genuinely want to know what in blazes Qui-Gon had been thinking dropping that particular thermal charge in the middle of the Council chamber. The boy’s potential was undeniable -- he shone so brightly in the Force it was intimidating, but the fulfillment of a dusty prophecy was debatable.

“Hm. Fifty-fifty.” He met Obi-Wan’s surprised look with a wry expression. “It was the first thing I could think of that might have convinced the Council -- in particular, Yoda -- to consider keeping him. Whatever the reason, I knew what would happen on Naboo. I knew that if we faced the Sith together, both of us would die, Anakin would be sent away from the Temple and he would end up in the hands of someone...terrible.”

“The Sith Master?”

“I don’t know. There are so many terrible people in this galaxy who would leap at the chance to
possess a young, untrained Jedi. Whoever it might have been, Anakin falling into their grip would have been my responsibility because I was the one who had insisted upon bringing him from Tatooine. I saw there was a slim chance that, if we were separated, one of us would survive the battle to take care of him. But the person to engage the Sith on their own first would die. I couldn’t let that be you.”

Obi-Wan sighed and hung his head. “And then I had to go and do things my own way, regardless.”

“This is a very good example of the future always being in motion.” One side of Qui-Gon’s mouth tugged up in a self-deprecating smile. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad to have been proven wrong on both counts.”

Thinking back on the past few months, Obi-Wan nodded. “I’m glad you were, too.”

“Your friend is correct in that Dark emotions are a natural part of living. Jedi are expected to keep a tight rein on them purely because we can turn word and thought into deed far more easily than any non-sensitive.”

Qui-Gon sighed, and Obi-Wan recognised what a difficult position he’d put the man in. There were a hundred reasons why he shouldn’t do this -- reasons why he could go to Bandomeer and the AgriCorps and make a peaceful life tending new growth there, reasons why he should content himself with assisting the common folk on a comfortable planet like Mandalore, where the Darkness of the galaxy’s underbelly was a faint shadow and putting his life on the line was unnecessary. A thousand reasons why he could continue the Order’s current course of aiding the worthy rather than the needy, and never put himself at risk again.

The thought sent a cold spike of denial down his spine that settled in his gut.

“Master,” he said slowly, considering each word before uttering it. “The Jedi...do not do enough. Not for the people who truly need our help. And we hold back so much because we are afraid to risk our own purity of self on behalf of others. It’s...it’s a form of attachment, Qui-Gon. We’re taught to put the good of the many over that of the few, but never to put the good of those in need over our feelings of self-worth. The restrictions placed by the Senate give us a publicly palatable excuse to not do everything we could.”

The other man’s eyes had gone wide and he opened his mouth to speak; but once the words had started, they wouldn’t stop. Obi-Wan continued, “There’s no longer any risk of my actions reflecting badly upon the Order. And-and maybe it’s a good thing that this happened, because I can potentially act where the Jedi cannot -- because of the Senate -- or will not. It’s...an experiment.”

“Obi-Wan, you’re not expendable--”

“I don’t intend to die for this. Most Jedi believe the Light and Dark are two distinct aspects of the Force. But when did the Jedi cease trying to understand fifty percent of the world?”

“Many Jedi who studied the Dark for the sake of understanding it Fell--”

“Fallen, Darkened, and evil are not synonymous unless the mere act of Falling or state of being Darkened are considered to be evil. Evil is an action, Qui-Gon. It’s an intent to harm selfishly, it’s an act without care for the consequences. Am I evil, Master?”

“You know I don’t think that.”

“I’m already Fallen, Qui-Gon. What could it hurt?”
Qui-Gon had straightened in his chair with alarm; now he glared at Obi-Wan through the comm feed. “It could hurt you, and then I would be responsible for that, as well.”

“By that logic, you already are responsible. You took me on as a student when you could have left me where the Council sent me; you trained me. You tried to save my life on Naboo, and I wouldn’t let you, and here we are.” Obi-Wan breathed out his irritation and tried to banish the scowl from his face. The best he could manage was an exasperated frown. “Qui-Gon, it’s still affecting me. I have a lot of...baggage, that I thought I’d rid myself of already. The least I can do is learn to be responsible about my own Darkness rather than letting it build up and explode.”

Qui-Gon pressed his fist to his mouth, frowning in thought. Obi-Wan gave him the time. Questions of morality and responsibility had been subjects for heated debate among expert scholars for millennia; they certainly weren’t going to resolve that question tonight, but perhaps Qui-Gon could stop blaming himself for what had happened on Naboo.

“And if what you learn encourages you to act on behalf of others regardless of their own preferences?”

He smiled sadly. “You spent several years teaching me to keep the needs and desires of those I wish to aid in the forefront of my concerns. Do you trust me to remember those lessons and follow your example, regardless of where my path may lead?”

His former master’s eyes softened. “I do. If this is truly what you choose…”

“I truly don't want to, but I think it's necessary.”

“Then you should go see my own former Master. Dooku has rescinded his place in the Order and returned to his family home on Serenno.”

Obi-Wan straightened in shock, leaning toward the comm feed intently. “He left the Order?! When? Why?”

“Several months ago, in part because of the way the Naboo crisis was handled. But his heart has been troubled since the events on Galidraan twelve years ago, and then the loss of his last Padawan, Komari. He feels as you do: that the Jedi could do more, and are too tied to politics to go where we are truly needed. It isn't widely known, but he was seeking a way to unify Living and Unified Force philosophy, and did some study of the Sith to find the source of the schism. He may have what you need, or at the very least might suggest a place to start.”

“Are you certain about this, Obi? You’ve only just returned, surely Master Qui-Gon could look in on his former master, if he was truly so concerned?” Satine was pacing in front of the window in Obi-Wan’s room as he packed. This was not going as she’d planned; for the life of her, Satine couldn’t understand how he could be so content with being on the move. Could the man not consider setting down roots for more than five minutes?

Her lover glanced up from the bag he was packing. He’d carefully folded a selection of the less-florid garments he’d acquired over the past few months courtesy of Satine’s tailor. As upset as she was, Satine approved his choices: Dooku had reclaimed his house title of Count, and Obi-Wan knew better than to show up at the palace looking like a courtier. “It’s only Serenno, darling. It’s practically next door, and it’s certainly easier for me to go than for Qui-Gon to get leave to travel from the
Temple. Besides,” he added with a grin, “he’s probably having just as much trouble adjusting to non-
Temple life as I’ve had. We can discuss how to make it easier for both of us.”

He disappeared briefly into the ‘fresher and returned with his shaving kit. Most other necessities had
already been stored onboard the shuttle Obi-Wan had requested; at Ethyne’s suggestion, they’d
granted him a modified Aka’jor that had been confiscated from a group of Death Watch a year
previous. It had better shielding than the factory model, although it really needed a crew of two for
more than short journeys.

Satine watched as he tucked the kit and an impressive stack of datacards into the bag. If that was
what his research had become, the Republic was going to have their work cut out for them cleaning
up the Trade Federation’s mess. “Exactly how long are you planning to be there?”

“A couple of weeks, possibly a month. I’m not opposed to staying to assist him for a while, if he
needs it.” Obi-Wan laughed, and the careless sound made her prickle with indignation. “Or I could
be back in a few days if he decides he doesn’t want to see me.”

“You don’t have an invitation?!”

“Given how little spare time the head of one of Serreno’s Great Houses likely has, it’s better to be
immediately available. I’ll go to Carannia first and wait on his terms rather than make him wait on
mine.”

He sounded so certain of himself. “Obi, how well do you know this man?”

He leaned against the bed’s solid footboard and hooked his thumbs through his belt; it was a roguish
pose she’d always found appealing, possibly because he lacked the arrogance that could easily
accompany it. “We’ve seen each other at range but never met. Qui-Gon has apparently kept him
informed of my existence. I’m not going to ask my former master to arrange an introduction: the
Count might easily mistake it for an attempt to get him to return, and refuse to see me.”

Satine moved to stand in front of him and studied him critically. Obi-Wan certainly seemed more at
ease than when he’d arrived, and there was a hint of something like relief in his eye. Maybe he had a
point about needing to feel useful; she’d have a word with Ethyne about it later. “You seem to have
thought this all out.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time. You only saw how I handled things at the beginning of my
training, Sati. I have six years of experience beyond that now.” Obi-Wan rested his hands on her
shoulders and placed a kiss on her forehead. “Believe it or not, I do know what I’m doing on
occasion.”

“I’ll hold you to that, darling.” Satine wrapped her arms around Obi-Wan’s waist and leaned into his
warmth and wiry strength. It was going to be a long few weeks without him. Again.
During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Obi-Wan receives a few spirited lessons.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 976.11.23
Serenno

Obi-Wan was quite certain Matsuuri hadn’t told Satine just what sort of shuttle she was giving him. Its former Death Watch owners had improved its shield emitters and gone over the detailing with artistic shades of red, but they’d also installed a set of laser cannons on either side of the cockpit, and a pair of torpedo launchers underneath. It was a tiny bird with a bite, and he’d soon nicknamed it Veeka after the crimson-plumed Dathomiri avians.

The case containing his armour and spacer’s gear had been loaded by one of Matsuuri’s people ahead of his departure. As soon as the shuttle dropped from hyperspace over Serenno, Obi-Wan swapped his Sundari finery for the older, more comfortable clothes and his leather jacket, lightsaber tucked away and blaster once more on his hip. Feeling more like himself than he had in ages, he composed a polite message to the Head of House Dooku requesting an audience before following landing instructions to the planet's capital city.

Carannia was a clean-looking city on the verge of one of Serenno’s oceans, a stretch of low-profile megaplex arcologies and egg-shaped towers. It reminded Obi-Wan of Ilic as he followed an avenue lined with shops that led through a building’s lower levels and into another via a covered overpass. A sentient could spend their entire life inside one of the arcologies and not feel the lack of experience. He was having dinner at a small restaurant that overlooked a tasteful domed park when his comm chimed with a response from House Dooku; the Count’s aide expressed a welcome on behalf of her Lord, and an invitation to visit at his leisure.

The palace was some ways from Carannia, near enough to a mountain chain to enjoy the view but not the weather, surrounded by dense forest. It was a lovely setting, and Obi-Wan found himself hoping for an opportunity to explore the apparent wilderness. He was directed to set down at a landing platform below the cliff face -- the private entrance rather than the guest platform above, so it wasn't too much of a surprise to be greeted by Dooku personally. The older man was dressed plainly
in midnight shades of blue, his voluminous cloak wafting in the downdraft from the repulsors. His dark hair and beard were only lightly touched by regal silver, the streaks at his temples and jaw adding to the man’s distinguished appearance.

The former Jedi Master embraced him formally, a genial smile warming his severe features. “My dear Grand-Padawan. It is good to meet you at last.” His voice was surprisingly deep and resonant with the barest hint of gravel; Obi-Wan could understand why the Count had been considered one of the Council’s best orators.

“And you, Grandmaster. I expected you to be too busy to spare much time for me.” A valet absconded with Obi-Wan’s bag while the Count rested a paternal hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder and guided him into the palace’s lower levels.

“The day I do not have time for my Grand-Padawan is the day I accept another Council seat. It disturbed me greatly to hear of the treatment dealt you by the Order.” A concerned frown pulled heavily on his features. “How are you finding life outside the Temple?”

“In a word, difficult. I’m not accustomed to the lack of structure. I feel…adrift,” he admitted.

“I know the feeling. At least I had other duties to fall back upon. It helps if one finds a way to stay busy.”

The corridors were richly decorated, a painting, tapestry, or statue filling each alcove between paneled wood columns. Woven runners underfoot swallowed echoes and gave it an unexpectedly cosy feel.

The parlour they ended up in was high-ceilinged and paneled in aged wood, with orderly bookshelves lining two walls from floor to ceiling; Obi-Wan suspected a hidden door in one corner, but couldn’t detect a latch. A single display of crossed swords and a shield, at least four thousand years old, adorned the wall above the fireplace under a preservative field. A small smile curved Dooku’s mouth when he noticed Obi-Wan’s curiosity.

“House Dooku is an old line, and while the palace had to be rebuilt a few generations ago, much of the old memories were retained,” he said, handing Obi-Wan a glass of very expensive brandy.

Obi-Wan hid a grin as he breathed the rich fumes aerating from the drink. And Booster wondered where I got my expensive tastes from. He let the first sip pool on his tongue and fill his head with warmth. They sat and made light conversation for a while; Dooku wanted to know what Obi-Wan had been up to since Naboo, and nodded sympathetically when he launched into a long rant about media and public relations.

“A level of nonsense I have little patience for. Publicity is one matter, but intrusions into one’s private life are unacceptable.” Dooku’s tone dripped with disdain. “Rather than your associations, you should be commended for your actions; but those have been obscured from the public eye. For good reason, I’m sure, but it does you a disservice. To defeat a Sith is no simple task; to declare that moment your Trial after the fact a grave injustice. I was distressed that your knighthood was the price you paid for saving my former Padawan’s life.”

Obi-Wan ducked his head. Dooku’s tone was solemn rather than fulsome, which made controlling his reaction to the praise easier. It made openly admitting his errors more comfortable. “Thank you, Master. Although they are correct that I lost control, and badly.”

“Be that as it may, Qui-Gon is alive because of your actions. A momentary Fall is cause for counseling, not expulsion. Many Jedi have had a brush with the Dark side at one time or another.”
From the look on the Count’s face, he himself had been among those.

With a sigh, Obi-Wan leaned forward, resting elbows on his knees. “Unfortunately, many on the Council are not so willing to examine things as yourself.” He nearly mentioned Qui-Gon’s suspicions that someone was attempting to separate them, but they caught on his teeth as he realized it might sound like hearsay or paranoia.

Dooku's smile was warm and knowing. “And that is why you have come to me, is it not.”

“Yes, Grandmaster. For all I have tried to let go of the past and embrace a new life, the past will not let go of me. Ignoring the will of the Force is dangerous, but the work I’m best suited for -- helping those in need -- brings me closer to the Darkness inherent in all life.”

Dooku’s gaze had sharpened, hawk-like, and Obi-Wan felt the full weight of the Jedi Master’s presence, but no censure. “To face the evils of the galaxy without the Order’s oversight is a risky choice, Grand-Padawan.”

“I’ve come to realise that recently. I would ask you to share with me what you have learned of the Dark side.”

The Count leaned forward intently, mirroring Obi-Wan’s pose, his expression calculating. “You wish to know where the balance lies, to walk the grey spaces between.”

He took a steadying breath. “That is what I wish, yes.”

Dooku was silent for a time as they finished their drinks. At last he tilted his head. “I must meditate upon this, Obi-Wan, although I believe you are right to seek guidance. A guest room is being prepared for you. While we wait, tell me about the boy my Padawan has claimed to succeed you. I understand he is remarkable.”

Yan Dooku’s private rooms were more sparsely adorned than the rest of the palace -- still of high quality and refined taste, as befitted his station, but he’d found the furnishings left by previous Dukes and Duchesses a cluttered distraction. In all likelihood his preference for a sedate, open space was a habit lingering from ascetic Temple life, but the low light and soft air was conducive to meditation.

He settled himself more comfortably on the cushion and slipped into a trance, letting his mind examine the thoughts that preoccupied him.

Foremost was young Kenobi, of course. Qui-Gon must have mentioned Dooku's more taboo studies; it had taken all of his considerable willpower to prevent a reaction to Obi-Wan’s request to learn. He considered throwing some choice invective in his former Padawan's direction and then dismissed the notion. Qui-Gon would not have mentioned it if he didn't trust Obi-Wan, which meant...something. The boy’s brush with Darkness lingered like a cobweb of shadow; had any on the Council been able to see what Dooku could now, they would have locked the boy in the Healers’ ward for extensive examination and therapy.

The narrow-minded fools could not, of course. Dooku had only recently become aware of a much larger and more shadowed world than the one he’d thought he inhabited; no Order Jedi would dare to go half as far as he had. Not in this day. It was an era long past and nearly forgotten when the Jedi
had strived to acknowledge and understand such things, even making use of the Dark when need
called for it. Now they averted their eyes and stared into the Light until the glare blinded them.

Yan thought he had resigned himself to his current course: the Order was destroying itself in its
increasing rigidity, its involvement with the politics of the Republic, and its inability to see the taint
planted by the Sith thousands of years before, seeping into the Order’s very foundations. A day
would soon come when they would crumble, bringing the Jedi to their knees.

That inevitability had led him to believe even his own Padawan was beyond saving. But now his
Grand-Padawan had come to his door, seeking forbidden knowledge. In the Force, the boy’s sense
was of carefully controlled power locked behind heavy shielding that was still not quite sufficient; at
the moment, Dooku read nothing of him beyond the soft mist of slumber. Obi-Wan was at ease here,
and that was good; it left Yan free to continue his own work without arousing suspicion.

He would teach the boy. Just a bit at first. Draw him into the deeper mysteries through his own
curiosity. In time, perhaps Obi-Wan would express interest in more, and then--

Well. Dooku was not foolish enough to entirely trust his own teacher. The Sith were notorious for
challenging one another and destroying their weakest; having a loyal apprentice to support him and
guard his back would give Dooku a better chance than standing alone.

A soft chiming brought him gently back to the surface; emerging from his trance, Dooku accepted
the comm connection.

A hologram formed before him over the comm’s projector: a man, cowled in black, only a pale chin,
thin lips, and nose visible beneath the oversized hood.

“Greetings, my Master.”

“What is the status of the project, Lord Tyranus?”

He was too experienced to let the lapse in courtesy irritate him, though old etiquette lessons cried in
outrage. “We are on schedule, my Lord. The Prime has been most accommodating and the
Kaminoans are pleased.”

“Excellent. I have a small addition to make. In two weeks, you will receive a package. Take it to
Kamino and personally see that it is implemented.”

“I will do as you command, my Lord.”

The robed figure paused, a deliberate hesitation intended to intimidate. “I understand a young Jedi is
paying you a visit. What are his intentions?”

Dooku would have given much to ferret out the spies among his staff; but he had vetted them all
personally. Someday, he would figure out how Sidious did that. “He is having difficulty adapting to
life beyond the Temple, my Lord. He has requested guidance from one he perceives to be a fellow
exile.”

“Indeed.” The syllables were flat with displeasure, the edges honed razor-sharp. “What do you sense
from Kenobi, my apprentice?”

Again with the power play. Dooku took a moment to compose himself. “He is Shadowed, my Lord,
and far more cognizant of it than the Council is.”

His Lord considered the matter. “He has great potential. His defeat of my assassin was unexpected.”
Even you cannot foresee everything. Keeping his disdain from his face he mused, “It is possible Kenobi could be turned. He seems to be of a sympathetic mind.”

Sidious’s chuckle sent a runnel of ice water down his spine. “You think to claim an apprentice so soon, my friend? No. Earn his trust. Expose him to whatever he wishes. Once you have his sympathies, bring him to me.”

“Of course, my Lord. It would have to be done carefully if we wish to claim the best of him, however.” I will not be party to the torture of my Grand-Padawan, your methods be damned. He could still feel the memory of the leaching, snapping energy of the Force lightning Sidious had subjected him to.

“Do it. And if he will not be turned, see that he is incapable of sharing his knowledge.”

Dooku bowed from the shoulders, showing deference without undue humility. “It will be done, my Lord.”

The hologram faded, and Yan Dooku resumed his trance to consider his next steps.

The room Obi-Wan had been given was in the palace’s tower, a location normally reserved for family. Dooku had none of his own -- his sister had departed for Alderaan along with her son when the Count had reclaimed the role -- and insisted that he considered Obi-Wan to be as close to his lineage as any blood relation. He was offered the run of the palace, save for the private rooms of Dooku and his staff, given a full tour so he wouldn’t get lost, and afforded nearly the level of courtesy by the staff as Dooku himself.

He’d successfully engaged Sahthan, Dooku’s aide, over a pot of tea one morning. The older woman possessed a Jedi’s statuesque serenity masking a devastating wit, and she delighted in sharing scurrilous details about the other five Great Houses. Under the façade of respectably, everyone was involved in something sordid.

Dooku was a warm if reserved host, frequently busy. They shared meals and settled into a routine of sparring just after lunch when his Grandmaster had time free. In the evenings, they would share a drink and Dooku offered advice and occasionally some training. Obi-Wan found a kindred spirit in their shared preference for Unified Force philosophy and opinions on the Order’s usefulness within the galaxy. The Count’s library was extensive and he spent much of his days reading histories and manuals from previous generations.

It was comfortable, peaceful, and reminded him of more pleasant times at the Temple.

Obi-Wan had been there just over a week when Dooku brought him back to the parlour lined with bookshelves.

“You asked about understanding the Dark side, and I did say I would introduce you to my studies. I apologise for the delay--”

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan gave his Grandmaster an understanding smile. “You’ve had me working on my shielding, Master. The reasons for that are obvious: what I asked of you is not particularly safe for even the most prepared Jedi.”
“No, indeed.” The corners of the Count’s mouth turned up. “Obviously I do not keep such material in publicly accessible areas. There is a trick to opening the door which only one with the Force as their ally can access.”

It was clever; the latch was sealed within the hidden door itself. Once Dooku had pointed it out, its presence was obvious. With a glance to the Count for permission, Obi-Wan applied a gentle pull, stepping back as part of the bookcase swung outwards.

“This is my private workroom. Bring no one else here and do not speak of it,” Dooku warned, his tone grave. “These materials must not fall into the wrong hands.”

The room looked like any other in the palace save that it utterly lacked windows or furnishings beyond a large reading table which dominated the centre of the room. A workbench that would not have looked out of place in the Temple’s lightsaber workshop stood to the side, tools and parts neatly stored. A door inset into the opposite wall, however, thrummed with shielding energy.

Dooku led him to it. “The vault, containing something more precious, and far more dangerous, than mere wealth.”

There was no latch on the outside; the Force had to be used again to gain entrance. In another windowless room, row after row of bookshelves and data-storage stood in organized ranks. The walls were lined with artefact displays: ancient weapons, tools, shards of stone or metal decorated with sinuous glyphs. Pieces of armour, the underlying leather half rotted away, lay arranged within a table-sized case in the middle of the room.

Turning to pin Obi-Wan with an attention-grabbing glare, Dooku said, “You have access to anything within this room, but do not examine them in here. Take them out to the worktable, and seal the vault each time. Every item in this room is tainted with Darkness, and I will accept no risks. Remove nothing. I cannot stress the importance enough; the walls are shielded for good reason.”

Aghast, Obi-Wan turned in place, staring. The sheer malice present within the room felt heavy and slick on his skin; the air prickled when he breathed. “How did you come by all of this?” he whispered.

“Some pieces were already present in the palace collection when I was a child. Most I acquired over time from private dealers and the black market, removing the risk of them falling into unwary hands one tome at a time. I kept them in a separate location while I lived at the Temple; maintaining them here is as much for the safety of others as it is for my own edification. Many Jedi would see the lot destroyed, but I feel that is a grave error. After all, how does one defeat an enemy when one does not know what it looks like?”

The atmosphere within the vault seemed almost alive, as if the contents were somehow sentient and aware of two beings not of their kind standing there. With some relief, Obi-Wan followed Dooku out. “Do you have any advice on where I should start?”

The Count retrieved a datapad from a drawer in the workbench and noted down a series of numbers. “Organizing the collection has been painstaking and unpleasant, but you may find these to be most relevant. Do be cautious and check them using the Force before touching them. I have cleaned everything myself and still I occasionally find a trap restored. If there is something you cannot access, I will deal with it.”

Obi-Wan stroked his beard, considering the matter. “Will you show me how to recognise these traps and disable them?”
Dooku smiled proudly. “Of course, Grand-Padawan. It would be my pleasure.”

The trick to reading texts about the Dark side, even those written in Basic such as the ones Dooku had listed for him, was deciphering the writing. Sith felt the need to make even the symbols of Aurebesh look threatening and ornate, apparently, and Obi-Wan had to take frequent breaks to stave off a headache. The decorative finials made the characters writhe in his peripheral vision.

One of Dooku’s suggestions was a volume on Sith language which the Jedi Master had hand-written himself, copying from an older text created for an earlier form of Basic. Obi-Wan applied his free time to wrapping his mind around the tongue-twisting language. It was a less than enjoyable experience, but it made deciphering some of the scrawled margin notes easier.

Sith had a lot of opinions, about everything. He mentioned it to Dooku, who laughed.

“To be a Sith of Bane’s line is to be isolated. It's not surprising many would voice themselves in the text when there is nobody else to listen.”

“Bane’s line?” Obi-Wan had studied enough history that the name and its associations was familiar, but the idea that the Sith Lord had descendants beyond Darths Zannah and Cognus was troubling.

Dooku folded his hands around his glass. “The roots of my disappointment with the Council’s handling of Naboo. Darth Bane and his apprentice, Darth Zannah, are the last known Sith -- until earlier this year, of course. Bane broke thousands of years of Sith tradition to institute the Rule of Two: one master, one apprentice. He felt the Sith’s constant warring against one another was the surest way to guarantee their extinction, for while they fought each other, the servants of the Light -- Jedi and others -- would take advantage of their weaknesses. The irony is that in order to do so, Bane directly or indirectly caused the deaths of hundreds of Sith and their acolytes to achieve this.”

Obi-Wan sipped his drink, lost in thought. “So with only two true Sith rather than massive numbers, they could hide more effectively.”

“And whilst hidden and unknown, the Sith could undermine the galaxy using its own political structures instead of all-out, costly war.”

“Insidious.”

The Count found the statement amusing. “But there is where the Jedi Council’s failing on Naboo lies. That there are no known Sith is not evidence for their extinction. As the scribbles in my collection can attest, the line has continued in secret for a millennium. That they have revealed themselves now concerns me deeply. I'm certain it means they are close to achieving their goals.”

“Whatever those may be.” Obi-Wan frowned. “I could suggest that the Apprentice’s actions against myself and Qui-Gon were failures, but if the Sith have that much experience using others’ expectations against them, perhaps that was deliberate. Lulling us into a false sense of security whilst simultaneously making us more paranoid.”

“And more willing to consider ejecting a talented young Jedi who has just a bit more fire than the Council is comfortable with,” Dooku added, tilting his glass in Obi-Wan’s direction. “At any other time, they might have assigned you to a series of sessions with the Mind Healers to determine the source of your temper.”
Obi-Wan had wondered about that, as had Bant the last time they had spoken. The majority of Jedi at the Coruscant temple seemed unwilling to challenge the Council’s decision, which boded ill for any Padawans who found themselves in a similar position in the future. And there would be more; every Jedi in the field faced their demons with varying degrees of success. “Why did you not mention any of this to them?”

A wry grin tugged at Dooku’s cheek. “Without revealing the source of my information? The restricted volumes in the Temple libraries are largely forgeries. Many of the originals were stolen over the years, replaced with bland, dismissive materials. I know this because I managed to re-acquire a few volumes from the black market, and the contents do not match what I recalled seeing during my Order-approved work.”

Sighing, Obi-Wan leaned back into the embroidered cushion of his chair. “And without being able to show evidence to support your claims, you can’t tell them.”

“As I said before, the Order would likely demand the destruction of the vault’s contents. I will not risk that.”

“No, you’re right. You never considered speaking to Qui-Gon about it?” Obi-Wan grinned; it had been Qui-Gon’s idea to come here, after all. “My former Master does have a reputation for being a bit less conventional.”

“I was tempted, but this is not a path I would want him tangled up in unwittingly.” Dooku regarded him steadily; it felt like having his very essence measured for flaws. “You arrived on your own and asked of your own accord. I must admit, it gives me some hope for the future of the Jedi. Not that I should wish young Jedi to investigate the Dark side!” he added quickly as Obi-Wan gave him a pointed look in amusement. “But to question the dogma that has stagnated the Order so badly. You and Qui-Gon were barely prepared for what you faced, and the pair of you were easily acknowledged as some of their best.”

Obi-Wan finished his drink, feeling the brandy's warmth settle in his stomach. “Are we so certain only the Sith of Bane’s lineage remain? What if there are others?”

“There are known cults who worship the Dark side in their own way, or follow a bastardized interpretation of Sith teachings.”

“The Dathomiri Nightsisters.”

“They are one such example, yes. The Order has kept close watch on these groups, but none have as yet indicated any interest further than being left to practise in peace. But you are referring to other Sith lineages, yes? Bane was quite certain he or the Jedi had eradicated all possible competition. If there is another Sith lineage still in existence -- and I will not make the mistake of dismissing that potentiality -- they have been in hiding for a very long time, possibly in Wild Space or the Unknown Regions.”

Catching the omission, Obi-Wan gestured with his empty glass. “Bane’s lineage could have done just that, but you don’t think they did.”

Dooku's eyebrows, yet untouched by silver, peaked sharply. “Indeed. Bane was an ambitious man, and would settle for nothing less than the utter destruction of the Jedi. He was also a proponent of the concept of keeping one’s enemies close. I do not believe they would have hermited themselves away on a deserted rock in the back of beyond.”

A horrible thought coalesced in Obi-Wan’s mind. “Is it possible for the Sith to mask their presence
around other Force users?”

“They could have gone so far as to hide themselves within the Temple itself, posing as Jedi, and none might be the wiser.” He set the glass down on the side table as his hands began to shake.

The Count looked perturbed. “That is...a possibility I would rather not consider. But there may be a grain of accuracy to it -- as the contents of the vault can attest. Many people have little familiarity with how Jedi behave beyond their exposure to low forms of entertainment. A Sith could easily pass as a Jedi by aping actors’ impressions.”

He would need to contact Qui-Gon about this. But not overtly; comms channels might be compromised. Obi-Wan could see now why the Council preferred to believe the Sith were extinct -- the level of security and paranoia that might exist would have been nigh intolerable.

A courier arrived a few days later with a package for the Count. Dooku made his sincerest apologies to Obi-Wan that he would have to go offworld for business whilst his young guest remained. Obi-Wan noted that it was unlikely the staff would forget to eat while the Count was away, a comment which drew a laugh from Sahthan.

Obi-Wan was permitted continued access to the vault, although Dooku warned him to not take unnecessary risks. Not having someone more experienced around who might detect something gone awry did give Obi-Wan a feeling of unease. He resolved to only continue his studies of the Basic texts and language until Dooku returned.

That had been the plan, at least. Dooku’s hand-scribed Sith language text made reference to another volume that was not in the list of Basic documents. Obi-Wan was reasonably certain he had seen it previously, and Dooku’s painstaking index gave him a case and shelf listing.

As always, the vault’s foreboding air enveloped him as he entered, the lights installed in the ceiling activating automatically and bathing the room’s contents in an incongruously cheerful golden glow. It was possibly a deliberate choice, he mused to himself, an effort to reduce the creepy feeling and banish the shadows. The possibility that the things contained there might affect one’s mind was altogether too likely.

The book was easy to find, a thin volume of yellowing, heavy-grained paper re-bound in a green cover which contained its own preservative field. Dooku had been utterly meticulous in maintaining things, and had liberally applied the knowledge of data conservation he’d learned from his friend Jocasta Nu to everything.

Obi-Wan held his hand in front of the shelf. The art of sensing and dispelling Sith traps relied upon use of the Dark side, a trick which had taken him some time to grasp. He’d been surprised when the techniques Dooku had taught him involved nothing more sinister than focusing through a manufactured rage at the notion that someone might have the temerity to prevent his access to the book. Such a concept was alien to Obi-Wan -- ordinarily he might have experienced at most a mild annoyance -- and it was only through the elevation of his own self-importance that the anger would come at all.

The book was clean, although one of the volumes nearby had something nasty that felt like a coiled
snake waiting to strike, and he made note to mention it to Dooku when he returned. Obi-Wan had just slid the green book from its slot when he became keenly aware of being watched.

The air left his lungs in a shaky breath. This was not the usual passive alertness he normally felt in the vault. Something had awakened. It was a small mercy that it didn't feel threatening. Steeling himself, Obi-Wan turned his head to the right.

A human man stood at the end of the row — lounged would have been more accurate for his posture, leaning with one shoulder against the bookcase and his arms folded in a casual pose. Pale with jaw-length dark hair, he was only a handspan taller than Obi-Wan and dressed in deep reds and purples. Dark armour that looked like bone capped both shoulders and guarded his forearms.

Above bottomless dark eyes, the man’s forehead was branded with the tattoo of a Sith sigil.

He studied Obi-Wan with idle curiosity, a tiny smile pulling up one side of his mouth. “Hello, there.”

The sound shocked Obi-Wan back to life. He swallowed to moisten a mouth gone dry and answered, “Hello?”

The tiny smile became a knowing smirk. “Yan doesn't bring many people down here. Well, any people. And he never sticks around to chat. It’s so boring.”

The Count hadn't mentioned how to handle being addressed within the vault. Obi-Wan straightened and shrugged. “But have you tried talking to him?”

“Only the once. It didn't go well.” From the man's expressive eyeroll, Obi-Wan guessed Dooku had studiously ignored anything he’d heard and left the room.

“You're stuck in here, aren't you? Something you're connected to is part of the collection.”

The smirk transformed into a genuine grin; the man might have been intensely attractive in life, were it not for the shadows under his eyes and the hollows in his cheeks that spoke of sleepless nights, torture, and self-neglect. “Smart kid. His shielding around this room is pretty good, yeah.”

“Does the Count even know there's a Sith spirit bound to his collection?”

The corners of the man’s mouth tightened in a grimace. “There are lots of Sith spirits connected here. I’m more like a fragment of a spirit.” He motioned with his chin toward the weapon worn openly on Obi-Wan’s low-slung utility belt. “I'm surprised you haven't drawn your lightsaber.”

Obi-Wan considered the statement. “Would it even be able to affect you?”

The spirit’s eyes widened. “Actually, that's a good question. Kyber crystals are more than just minerals and exist on more than one plane. I’m not all that eager to test it, if you don't mind.”

Tilting his head, Obi-Wan studied the man, suppressing a cautious smile of his own. “Well, if you're talking to me, you must want something.”

The man gave a chuckle that was more air than sound as the shifted his position against the bookcase. He didn't move any closer, although Obi-Wan suspected the distance was no obstacle. “Dooku warned you about the traps on the books, but did he warn you about the traps in the text?”

“In the text?”

“That’d be a no, then.” The smile vanished into a serious glare. “Sith writing lends itself well to
multiple layers of content. The unwary reader can be snared easily, shields eroded and suggestions implanted. They think it's their own idea to go looking for more--” He made a languid gesture toward the book in Obi-Wan’s hands. “You want to put that one back.”

Obi-Wan stared at him for a moment and then slowly slipped the book back into place. It was like fighting his own hands to do so.

“May I help?” The spirit was at his side in a moment, waving his hand between Obi-Wan and the book. A tug he hadn't noticed before in the centre of his chest suddenly released, snapping back so hard he nearly staggered.

“Easy, there.”

Obi-Wan pressed a hand to his forehead. His shields, when he checked them, had been scoured down in places without his notice, and he quickly pulled a protective layer over the raw spots. “I-- Thank you. But why would you help me?”

The spirit’s expression darkened at some distant memory. “I Fell because I was tricked, drugged, and tortured. As reckless as I might have been, that wasn't a choice I would have made in my right mind. An uncontrolled Fall is dangerous and consuming. I’d rather not see what happened to me happen to someone else if I can help it.” He reached up and rested a finger against a blue-bound volume on a higher shelf. “Start with this one.”

This book was much larger than the green one, the paper dense and tightly bound. Obi-Wan turned it over in his hands without parting the covers. “What's in it?”

“It's the closest thing you’ll find to a primer in here.” The spirit laughed at his surprised glance. “If Dooku is going to neglect your training, I'm making it my role to fill in the gaps. No tricks in there, Obi-Wan, just a guide.”

Something in the room surged and Obi-Wan gritted his teeth as the air grew heavy. “My apologies. I shouldn't linger here.”

“Yeah, there are scarier things than me hanging around.” The spirit offered another smile. “We can talk again later. It's not like I have anywhere to go.”

Obi-Wan made his way to the door, book clutched tightly in his hands. “Of course. It was a pleasure to meet you…?”

“Call me Ulic, Obi-Wan.”

There were times when he had to admit that he might have just lingered too long. As with all things in the Force, he had a choice, even if the options were less than ideal. Unlike the occasional lurkers in Dooku’s vault, Ulic couldn’t just shift himself to another bound location. He might be able to dispel himself, fade into the void as he probably should have done long before, but that felt too close to giving up.

If he were truly honest, Ulic was too attached to the concept of existing as himself. It was isolated and frustrating and at times utterly maddening, particularly after Yan had wised up and sealed a particular heirloom behind carefully crafted shields -- he’d had access to the entire palace and even
some of the grounds beyond the walls until then -- but it was still his existence. For a while he had pondered the improbability of his preservation, like a bee in amber, when Nomi Sunrider had exacted her very effective cure for Ulic’s affliction. He wasn't so conceited as to think the Force had allowed it for a reason.

Confronted now with a potential solution to a grave problem that had arisen in recent decades, he was starting to question that assessment.

When Obi-Wan returned a couple days later, it was immediately apparent that he'd been applying the knowledge from the book Ulic had pointed him to, even if only through focusing exercises. The Dark side didn't come easily to him, and his Force presence showed the strain.

“How are you getting on, kid?” Even when you knew the answer, it was important to ask. Had to make sure your student was being honest with themself.

The young man had dragged one of the workroom stools in; he propped it beside the door and sat, turning the primer over in his hands. “It's... uncomfortable. How do you justify thinking like that?”

“It's a personality thing. For most Sith, it just comes naturally.” The kid could do with thinking about his own needs a bit more, but that selflessness wasn't something the Jedi had taught him; maybe made it more pronounced, which Ulic wanted to kick someone for, but it was all Obi-Wan. “If it helps, consider that the difference between self-confidence and arrogance is what you're willing to take from someone else to maintain it. Self-confidence hurts nobody, but you do need to realise your own value in the world.”

Frowning, Obi-Wan shook his head slightly. “But it didn’t require that before.”

Ulic stopped himself from refuting that claim. If it felt different, something else was going on. “What were you doing?”

“The first time? Looking for more strength to protect my Master from Maul. The second time, sensing, seeking targets, danger to myself and others. Well, until I tried to throttle a man.”

Not shabby for a first-time use. Pacing didn’t expend energy anymore, but the movement helped. “And instead of putting your emotions aside the way the Jedi do…?”

“I think I was focusing through them.” The young man shook his head in disappointment at himself. “It wasn’t the first time, either. I’ve been frustrated and -- at least the second time -- angry.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. Can you identify a reason?”

“Angry because of my Master’s behaviour towards me, and later because I was hunting down a bunch of slaving chakaare.” Ulic twitched at the unexpected Mando’a; Obi-Wan didn’t seem to notice. “I understand Qui-Gon’s reasoning now, but talking would have saved us a lot of trouble. The frustration was because...in short, I was coerced into a role I hadn’t expected, when I’d intended to spend time figuring out what to do with myself.”

“Frustration is ego enough to get things done, you know. You don’t have to see yourself as more important than others -- that’s Yan’s thing. But if something is preventing you from doing what you want or need to do, it’s enough.” When Obi-Wan looked at him curiously, Ulic clarified, “You’re recognising the value of your presence and your actions. That’s all. Jedi have such a negative view of the Fallen. You don’t need to be a raging autocrat to use the Dark side.”

Obi-Wan gave a soft laugh. “You must have been an interesting person.”
“Nah. Four thousand years gives you a lot of time to consider how you fucked up your life. I was a smartass and thought I knew better. I’m trying to help you avoid making my mistakes.”

“The voice of experience.”

Ulic chuckled. “There are some errors you just have to let people learn for themselves; this is not one I would recommend. So. Dooku will be back in a week. The last thing you want is for him to sense you’ve been dabbling. Just...trust me,” he added with a grimace when the kid gave him a questioning look. “I’m going to give you some homework: there’s a technique for masking your Force presence that both Sith and Jedi of my time have used. You're no novice, so you should be able to—” his eyebrows arched in surprise as Obi-Wan’s presence cleared, like he’d wiped the shadows away with a cloth.

Obi-Wan flushed faintly at Ulic’s open astonishment. “It was one of the first things I looked up.”

Ulic could have danced; he settled for a delighted grin. “I have a student who's ahead of the curve; this is fantastic! Right, we’ll move on to the next step.”

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Ulic Qel-Droma. Fallen Jedi, Sith warlord, leader of the Krath invasion of Coruscant which sparked off the last Great Sith War four thousand years earlier. If it truly was him -- or rather, a piece of him -- it was not an aspect of the Light; HoloNet archival search indicated that Qel-Droma’s spirit had been seen at his tomb on Rhen Var, confirmed by a number of respected Jedi Masters.

The attached discussion forum was filled with conspiracy theorists, sceptics, and a handful of obsessive ghost-sighters, at least three of whom had obvious kinks they needed to find a healthier way to address. After a moment’s hesitation, Obi-Wan captured stills of the more cringeworthy exchanges on his datapad and brought it with him the next time he went into the vault.

Ulic found it hilarious.

“Doing your homework on me?” he asked, wiping ethereal tears of mirth from his eyes. The spirit looked remarkably solid despite being wholly intangible.

“Can you blame me?” Obi-Wan turned the datapad off and hooked the heels of his boots into the rungs of his stool, slouching a little. His mind ached from being forced into focusing along new pathways, but he’d managed to maintain the concealment of his Force presence overnight for the first time; he wore it now like a cloak, carefully controlling how he could be perceived in the Force. It felt like a major milestone had been reached.

“Nope. I wouldn’t put it past some of the more devious ones here to impersonate someone more trustworthy by current Jedi standards.” The spirit threw a dirty look over his shoulder at the rest of the room. “You could always go to Rhen Var and ask the real thing, anyway. He’d probably be less than pleased to discover I’m still around.”

“Does it bother you? Being a...a fragment?”

“For the first couple hundred years? Yeah.” He gave a tight smile. “It’s been a long time; my choices were either suck it up and accept things, or rage in the dark ‘til I go insane. Again. Already been down that road once.”
Cautiously, Obi-Wan said, “You...are rather more polite than I would have expected.”

Ulic grinned with morbid humour. “For a dead Sith Lord, you mean? I told you, I fell to the Dark side because of torture and a particularly nasty Sith poison. When I was alive, I was literally insane, and my judgment was questionable at best. Thing about being dead is that the physical torments no longer affect you.”

“But you didn’t return to the Light.”

“Can’t.” He shrugged, unconcerned. “I’m saturated in Darkness, kid, there’s no cleaning that up.”

That sounded...odd. Obi-Wan bit his lip, frowning, then said, “May I ask what it is you’re connected to here?”

Ulic’s spirit studied him warily, then motioned with his chin toward one side of the room. “Lightsaber crystal in the case over there. Kyber crystals don’t like being used in Darkness and can...rebel. Sith expend a bit of ourselves to bind the crystals we use. It’s why they often turn red -- they’re technically bleeding into the Force.” He acknowledged Obi-Wan’s grimace of distaste with a wry nod. “But it also attaches a bit of the Sith’s essence to the crystal; if you get ahold of one, you can track its owner down.”

“That’s disturbing.”

“Oh, it’s not like ghosts will appear from just any ancient Sith lightsaber. The rest of me got his connection to the Force cut off.” He pulled a face at the memory. “Being severed like that actually hurt.”

“What would you do if you weren’t stuck here?”

The spirit shook his head. “I’m a sentient rock, kid. Barely enough power to break that compulsion on you -- a fairly weak compulsion, at that. Everyone I ever gave a damn about is long dead, and the ones that lingered probably don’t want to see me.”

Obi-Wan shivered at the thought of spending nearly four millennia anchored to a chip of crystal. “You're lonely.”

“I am fucking lonely,” Ulic confirmed. He sounded weary. “There are a few bastards who have connections back to things here -- Dooku's shielding can't block that. They're not much fun to talk to, so we generally avoid each other.” Another glare towards another part of the room. “I’m going to be direct here, and you need to be more honest than you have ever been before in your short life. You want to really learn to use the Dark side?”

The truth of it, laid out so flatly, made his stomach twist. Obi-Wan’s jaw clenched as he swallowed. “I want to be responsible about it. I nearly killed someone -- I won't say he didn't deserve to be killed, but proper justice is more important. I want to be able to control myself.”

The spirit nodded as if confirming something to himself. “Congratulations. You’ve come to a more mature understanding of the facts of the universe than everyone who tries to deny half of the Force’s nature. Look, the Force just is --”

“I’ve heard that, recently.”

Ulic quirked a smile in acknowledgment. “It's your actions, intent, and effect on the universe that make it Light or Dark in your hands. This is why your Jedi try to scrub out emotion entirely -- they're trying to avoid negative emotions, but positive emotion is only a leftward step from its negative
aspects, and it takes very little to push it over the edge.” A wry smirk twisted Ulic’s face. “Speaking
from the perspective of someone who’s trod both paths and ended up Force-blind, trying to avoid
emotion is as unhealthy as mooning over every little shift of mood.”

“You're not trying to seduce me to the Dark side?” Obi-Wan asked with a grin.

Ulic’s laugh was gentle and almost fond. “Kid, you're already Fallen. If you want to learn control, I
will give you the kriffing tools you need to learn it. I’ll even teach you everything I know about the
Sith language so you can read the rest of the stuff here. There's no shame in trying to be responsible.”

“There must be a catch.”

“Oh, of course there is,” the spirit said. A trickster’s grin warmed his features. “But you might like
it.”

It was as if time had abruptly frozen; the atmosphere in the vault clenched in anticipation, sending a
chill down his spine. Obi-Wan eyed the Sith Lord warily. “Can I hear what it is before agreeing?”

“I'll give you some information for free: the Apprentice you killed, Maul? His Master calls himself
Sidious. It's an apt title. He’s an heir of Bane. You're familiar with that name?”

“I imagine some of what I know is skewed or outright falsehood, but yes.”

“Likely, but that can be fixed.” Ulic scowled fiercely. “Bane’s a snot-nosed upstart who threw out a
lot of Sith philosophy and traditions in favour of orchestrating the relatively rapid decline of the Jedi.
Smart in theory, but that kind of downfall is too easily subverted. It's just a part of the cycle, and it
won't last.”

“You speak as though he's succeeded.”

“Look at the state of the Order over the past thousand years and tell me it's not been in decline. That's
a discussion for another time, though. Sidious...is a whiny, self-absorbed con man standing on the
shoulders of giants, who wants to rule the galaxy in total for himself,” he gritted. For the first time,
the spirit’s eyes flared a dull gold for a moment. “That's his biggest failing, because he's not
immortal. He’s trying desperately to find ways to avoid the ravages of time, rather than rebuilding the
Sith to pass it on to the next generation. Bane’s Rule of Two has pretty much guaranteed that it all
falls into the hands of the biggest megalomaniac who won't share his power.”

It was difficult not to laugh at the spirit’s visible disgust. “I get the impression you don't like him
much.”

“All mutual dislike aside, most of us old Sith agree he’s a prat. And there's a lot of us still lingering.
Anyway. I want you to take what you learn and use it to fuck with Sidious’ plans. Take a student, or
several, I don't care. Just be an utter thorn in his shoe.”

For a Sith -- possibly more than one -- to suggest opposing another, and be willing to train someone
who by rights should be their enemy in order to do so, was hardly an altruistic move. “You're trying
to restart the larger Sith conflict,” Obi-Wan accused.

Ulic folded his arms and gave him a long, measuring stare; the sense of anticipation in the room grew
heavier. “Obi-Wan, I’m going to give you some advice: if you don't want to become a Sith in truth?
Turn away. Close the books. Leave Serenno. Go back to your friends on the freighter and be a
smuggler.” His eyes narrowed. “But you're very like the person I used to be: you can't just live like
that. You feel the need to be a part of something bigger than yourself. And if you want to be
effective at that, you need to learn balance, and you need to be willing to get involved in this.”
The spirit’s voice dropped as he took a step closer. “The Jedi are failing because they've thrown out a lot of the knowledge and traditions I grew up with. They have no idea how much they've lost. A Jedi can't do what needs to be done to wreck Sidious’ party. You?” His shoulders twitched in the barest shrug. “You’ve already Fallen. What's the worst that can happen?”

Obi-Wan looked down and away from Ulic’s fathomless dark eyes, taking a focusing breath. There were no simple answers here. “I need time to consider it.” It was definitely not his imagination when the pressure eased. He looked up and squinted off across the room, but there was nothing visible but data storage and slightly sinister artefact displays.

Ulic followed his glance with a vague smirk and nodded in confirmation. “Of course. But don't take too long. Sidious is close, very close. I give him less than three decades at the rate he’s going.”

“How much difference will a week make?”

“Oh, that depends on whether the Count is back from his trip by then. I’d prefer to get you started properly before he returns.”

There was a thought. Obi-Wan tilted his head curiously. “Has Dooku triggered any of the traps?”

Ulic gave a toothy expression that wasn't a grin. “Several. And he doesn't know it. You might not want to share too much with him.”

Chapter End Notes

Next month is NaNoWriMo, so I'm taking November off to focus on getting a silly concept out of my head and onto paper.

The next chapter update here will be on December 1st!
Lessons

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

On Serenno, Obi-Wan learns the ways of the Sith. They aren't quite what he'd expected.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumii and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

Update: On request, this chapter now has a Director's Commentary version

Reformation Year 977.01.07
Serenno

“The work continues apace, my Master. Chief Medical Scientist Nala Se is confident that the change can be implemented without interruption of the program. Chief Scientist Ko Sai has expressed concern that the alteration was introduced after the production of the initial batch and wishes to know if we would like the matter rectified.”

“That is of no consequence. I trust the Prime had no objections to this addition?”

Dooku thought of the slow, dangerous grin that had spread over the bounty hunter’s face when he’d been informed of the biochips’ purpose. The Count had initially held some misgivings about working with Fett, given their history. The expression on the Mandalorian’s face after the events on Galidraan had haunted Dooku’s sleep for years even as his own faith in the Order’s purpose curdled. The younger warrior -- then scarcely older than Obi-Wan was now -- had been devastated, shell-shocked, and utterly covered in Jedi blood. But the hunter had proven eager, in the end. His thirst for vengeance outweighed any personal debt between them. “None at all, my Lord.”

“Good.” The word was crooned, savoured, and Dooku suppressed a shiver. “What of young Kenobi?”

Dooku shook his head. “My Lord, he has proved an avid learner and an eager student; he has spent a great many hours studying what texts you have granted me, and mastered the Sith language with astonishing swiftness. But the Darker aspects of what he encounters seem not to affect him at all. He may be more resilient than anticipated.”

The Sith Master drew a hissing breath through his teeth in displeasure. “Most disappointing. You have engaged him in further studies?”
“Extensively. He grasps the concepts with ease but the practise…. The Count scowled. With his previous brush with Darkness, Kenobi ought to have found passing the boundary increasingly easy. Perhaps…. “It may be that we lack the proper incentive. From all accounts, his known use of the Dark side happened when he was protecting another.” Blast. Dooku struggled to keep from his face the knowledge that he may have just set himself up for an assassination attempt that would be all too real and not at all under his control. It would be very difficult to conceal his own increasing mastery of the Sith arts if Dooku were caught unawares.

Sidious’ teeth bared in a malicious grin. “I will keep that in mind, my Apprentice. It may be that your methods are lacking.”

Ulic made a point of prodding Obi-Wan’s shields daily now that Dooku had returned. His student -- the ancient Sith spirit would not dare to claim the young man as his apprentice -- had become a swift learner once they had broken down his Jedi-taught notion of what it meant to be Darkened, and it wouldn't do for Dooku to sense the younger man knew more than he let on. One of the vault’s occasional visitors, a pompous Twi’leki arse named Pyyra whose holocron Sidious possessed, had grudgingly warned Ulic that the contemporary Sith Lord was too aware of Obi-Wan’s presence on Sereno.

Time was running out.

“What’s the most important thing about using the Force?” He was pacing just so he wouldn't be standing around awkwardly, passing through the end of the display case full of Sith armour. The Darkness lingering in the ancient mail tingled pleasantly, but the physical objects had no real sensation.

The kid looked like he was about to answer immediately, then frowned and gave it a bit more thought. Reflection; reassessment. Good. “Self-control.”

“Exactly. Even before you get to focus on what's outside of yourself, you need to focus and master what's inside yourself. That’s why Jedi spend so damn much time on discipline and meditation.” Ulic grinned; he knew that long-suffering look too well. “So we’re going to spend more time on discipline and meditation, but we’re going to do it a bit differently from what you’re used to. Might take a bit for you to get the hang of it, so try not to fret too much.” Obi-Wan gave him a sour grimace; after years of the Force being so readily at his fingertips, the apparent slowness of his progress often frustrated the kid.

His progress was not slow, but Ulic knew better than to say so. Best case scenario: he’d get cocky. Worst: he’d start pointlessly measuring himself against others.

The spirit settled himself in a half-lotus on the end of the display case. He might as well have floated in the air -- gravity had long ceased to be a factor in his existence -- but the disrespect to Darth Xaryph’s relics amused him. “You're at a very delicate point right now, Obi-Wan; you have a decent understanding of yourself, but little control over it, and if I were anyone else, that could be used to strangle everything good in you. We're going to get a start at untangling that. You're not gonna like this, but I need you to meditate on a time when you felt the Dark side, really felt it, and didn’t want to push it away. We're going to explore that moment together. I'm going to touch your mind, but only so I can watch. Okay?”
His mouth pressed into a thin line, Obi-Wan abandoned his position on the hard wooden workstool and settled comfortably on the floor with his back to the door. “Alright.”

“Which moment do you want to explore?”

“Honestly, I really don’t.” They shared a sympathetic laugh. “But...the attack on the slavers. That troubles me far more than the fight with Maul.”

“Yeah, you still have some baggage there. That's fine; it's normal, and I’m glad you're not ignoring it. Start your usual meditation, and when you're ready, pull that memory out. It's not gonna be fun, but we’ll dissect it together.”

Obi-Wan settled into a light trance and Ulic stretched out with his mind, seeking that door the young man had created specifically for him. Eventually that gap would need to be sealed, but it had been useful for the past week and a half while they worked together. His student's mind was a comfortable place, welcoming to one it recognised as a teacher and -- Ulic hesitated at the sensation -- friend.

Sith didn't claim friends. Allies, yes; lovers, certainly. The close trust inherent in a friendship was perceived as a weakness, leaving one open to betrayal.

But then, he thought with chagrin, allies and lovers can betray one as easily. And it hurt no less when they did.

He felt the shift as his student's focus narrowed; Darkness coiled around him, fierce and destructive. There was a raider, human, male, nothing pretty to look at, zapped unconscious with some sort of disruptor installed in the young man’s gauntlet. A woman, another human, whom he recognised barely in time to avoid knocking her out as well. The Shadow receded at his genuine pleasure and relief at seeing her, but came roaring back, licking like flashfire at the edges of his mind as her words warned him of danger and captivity.

Obi-Wan. Can you hear me?

There was a notable pause as he watched Obi-Wan zap and cuff another raider who cowered in the shadows. I hear you.

I can see what's going on here, but you need to pick it apart on your own. Focus on what you're feeling. Where's that rage coming from?

--these fuckers how dare they not worthy of sentience who do they think they are don't deserve to live after what they've done-- It's...hate. I hate them. He sounded ashamed of himself; the Jedi Order might bob their heads and murmur sanctimonious things about how wrong it is to hate, approving of his shame without ever recognising it as hate's paler cousin.

Hate was natural and useful, a way to discern when one encounters something anathema to one's understanding of an ideal world. Its presence, however, did not automatically put one in the right. Ulic kept his distance from Obi-Wan’s memory-self, remaining unobtrusive. A solid source of Darkness, but you have to be careful. You feel that heat? Hatred is a virulent poison, it’ll burn you up if you try to store it. That shit needs to be analyzed and then used or released into the Force. Don’t hold onto it.

Despite the swift dispatch of a group of raiders with a series of moves Ulic warmly approved of, Obi-Wan chuckled. That's the last piece of advice I’d expect from a Sith.

You don't exist as long as I have without learning that we can be our own worst enemies. Hate is the source of the physical corruption many Dark side users experience. Either use up that hate-energy
or dispel it the way the Jedi taught you. But remember that feeling; you’ll need to identify and leash it or redirect it every time. A laugh of pure delight bubbled up as Ulic watched his student carve a hole through the floor on the second level; the chunk of duracrete couldn’t have been aimed better as one of the raiders disappeared entirely.

Okay.

The Dark side purred contentedly here, fed fat with a heady mix of painhatefear and the raw, uncaring malice pouring from the leaders of the pack who were gathered in the room with their victims. Obi-Wan’s own Shadow had grown deep with his reaction to what he saw, but the lingering hate dissipated like smoke. Nicely done. You’re better than your Council gave you credit for. You’re still steeped in Darkness; peel back the next layer. What’s its basis?

--children these are children they don’t deserve this how dare anyone lay a finger on them--Protectiveness. I’m angry on behalf of the younglings. He had a blaster in his hand now, and used it with vicious precision on the leaders of the pack, even the woman in medical garb who stood wreathed in the horror of her victims. The difference wasn’t lost on Ulic; his student perceived a defined separation in responsibility between the pack’s casual members and the ones in charge.

Excellent. Your Order claims that attachments are a negative that need to be removed, but when I was a Jedi this wasn’t the case; we married, had children, and a Master could train multiple Padawans simultaneously, including their own young if they were so inclined. He winced as Obi-Wan’s memory-self was caught by the Wookiee leader; the kid was damn lucky he’d been wearing armour. Attachments can make us strong; our willingness to risk everything for those we care for -- and even for those we don’t care for but still believe worthy of protecting. Be careful with that, because it can be used against you, but that energy is safe to store and use as needed. It won’t destroy you the way hate will. Pull it back, make a place for it in your heart.

Alright. The Wookiee thrashed as Obi-Wan pinned him back against the wall from halfway across the room; the Dark side embraced the young man as one of its own. There’s still something… -- cannot believe this is allowed to happen how can politicians sit in their pretty offices and know this is happening but do nothing this is not RIGHT--

Ooh. Rage at injustice. That’s a good one. That can be stored as well, but be cautious because it too can be warped into hatred. Intellectually, you know where the injustice is coming from?

The politicians who don’t see it as a cause that will help maintain their seats. The governors who do nothing, or worse, appropriate funds intended for the anti-raiding divisions. The law enforcement who accept bribes to look the other way. Memory-Obi-Wan was shot in the back, then the head, toppling over onto the floor. The setting faded somewhat, but his imagination filled in the rest: the disguised Jedi woman hauling the Wookiee’s dazed bulk over her shoulder to help him walk. Obi-Wan’s undercurrent of shame, both for his actions and the raider’s escape, intensified; Ulic made a note to help him work that out, as well.

Keep reminding yourself of that. Slavery is a huge problem with many roots and no single individual can be pointed to as the source. Loads of willing participants, but while they’re responsible for their behaviour, they aren’t truly responsible for the system that encourages it. You can focus on the injustice as a concept to be challenged, but don’t take that out on people.

What I almost did. If not for Siri...

Your friend is smart and used you to get further in her own mission. She’s aiming higher. Ulic pulled back from his student’s mind as the memory fragmented. Through the gap in Obi-Wan’s shields, Ulic felt something settle -- a banked fire of slow-burning anger rather than the uncontrolled flare it
had started as. Better; the tangled, sparking coil of spiked cables knotted around his core still existed, but it had lost some of its substance. If he worked on it a bit at a time, it would eventually disappear. “Listen to me carefully, Obi-Wan. You're holding on to a bit of your own Darkness now, but this is one single meditation session; it won’t mean anything in the long run. If you continue to do this, you’ll be walking a Darkened path.”

The kid took a shaky breath and scrubbed his hands through his hair; tears streaked his cheeks, the tracks irregular under the prosthetic eyepiece. “And if I want to be able to control those feelings instead of releasing them, I’m going to have to do this regularly.”

“Like your usual meditation, yeah. You can always release the Darkness later, but it builds more easily every time. Better to keep it and have it under control.”

Obi-Wan wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand, laughing softly, and pulled himself back onto the stool. “You keep warning me about this. Do you not want me to try?”

“No, I think you need it, but not without knowing the risks.” Ulic felt a rueful smile twist his face. “While many Sith delight in tricking Jedi into a Fall, that isn’t my style. I’ve been there, trust me. An uncontrolled Fall will destroy anyone eventually -- remember that hate-burn I mentioned? Far better to walk into the depths with your eyes open and test your limits knowingly. Remember, I have a use for you, and you’ll be best suited to that purpose if you’re in control of yourself.”

“And here I thought it was because you cared.”

Ulic chuckled; Kenobi was giving him that sly, knowing look. “The Sith don’t have a word for that.”

It was getting easier. Obi-Wan wasn’t certain if that should be a fact to celebrate or dread. He dropped back onto his bed, studying his hand in the low light; he could still feel the tingle of electricity in his fingers, the heady thrill of commanding that much raw energy. The only things preventing his host from noticing Obi-Wan’s active use of the Dark side in the salle were the shields he would expend several minutes creating around the room; when he finished, every training droid or remote he’d used had to be meticulously cleaned before he could drop the shields again.

The Count had been doing something similar; one of the remotes had carried a lingering hint of Darkness that Obi-Wan knew he hadn’t been responsible for. He wasn’t certain what to make of that.

It was nerve-wracking; training without Dooku present for seventeen days had given Obi-Wan the much-needed space to be sloppy and learn to clean up after himself. With the Count back in residence, he had a jittering paranoia that he might slip and reveal his knowledge by accident. He knew Ulic wasn’t telling him everything -- the spirit had never lied, no, but like any Sith of legend had offered only parts of the truth -- and it was clear there was more going on that Dooku wasn’t saying, either. Was this the life of a Sith? An existence of second-guessing and elision, of not trusting even your allies to not have a plot waiting to unleash if you proved unworthy?

Grumbling under his breath, Obi-Wan rolled over and stared out the long window that took up the full outer wall. Moonlight gave the forest and mountains beyond an unworldly cast, and flashes of bioluminescence from night-hunting creatures flickered in the shadows.

The Jedi were nearly as bad for sharing only parts of the truth, manipulating others into doing what
they wished and claiming the result excused their duplicity. Case in point: Qui-Gon telling the Council that Anakin was the answer to a prophecy he himself barely believed in. It had worked -- particularly after the nine-year old had helped in the battle over Naboo -- but that could come back to hurt Anakin if the Council decided to expect actual miracles of him.

His datapad’s available memory chip was rapidly filling with notes; Obi-Wan was going to need to switch to sticks soon. A lot of Sith philosophy seemed like desperate attempts to distance their viewpoint from that of the Jedi, but he’d found a number of points that aligned with the two major -- and dissenting -- Jedi schools of thought. Ulic’s words two weeks earlier about how Light and Dark were abstracts matched Obi-Wan’s personal understanding. Many Jedi worried about following the “will” of the Force, but gave little thought as to whether ascribing sentience to something that vast was the right way to address it. If the Force had will, it was likely far beyond the ability of any sentient to grasp, and possessing goals that might not align with any individual sentient’s desire to exist; like cells in a living body, sacrificed without thought to destroy a disease.

That was a terrifying thought. He was going to give himself nightmares at this rate. Obi-Wan laughed for the sake of breaking the silence and put the ‘pad away. His quarters had a small audio receiver and speakers built into the wall; he messed with the settings until he found a broadcast of the latest ambience from the Core worlds. The experimental use of ancient traditional instruments to replicate modern rhythms and melodies was gaining popularity. Obi-Wan turned the volume down and settled in on the woven rug for light meditation.

Yan Dooku had no regrets regarding his departure from the Order, but the absence of anyone similarly schooled with whom to exchange thoughts and theories had left him somewhat bereft. He took pleasure now in engaging Obi-Wan in a variety of subjects, deeply grateful for the academic companionship.

Kenobi’s opinions on the Sith texts were both amusing and enlightening. As a product of a previous generation’s training, Dooku was aware that certain standards had shifted, but he hadn't been confronted by it until now. Younger Jedi, it seemed, were now chastised simply for feeling anything; a marked change from what he had learned.

Obi-Wan leaned forward, fascinated, his drink all but forgotten in his hand. “They encouraged you to feel emotions?”

Dooku nodded. “To feel them and examine them before releasing them into the Force. Emotions are a valuable tool for understanding one’s relationship with the universe, although dwelling on them too much can blind one to reality.”

“I read that, recently. Darth Cheyne’s treatise on the humours. Applying ancient theoretical science to modern understandings of chemical production and reception in sentient brains was, eh…”

“Paradoxical?”

The young man laughed, the sound bright and heartwarming. How long had it been since the Count had heard a Jedi express such unfettered delight? The Order was destroying itself. “Oh, it definitely is that. There’s a palpable disdain in his tone with regard to the old premedical theory, but he did seem adamant that classifying various emotions under the humours was an effective guide to how best they could be used. I honestly had no idea that different emotions could be used to different
effects.”

The Count sniffed dismissively. “Because they don’t teach younglings to analyze them properly anymore. Certain emotions are directed inwards, others outward. Some are subjectively focused and others more ephemeral.”

“The visual charts were enlightening.”

Count Dooku regarded the golden glow of lamplight through his brandy before savouring a sip. Despite the occasional presence of a number of entities within the vault, the boy had clearly spent significant amounts of time within, and yet showed no evidence of Dark side taint in his Force presence. If anything, the Shadow he’d arrived bearing had all but faded to nothing in the intervening weeks. “Tell me, how difficult are you finding it to use your own emotional state?”

Obi-Wan sighed, frowning distantly at the display of ancient weaponry. “Difficult, yes. I’m so accustomed to pushing away my feelings that I have to...manufacture them, even to dispel traps. Remembering events that once upset me, or trying to inflate my own ego, runs counter to everything I was taught before. ‘Exhausting’ is the word, I think.”

“Hmm. You’re expending more personal energy than you should need for such minor applications.” Dooku stroked his beard, considering the puzzle his Grand-Padawan presented. The boy had always been considered volatile by the Council, not lacking in Knightly qualities, but possessing perhaps too much drive to confront when defense was called for. The incidents of his youth -- and there were many -- indicated a strong objection to injustice and allowing it to perpetuate, both toward himself and others. His few prior contacts with the Dark side had been merely a step further, at times when his emotional response had been uncontrolled. Dooku had little doubt that, confronted with a similar situation in the future, the young man would prove far more adept; it simply involved evoking a genuine emotional response.

A Sith whose strongest actions occurred in the face of injustice was not a Sith who would find comfort in Sidious’ service. Dooku didn’t want to consider what his Lord might do to the boy; the longer he remained on Serenno, the greater that risk became.

Haunted brown eyes in a field of snow drenched with blood flashed again through his memory.

Sidious would punish him severely if Obi-Wan were to disappear, but the alternative would be harder to bear. The Count cleared his throat. “Perhaps you genuinely lack the ego required to put what you’ve learned into practice.”

The young man nodded, looking resigned. “I did consider that. The ancient Sith were very full of themselves, weren’t they?”

“They were,” Dooku agreed with a laugh. “When one has that much raw power at their disposal, it is easy to become overconfident.”

“I wonder what it’s like for Yoda. He’s by far the most powerful Jedi alive. How does he stay humble, I wonder.”

The Count leaned forward, smiling conspiratorially. “I will tell you a secret, Grand-Padawan: he doesn’t.”
Ulic was looking troubled the next time Obi-Wan entered the vault; the Sith spirit was fidgeting restlessly.

Obi-Wan returned the book he’d been using to its place, studying the Sith from the corner of his eye. The spirit was cagey with his outside information, but usually he hid his reactions better than this. “All right, Ulic. What's going on?”

The spirit snorted in irritation. “I wanted to wait a bit more on this, but we’re running out of time.” Cryptic as usual. Obi-Wan composed himself on the workstool to wait for Ulic to get to the point.

Ulic was pacing again, ignoring the bookshelf his arm passed through. “I’m going to ask you some hard questions, kid. For your sake, your answers need to be honest.”

“To what end?”

“We’ve worked on identifying the causes of momentary surges of emotion, you’re getting better at it. But everyone has some lingering baggage that can cause more problems later on if it’s not at least identified, if not dealt with. You’ve got a huge knot of Dark emotions -- old ones -- messing up your psyche, and you don’t need me to tell you that. So. You’re going to be fucking honest with yourself, because if you don’t, you’re going to risk everything you’re working for.”

Taken aback by the fierceness in the spirit’s eyes, Obi-Wan braced himself. “Alright.”

“What happened when you were an Initiate?”

Clarity was difficult to summon; the memories were painful, often carrying some lingering humiliation even after a decade and more. “The...usual cycle of bullying. Another Initiate and his friends engaged in taunting me repeatedly.”

The spirit grumbled under his breath. “Childhood insecurities. How was this addressed by your teaching Masters?”

“I…was told each time that it was my responsibility to not let it upset me.” His cheeks burned at the memory of one particular scolding he’d received, in front of several other Initiates while Bruck had gloated silently at him.

“Typical. And they would talk to the other Initiate?”

“Yes.”

“Who would seem contrite but never change their behaviour.”

His teeth gritted. “Yes.”

Ulic’s voice snapped like a whip. “Check yourself, Kenobi.”

With a muttered curse, Obi-Wan focused, feeling Ulic’s light presence watching in the back of his mind. The hate he’d known, both at Bruck Chun and at the teaching Masters for not addressing the situation in a way that might have spared Bruck’s life later, was there; so was his outrage at the teaching Masters’ unwillingness to deal with the matter. Bruck’s death had been on Obi-Wan’s hands, but would the Initiate have fallen prey to Xanatos had the Masters helped Bruck work through his insecurities? He shoed the hate out into the Force, and after a moment's consideration sent the outrage after it. The emotions were too alike.

What was left? Residual humiliation at having been so easily riled. Except it hadn't been easy, had it?
Bruck had just pushed and pushed until he’d received a response. Obi-Wan had tried speaking to the teaching Masters, the crèche master, anyone who had been in a position of authority, and been told not to let it bother him.

As an adult, he understood that a person so determined to think poorly of another would never be convinced otherwise. At twelve years old, that lesson hadn’t yet sunk in; his world had been smaller, and the mocking of a few voices had seemed that much louder.

The shame still lingered, though, and now that he’d focused on it, it threatened to swamp his mind. Bruck had been right, after all: so many years later, Obi-Wan had been judged a failure and ejected from the Order. He had somehow cheated fate when he’d convinced Qui-Gon to take him on; his braid had still scattered on the floor of the Council Chamber seven years later.

*Easy, kid. Back up. There’s no such thing as fate, only possibly. What are you ashamed of?*

Obi-Wan struggled back to the earlier memories. *Letting them upset me. Losing my calm. Not being able to uphold the Jedi Code even in training.*

*Hmph. ‘There is no emotion; there is peace.’ The other kid broke it first. Did you never think that the Order’s expectations there were unreasonable?*

*Sometimes. But how was a twelve year old Initiate to change that?*

Ulic’s presence rippled with something Obi-Wan hadn’t expected: sympathy. *The Jedi Code is an ideal, not a law. It’s a good place to start, but not if you’re taking it literally.*

*Even for a Sith?*

There was a soft laugh that warmed him. *The Jedi Code and Sith Code can coexist without destroying each other. Let's look at this from a different angle. You're experiencing residual shame. What kind of humour is shame?*

It took him a moment, visualising the charts from Cheyne’s book. *Subjective and inward-directed.*

*Shame is a direct kin to self-loathing.*

That explained a lot. *Just because it's not directed outward doesn't mean it's not still hate.*

*Good. You know what to do with that.*

Releasing the emotion into the Force was more difficult than usual; it clung to Obi-Wan’s psyche with numerous barbed tendrils, and he felt the frustration begin to build.

*Easy. Self-directed humours are nasty and can't be dealt with in one go. Burn that branch off and leave the rest for now.*

It was much easier to separate the tendril of shame associated solely with his memories of Bruck. After a moment's consideration, Obi-Wan applied the rage he felt at how inadequately the Order had dealt with Bruck’s needs, driving the other Initiate eventually into Xanatos’ machinations; the tendril crisped and turned brittle, crumbling into dust. Obi-Wan shook himself out of his trance, feeling drained.

Ulic was smiling proudly. “You got there eventually! We can deal with the rest of that mess some other time, but now you know what to watch out for.”
Obi-Wan heaved a sigh and ruffled a hand through his hair. “I’d rather not face that again without supervision. It’s too easy to let that overwhelm you.”

“And now you’ve seen the heart of what could become a severe case of depression, given enough chemical imbalance.” The spirit’s expression was grave. “I’ve been there; those vines will choke out everything if you lack the ability to deal with them. There’s a reason Mind Healers are so vital.”

“I see that, now.” Obi-Wan shuddered and picked up a memory that had raised questions. “You said the Sith Code and the Jedi Code don’t cancel each other out. How do you reconcile the two?”

Ulic shrugged and took a seat on the end of the armour display case. “Creeds are open to interpretation. A lot of people treat them as absolutes, but there’s no chance for improvement if you do that. Sith don’t deal in absolutes. Not unless their name is Bane, anyway. It’s an actual part of the Sith Code, itself.”

A grin tweaked the corner of Obi-Wan’s mouth mischievously. “Sith don’t deal in absolutes?”

The spirit laughed. “Yeah, runs counter to everything you’ve learned, right? But you have only Bane to use as an example, he did a great job of obscuring a lot of the past in favour of his particular philosophy. The Sith Code was written by an ancient Jedi heretic who witnessed the lives of the original Sith race.” He grinned, lopsided and wry. “The Sith Code can be viewed as an expression for the natural state of sentient existence, while the Jedi Code is an aspiration to something higher. To merely exist is to live in permanent conflict; with yourself, with your environment, with other sentients. Conflict isn’t an inherently terrible thing, it’s a natural constant. A living being requires sustenance and an environment that allows it to stay alive; if you’re deprived of food or oxygen, you’re not going to just say, ‘Guess I have no choice but to die,’ are you?”

“When you put it like that, no.”

“No, you’re going to try to acquire food; you’re going to struggle to get air. That’s what can be interpreted from the line, ‘Peace is a lie; there is only passion.’ Passion: struggle, conflict. A state of actual, true universal peace -- while something to aspire to -- isn’t realistically viable. There will always be a conflict somewhere. Look at how the Republic works. Maybe individual planets aren’t fighting each other, but there’s still crime and sentient rights abuses happening every day.”


“There are only two ways to totally eradicate it: force everyone to comply with specific rules, or get rid of everyone. The solutions are Darker than the existing problem. Is it better to allow a little Darkness to exist than to enact a greater Darkness? One is low-level but persistent; the other will stain the universe permanently. The rest of the Code follows the same vein. Through passion, I gain strength. Yeah, you don’t get better if you don’t have the drive to improve yourself. Through strength, I gain power. In order to meet your primary goals -- even if that goal is merely survival -- you need to gain power over that which you’re in conflict with. Through power, I gain victory. The conflict is resolved by your ability to overcome adversity.” Ulic laughed. “In theory, at least. Some conflicts are perpetual. Through victory, my chains are broken. Being locked into conflict is a sort of prison, when you think of it. You can’t improve yourself beyond that point while the struggle exists. The Force shall free me.” He opened his clasped hands and held them out, palms up. “What is the ultimate freedom?”

The answer came readily: the Jedi concerned about following the Force’s will, the Sith striving to forge their own paths. “To determine your own destiny.”
“There's no such thing as fate, only possibility.” The spirit echoed his earlier words with a fierce grin. “Prophecies exist, sure, but an individual can choose not to fulfill one.”

“Prophecies are absolutes, but there's room for free will?” That was an interesting skew from the debate about the imperative of prophecy within Unified Force circles.

“There always is; the choice just falls to the next poor sod whose existence meets the criteria. At any given time where a prophecy’s preexisting stipulations have been met -- and that might happen a thousand times throughout the ages before it's fulfilled -- there are several sentient who could fulfill the rest if they had the opportunity and the inclination.” Ulic laughed at Obi-Wan’s perplexed expression. “Yeah, let's save that for another time.

“Look. The Jedi Code is not one of universality but of personal aspiration, and again, it’s wide open to interpretation. I’m afraid the current Jedi Order has taken it a bit into orthodoxy.” The spirit’s face twisted apologetically. “One cannot act with the best interests of those they serve at heart if they are emotionally involved in a given situation; hence the line, ‘There is no emotion; there is peace.’ It’s a temporary peace, intended to provide perspective, distancing the Jedi from the conflict. Sentient brains have emotions wired in by evolution as failsafe measures. It’s not an instruction to become a soulless husk, merely a reminder of how Jedi best serve others. Same with ‘There is no passion; there is serenity.’ The Force is a power not everyone has access to. A Force wielder, trained or not, can exact a terrifying amount of destruction in the heat of the moment, even when it’s done for the good of others. Being able to maintain a cool head is essential for both Jedi and Sith, if we want to get anything done. I don’t even need to explain the rest; Odan-Urr tried to keep it as simple as possible. And still the context got lost.” He snorted. “Well. They tried, right?”

“It sounds like Bane used the Sith Code the way we use the Jedi Code.”

“That’s exactly what he did. The Sith Code has remained unchanged -- its history can be traced clearly -- but the Jedi Code has undergone at least half a dozen reinterpretations since the early days of the Jedi Order. As words to live by, they’re pretty aspirational, but it’s unreasonable to hold anyone to that standard unrelentingly.”

As much as Obi-Wan enjoyed Ulic’s input and suggestions, the vault wasn't a comfortable place for book work. There had been a sly, mischievous look on the spirit’s face when he’d pointed out this particular volume, and Obi-Wan was now hunched over it at the worktable in the other room. The purpose behind the Sith Lord's amusement had rapidly become apparent: the book’s contents focused primarily on concealment, enabling a Force user to move unseen in broad daylight as well as undetected by other Force users and even mechanical optics.

It was also brimming with text-based ensnarements. Obi-Wan was getting more practice identifying and subverting Sith spells than he’d ever imagined.

“You're an arse, Ulic,” he grumbled to the spirit, who was lingering at the threshold of the open vault door, the furthest he could move whilst his crystal remained behind the shields.

“Heard that before.”

“Not nearly often enough.”

The only warning he had was Ulic’s hiss of displeasure; when Obi-Wan glanced up, there was an
ancient Twi’lek woman sitting across the table from him, eyeing him measuringly. The deep violet and grey scarves that draped her head and shoulders fluttered into smoky wisps at the ends, as if she were caught in a light breeze. She smiled, baring sharp teeth.

“Hello, young one.” She spoke the common Sith tongue with an accent that lilted gently despite the hoarse nature of her voice. Extreme old age was not common for Sith, and the Twi’lek spirit wore hers with pride.

Obi-Wan nodded politely. “Hello. Do you prefer to be called ‘Lord’ or ‘Lady’?”

The woman clapped her hands in delight. “Manners! Ulic, you didn't tell me he was charming.”

Ulic growled. “Fuck off, Victis! My student, not yours.”

Victis gave a long-suffering sigh, rolling her eyes. “Dear, just because you're stuck here, it doesn't mean you own the place.” Her fingers flicked and the door closed in Ulic’s face. She met Obi-Wan’s eyes with droll humour. “Rude.”

It was difficult to keep himself from laughing. “Am I to assume you wrote this?” he asked, gesturing to the book in front of him.

“I did. And since you asked so nicely, I am Lord Victis. Too many assume the title ‘Lady’ to be of lesser status,” she sniffed. “But what can you expect from people who take any given opportunity to claim power?”

Obi-Wan grinned. “You're not selling the Sith very well. Why would I want to be part of a culture like that?”

“Ha! Why, indeed?” She bared her teeth again. “We’ve noticed that, while Ulic has been teaching you -- happily, I might add; having a student is good for him -- you haven't officially accepted our bargain.”

“To disrupt Sidious’s plans?”

Victis pulled an expression of distaste. “Bane’s plans, Sidious’s actions. It's far too dangerous at this time to confront Sidious directly: he has regrettably good prescience and the power to act on it. You could do with honing your abilities in that direction, you know.”

Straightening on his perch, Obi-Wan set the book aside. “I assumed such visions simply came when the Force had something to show.”

“Hardly. One does need some natural affinity for it -- which I regrettably lack,” Victis huffed. “But you can spend time learning to pick up subtler cues and clarifying what you already see. My brother Pyyra could help you with that, if he wanted. He hasn't yet decided if this is a good idea.”

“To be honest, Lord Victis, neither have I.”

“I know, young one. That's why I’ve chosen to grace you with my presence.” Victis looked distinctly unhappy. “Ulic has talked with you about how the Sith Code is more generalized than your Jedi Code, but he hasn't explained why that distinction is so important. In your Jedi lineages, you have some freedom to act against the wishes of your Masters. The Sith have no such freedom: being chosen for a Master’s lineage locks one into the course that Master has set. One can only change that fate if they are released by their Master. It's similar to a training bond, but far more permanent.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes widened at the implication. “Bane’s locked his descendants into his path by
"Not so much worried as enraged. It's a perversion of our way," she spat, her delicate features contorted in disgust. "In victory, our chains are broken, but Bane's philosophy has chained generations. Our wish is to see Bane's line end, Kenobi. What happens after that is of no concern. The balance will be kept, the Sith will always exist in some way to counter the Jedi. The universe maintains its own equilibrium independent of sentient actions."

They sat in silence, studying one another. At last, Obi-Wan ventured, "And that's why Ulic hasn't asked to claim me as his apprentice."

"Smart boy. Only a free agent can do what needs to be done. A free agent who can walk in the Light yet fear no Shadow. A Bendu, if you will." She chuckled. "The old ways of the Je’daii are so apt. But do you now understand? What we ask of you will be no easy task, but we have no wish to chain you."

Obi-Wan sighed thoughtfully. "I wonder if any of the old Jedi would agree with you."

Lord Victis cracked a laugh like shattering glass. "They would undoubtedly tell you not to trust us old Sith to have your best interests at heart. But if we did not, would we bother warning you of the danger?"

"Perhaps. If it was known that the best way to get me to do something is to challenge me."

"And is it?"

'Well..." He smiled and Lord Victis chuckled. "I have to admit, talking civilly with Sith Lords is not how I expected this visit to go."

"You thought you'd learn from the Count whilst evading the responsibility you have toward your lover?" Victis pinned him with a pointed and unforgiving look.

Obi-Wan winced. He'd sent Satine a message toward the end of the second week letting her know he'd be staying longer. That had been over three weeks ago. "I...could say I wouldn't put it quite that way, but then it would be a lie, wouldn't it."

"The kind of lie you shouldn't tell yourself." Her golden eyes narrowed. "I'm not going to tell you how to handle that responsibility. But you need to address it, child, and sooner rather than later. Consider it a lesson in not leaving important things hanging."

The trouble with the Houses of Serenno was that every one of them claimed some level of seniority over the others. Rather than seeking equitable solutions, they would fall to squabbling over the rights of the eldest -- and none could agree which that was, either. House Dooku maintained the Chair position it had earned twenty generations previous, but all that meant was that he received half a dozen missives every day which were obsequious and threatening by turns. Yan Dooku was grateful for the Jedi techniques to relieve headaches he had learned, else he would already be struggling with a painkiller addiction.
Houses Malvern and Tynglas were squabbling again on a matter which had literally been on the table for over a century. Dooku let them argue until one of the other Lords signaled her impatience and another seconded, giving him leave to call a recess until the next day.

The holograms projected into the seats in the conference chamber flickered out one after another as the Lords disconnected in various states of pique. Dooku waited to deactivate his own connection until the rest had gone, then took a private moment to sag in his chair, arching his spine against the tension that had built up over the past three hours.

Sathtan was awaiting him outside the conference chamber, bearing a datapad of notes she had taken whilst watching the proceedings from her office. “House Tynglas is likely to send an envoy to beg your favour in the morning.”

“Predictable, as always. Intimidation tactics may have worked with my sister, but not with me. What's the true argument, or has it been forgotten?”

His aide kept pace with him as he headed for the ‘lift down. “Initially, it was an interfamily matter. Lesser heirs rebelled and eloped, but neither of the sitting Lords at the time could disown their heir without losing claim to their allotments, and both Houses wished to claim the allotment of the other House’s heir.”

Dooku resisted the urge to curse. “Why Serenno persists with that ancient tradition, I will never understand. There are so many heirs, the allotments’ scales are now paltry. Is there an easy way to resolve this? Are those heirs even still alive?”

Her mild expression still conveyed sympathy and exasperation. “No, my Lord, both have since passed and granted their allotments to their children, to be divided equally. Fortunately, they had an even number,” she added with an amused smile.

“And to which House do they claim allegiance?”

“That is where the standing dispute arises. The heirs have stated plainly that they don't care, and so the Lords argue.”

They emerged from the lift into the residential levels and Dooku paused. “Ridiculous. Please locate the most recent property maps of the allotments in question and those of the Houses in dispute, the contact information for the heirs, and the recorded Wills of the parents. I will review the matter after dinner and hopefully find a solution to that farce.”

“Yes, my Lord.” Sathtan bowed politely, the train of her robes whispering over the carpet, and departed for the library.

There was too much irritated energy jangling through him, still. The Count made his way down to the ballroom he had repurposed into a training salle. Perhaps young Kenobi would be amenable to a light spar. Not wishing to disrupt Obi-Wan in the middle of a set, the Count entered via the mezzanine gallery.

He froze in his tracks, dark eyes flying wide as his breath caught. The shields he had just passed through were astounding, not least because he hadn't even noticed them before crossing the threshold. They enclosed the entire salle from floor to ceiling, and included a gentle deterrent designed to urge outsiders not to interrupt.

The reason for the shielding was evident: Darkness flooded the room, savage but tightly controlled. The hair at the back of his neck prickled at the sensation, a thrill of genuine fear running through
him. If this was what Kenobi had learned in the short time he had spent on Serenno…. Cautiously, keeping to the shadows, the Count moved toward the edge to look down at the main floor.

Obi-Wan was running through an active kata, his lightsaber a blur of blue as it deflected shots from a half dozen remotes that orbited the young man. His features were locked in an expression of serene concentration, but his eye practically glowed a warm amber as he channeled pure Dark energy into his movements. There was a ferocity Dooku had never witnessed before in their light sparring sessions; it changed the boy's posture from mere grace to the liquid menace of a predator.

It was a meditation, Dooku realised, if a violent one. The Jedi Council had always been so concerned regarding the boy’s more fiery nature. Oh, if only they knew how much he had been holding back! That Kenobi had concealed this in Dooku's presence for the last two weeks was incredible; the Count was torn between rage at Kenobi’s revealed mistrust in him, and elation at what the young man had accomplished.

He took a breath and released the outrage with it. Obi-Wan was wise not to trust: if any of Sidious’ spies had carried this knowledge to their master, the young man’s safety would be forfeit. Given Sidious’ existent interest in the boy, Dooku was running out of excuses to protect him.

This was both more than the Count would have dared to hope for, and his greatest nightmare. Troubled, Dooku slipped out the way he had come.

When the kid entered the vault, Ulic knew immediately that he’d made a decision; Obi-Wan worried at his lower lip, frowning as he fussed with his datapad between his hands.

“What's up, kid?”

“I….” He took a breath and leaned against the workstool without really sitting on it. “I had to give some thought to how I could challenge Sidious. He’s clearly someone of means and power, in more than just the Force, or the Trade Federation would never have dealt with him. Possibly even political. But… I think I’ve figured it out.”

The Sith Lord settled himself crosslegged on the waist-high data repository nearby. “Don’t keep me in suspense, kid. I'm too old for that nonsense.”

“Means is the key. He has access to funding in some capacity.” He fiddled with the datapad some more and then held it up, displaying a list of financial transactions overlaid with…piracy incidents? Raiding reports? There were correlations in the dates of various events highlighted in similar colours. “Between myself and a couple others, we’ve been investigating the Trade Federation’s rise to prominence, alongside that of the Commerce Guild, the IBC, the Techno Union, and a couple lesser guilds that have ties with them. We think the incident at Naboo last year was merely the most high-profile in a long string of coups and takeovers; Yinchorr seems to have been another, but more subtly.” His laugh was dry. “As if anything about that was subtle. Sidious was clearly involved in the Naboo crisis, so he may very well have had a hand in earlier incidents as well.”

It made sense. Ulic nodded. “You think you can find him among the numbers.”

“No. I think he’s too sharp to get caught that easily. Successful con men are not foolish con men,” Obi-Wan said with a pointed look. “Just because he’s an opportunist, it doesn't make him weak.”
“Alright, I get it. No underestimating the frackhead.” He shoved down a swell of annoyance, both at Obi-Wan and at Sidious; it rankled to admit Sidious might not be an unworthy adversary, but the kid had a point. “So what’s your plan, then?”

Obi-Wan grinned, a feral expression that lit his eyes with playful malice. “To shake his power structure. If enough damage can be done to his support partners to make them back out of further bids, it could decrease Sidious’ control of things.”

“Mess with their operations enough to make them regret the investment.”

“How do you hurt someone who uses money as power? Hit them in the wallet.” Obi-Wan closed the datapad with a snap and looked Ulic squarely in the eye. “I accept your deal. This way, I can do some good for the people who truly need it.”

Ulic arched an eyebrow. This again? “Not just because you want it?”

The kid shook his head. “What I want doesn't matter, if I have the opportunity to help others. I don't have to be a Jedi to do the right thing.”

Ulic pinched his brow between his thumb and forefinger; headaches hadn't been an issue in thousands of years, but Obi-Wan was challenging his existence. “Self-sacrifice isn't the best trait to cultivate, especially when the stakes are this high. It'll wear you out and foster resentment if you feel you have to give up on your own needs. You need to learn to live, Obi-Wan, and in order to do that, you need to want things for yourself.”

A quizzical frown punched the young man’s face. “But I am living.”

“No. You’re alive, sure, I’m not disputing that. But you’re not really living. Just going from place to place waiting for someone else to give you a purpose. Our deal isn’t a purpose, just a side goal. It’s okay to be a little selfish sometimes.”

Obi-Wan was quiet for a while, processing that. Ulic could see the shifts in his student’s thoughts, eddies running through the young man’s Force presence. An uncomfortable question was forming, and the spirit braced himself.

“Why did you admit to being lonely?”

Could have been worse; it was still personal enough to make him want to squirm. The smile on his face felt awkward and false. “Because while Sith might exploit the hells out of each other’s weaknesses, a weakness only has power if you don’t acknowledge it. If you own your weaknesses, nobody can use them against you. I’ve been alone, more or less, for four thousand years. The occasional passing Sith spirit poking their nose in to see who I am doesn’t really count as company.”

“Why do Sith exploit each other’s weaknesses?”

Ulic shrugged. “Power. Bane wasn’t the first to decide that mastery should be held by the strong, and a lot of Sith accept the concept of passion and conflict as a literal truth. That’s not to say we’re always at each other’s throats; alliances happen all the time when necessary.”

Obi-Wan tilted his head. “Such as right now.”

“Well, not above allying with Jedi, either. The trick,” Ulic said, aiming an emphatic finger at his student, “is convincing the Jedi not to kill us, and that we’re sincere. There’s nothing in the Sith Code that says we have to fight the Jedi, just as there’s nothing in the Jedi Code saying they have to fight the Sith. For a while, we were part of the same group; just a bunch of Force users, Je’daii, on
the run, building a better life after generations spent enslaved. The arguments over whether Darkness was a bad thing to study came later. I wish I could say the Bogan started that fight--"

"Victis mentioned the Je’daii. What were the Bogan?” He had the kid’s interest now; Obi-Wan shifted to sit properly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Ulic grinned; history had become one of his favourite topics.

“Early Force users who studied the Dark, named for one of the moons of Tython. Those who practised Light skills were called Ashla, after the other moon. The Bogan just wanted to study. Some Ashla decided this wasn’t tolerable, that the Dark was too dangerous to focus on alone. The groups split -- violently -- and the conflict between what became the Jedi and the Sith has never ended.” Ulic shook his head, frowning, and folded his arms. “It doesn’t have to be like that.”

Obi-Wan was watching him carefully, his expression guarded. “You really believe that?”

“You mentioned your former Master said there were distinct differences between being Fallen, being Darkened, and being evil. You don’t even have to be Fallen or Darkened to be Sith. It’s just a philosophy.”

From the look on Obi-Wan’s face, that was a groundshaking revelation. Ulic could sympathise; it had taken him a long time to come to that realization, and it hadn’t been comfortable. Not for the first time he wished he was solid enough to pat the kid on the shoulder.

“How do you know all this? This must be... ancient history.”

“It predates the Republic by at least ten thousand years. And I know it because I’m dead.” He grinned with morbid humour. “You didn’t think I just sat around moping for four thousand years, did you? There are old, old spirits who are happy to share their experiences and knowledge with anyone who can listen. Kinda stuck in the past though, they’re a little dull and uninterested in recent events.”

Obi-Wan’s mind was off and running again; Ulic could practically taste the thoughts as they flashed past.

“The Sith -- as I was taught -- express their philosophy through conquest; the Jedi stand against that. Has that always been the case?”

“Nah. Those are just the ones who make enough noise to land in the history books. Usually as lessons in how not to do things,” Ulic said, wrinkling his nose. “Really, my example is a terrible one to follow. For every Sith despot, there are dozens of scholars; for every Sith army, there are hundreds of communities who simply want to live and practise their arts quietly. The last thing we need right now is one Sith overlord wannabe fighting another.”

Watching the realization grow in Obi-Wan’s eyes was like watching the sun rise. “You want a Sith who doesn’t desire power.”

“And most of those are residing peacefully with little interest in the rest of the universe.” Ulic caught and held the young man’s gaze. “What do you want, Obi-Wan?”

“I…” The kid gave it some real thought. “It’s probably cliché, but...I want to be happy.”

It was cliché, but also a good start. “What makes you happy?”

Obi-Wan’s eye closed; the artificial one didn't give an indication of a lens cover, but there was likely a shutter inside. “Traveling, seeing new places, meeting people.” He hesitated, then with a wry smile added, “Helping people. Shut up, Ulic.”
He always took a moment to prepare himself before entering the vault. Prior to his departure from the Order, Dooku had maintained his collection in a private storage facility on Coruscant, behind several layers of security, but it had only been once he’d re-settled in his ancestral home that the collection had seemed...hostile.

Yan Dooku was not oblivious; he knew a number of his acquisitions over the years had served as some sort of focus objects for the Sith who had owned or created them, and that several had some sort of presence lingering. If he was not mistaken, young Kenobi had spent a significant time in their company, either immune to the dark promises whispered in his ears, or absorbing them so readily he had become deceptively proficient. There had been a notable difference in the young man between the day the Count had departed for Kamino and the day he had returned -- a reticence to speak regarding certain subjects, and a reduction in requests for teaching and guidance.

And then there was the performance he had witnessed the week before in the salle, peace and passion in equal measures. No, Obi-Wan had in less than a month learned more than Dooku had from the same sources in two decades.

The Count had never deigned to acknowledge the voices he often heard, the lingering attention he often felt, when in the vault. Perhaps that had been a failing, a lasting wariness of Dark things left over from his Jedi training. He should have pushed those lessons aside years ago.

He opened the door and passed through; the oppressive atmosphere closed in around him immediately. Dooku almost felt unwelcome, an intruder in his own domain, and he scowled darkly.

“I know you're here.” He might have felt foolish addressing a room populated solely by books and relics, but for the sudden shift in the still air. He had gained something’s attention. Good. “I am aware that you have been guiding young Kenobi in his studies; there is no other plausible explanation. You're a capable instructor, far better than I might have been, and for that I am both galled...and grateful.

“I have a request to make of you: tell Kenobi he must leave Serenno.” A sensation of an electric jolt ran through the room; his request had not been anticipated. “My master grows impatient, but I will not allow Kenobi to fall into his hands. He must leave, soon, and I must not know when, or why, or where he goes. It is imperative that he not linger here. I regret that I cannot pass this message personally, but my Lord is somehow able to spy on my household.”

He turned to leave but halted mid-step as a faint but clear voice whispered, “Do you want him to know this request came from you?”

After a moment's consideration, Dooku nodded sharply. “Yes, although he should not mention this
fact to anyone.” He waited to see if there might be any further response, but the vault remained silent.

Two days later, Sathtan interrupted his breakfast with the news that Obi-Wan was nowhere to be found, and his ship was gone from the residential hangar bay. Nothing had alerted the guards overnight, nor had any of the alarms been triggered -- and more than one should have been, when Kenobi's Mandalorian shuttle left the hangar. His Grand-Padawan had, indeed, learned more than he'd displayed.

Five books and a datacube were missing from the vault; upon noting the titles of the stolen items, the Count found he could hardly begrudge the boy some easily replaced philosophical materials.

Dooku never noticed that the collection of ancient Sith lightsaber crystals had been reduced by one.
Trajectory

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Starting fresh is like a card game: 60% chance, 30% luck, 10% knowing when to call.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 977.01.30
The Veeka

My darling Satine,

I'm so sorry I can't come back to tell you this personally, but for your safety and mine, I cannot return to Mandalore. Not now, not openly. I've learned that the Sith lord we've been seeking knew of my presence on Serenno and is apparently very intent on capturing me. To what end, I'm not sure, but it can't be good. I've located a number of tracking devices onboard my ship, and I will deal with them when I stop for fuel and to send this, but I fear a return to Mandalore at this time will be noted -- the blasted media will see to that. It may be best that I disappear for a while.

Truly, this is not how I wanted this to go. Do not trust Count Dooku, my dear. I'm not sure how deep he's gone, but I fear his integrity has been compromised. I wish I could tell you more, but I fear making you a target.

I dearly hope that this is all just paranoia, and _

"If you stare at that screen any longer, it'll catch fire."

Obi-Wan rested his elbows on his knees, cupped his chin in his hand, and sighed. The glowing words on the screen felt pathetic and damning by turns, and although he'd fussed over the message since entering hyperspace, it still managed to scald his heart. Satine was likely furious at him for making her worry, and telling her in this manner that he wouldn't be returning felt cowardly.

Some trained diplomat, you can't face your girlfriend properly to say goodbye. He didn't trust his own resolve; if Satine begged him to return anyway, he wasn't certain he'd be able to refuse.

"Am I doing the right thing, Ulic?"
The spirit studied him with the faintest frown. He was doing a credible job of appearing to sit in the copilot’s seat, although he tended to drift. “That's a tough question to answer. The ‘right thing’ is heavily subjective. If you go back, you're doing the right thing by your lady; but it might put you and possibly her in danger. If you leave, it's the right thing to do to ensure her safety and hopefully yours. But if I’m being honest, not at least calling her and ending it properly is utterly craven. Regardless of anything else, she deserves better than that.”

Obi-Wan winced, pulling a sharp breath through his teeth. “I had come to that conclusion, thank you.”

Ulic gave a soft little laugh. “It's so much easier to advise others on their problems because those problems aren't yours. Personal involvement makes a mess of everything.”

“I wonder if the advisement against attachments is because too many bad breakups were disrupting the Temple.”

The spirit found that inordinately funny. “Okay, look,” he said once he’d sobered. “Speaking as someone who has been married. I’m hearing you making excuses for not comming the lady directly. That's just evading responsibility. Wait until you know she's free, meditate your nerves into the Force, and be a gentleman. In the meantime, deal with the trackers.”

“Hmm.” He scowled at nothing in particular. “Yeah, you're right.” Obi-Wan gave Ulic a sideways glance and changed the subject. “Speaking of being a gentleman, I can't believe you encouraged me to steal from Count Dooku. You're a terrible influence, Ulic.”

The spirit laughed. “If it makes you feel better, the stuff I recommended was all things Dooku decided weren't worth his time, and there's more than a few copies around. He can get them replaced. But if he's looking at the books, he won't notice a missing relic.”

Obi-Wan leaned back in the pilot's chair, staring out into the cloudy tunnel of hyperspace. “He'll notice it eventually. What exactly did you have me take?” He'd been too tense, maintaining his silence and invisibility swaddled in the comforting depths of the Force, to pay much attention when Ulic had started pointing out books.

“Stuff you'll find enlightening. Most were written by former Jedi who thought long and hard about what they were doing. Also, none of them have any unpleasant surprises attached.”

“Hmm.” Obi-Wan reached into the pack on the floor at his feet and tugged one of the volumes out. The title was in Basic, but an older form of Aurebesh. “Bowden Antherre,” he read. “That’s not a Sith name at all.”

“Not all Sith take scary, intimidating names. Hells, I didn't even claim the title of Darth. It wasn't in vogue in my time.” Ulic leaned over, his elbow passing through the chair’s armrest, and added, “Antherre, however, was all Jedi. They made a good study of the Sith, even managed to find acceptance with a few of them.”

“That will be interesting, yes.” The hyperspace alarms pinged and Obi-Wan leaned forward to the controls, dropping the shuttle back into realspace.

“So where are we going?”

“Initially?” Obi-Wan brought the ship about and kicked the sublights in. “This is Junction. There's a waystation here where we can refuel and pick up supplies.”

“And afterwards?”
“There's a few options I’ve considered.”

The station granted him a hangar without asking questions; once the ship was down and the atmospheric barriers secure, Obi-Wan took a moment to check in the narrow mirror in his cabin’s closet door to make sure his lightsaber was properly hidden. His hair was reaching the point where he’d need to choose to trim it or not; for the time being he pulled the part that hung around his face back with a simple clip.

The armour from Concord Dawn had been folded away, but the helmet wouldn't fit in any of the drawers and took up space on a shelf, an adjustable strap preventing it from rolling around. He really should consider investing in a trunk to keep such things secure. But while he was thinking of it….

An investigation of the helmet proved that the electronic components could be disconnected and removed easily for repairs and modifications; even the HUD panel was separate from the inverted-triangle of the visor.

“Whatcha thinking, kid?”

He hadn't known Ulic was there, but after the past few weeks of experience being haunted, Obi-Wan barely twitched. “That this helmet is far too distinctive. The body armour could be from any number of sources -- you’d have to know what you’re looking for to spot the beskar weave. But this mask--” he tapped the faceplate-- “is instantly recognisable. I should be able to find a different style which will fit it all.”

The spirit smirked. “You don't want people to think you're a former Protector?”

Obi-Wan snorted. “I wouldn't fool anyone. It's not battered enough, and I’ve no desire to be caught faking an accent.”

He pulled the one part that would require a fitted mount -- the HUD plate -- wrapped it carefully in a scrap of vizzy-cloth and tucked it into the pocket inside the breast of his jacket. The tracking beacons he’d pried from behind bulkhead panels went into the thigh pockets on his trousers.

“What are you going to do with those?”

Obi-Wan considered the last of the palm-sized devices before putting it away. “I could incinerate them or toss them out the airlock. But there's an opportunity to have a little fun.”

Ulic’s sallow features lit up at that. “Mind if I tag along?”

“Sure, you can shout, ‘boo!’ if anyone spots me.” While Ulic chortled, Obi-Wan centered his presence within the Force and then tugged it on like a second layer of armour, a thin barrier bending light without so much as a ripple. It was the first time he’d done so in front of a mirror, and the effect was striking: he was perfectly visible to himself, but the mirror showed an empty room without even a shadow under his feet.

The docking ring circled the waystation at its equator; Obi-Wan took a walk, Ulic’s invisible presence like a prickle of static nearby. They selected ships at random and planted the trackers in decently concealed spots. Obi-Wan only came close to being noticed once, when a Wookiee on guard picked up on his scent. That would be something to work on -- he could conceal himself from sight, sound, and the Force, but biospoor was another matter.

Satisfied the spread of the beacons would throw off anyone attempting to trace him -- he wasn't even certain it was Dooku, given what Ulic had said about the Count’s request for Obi-Wan to leave -- he picked an unmonitored corner, dropped concealment, and went into the station proper.
It was fairly basic as far as stations went, an older structure which was probably top of the line in its day but now looking a bit run-down and shabby at the edges. Only the consistent attentions of cleaning droids prevented the metallic trim from losing its shine. The impression of age was reinforced by the presence of a commcafé two levels down, a quaint trend from well before Obi-Wan had been born; despite being obviously refurbished with fresh paint and tech, it wore its age with pride in vivid secondary colours and unfashionably geometric furnishings.

Obi-Wan purchased an access code and sat down at one of the booths to make the most difficult comm call he’d ever made.

_Breathe. Let it out, release the tension._

The privacy field activated as soon as he woke the terminal from sleep mode to enter Satine’s code. As usual, one of her aides answered first.

“_Jedi Kenobi!_” Shar Kasedi’s professional façade cracked immediately with a relieved smile.

Obi-Wan smiled back but it felt tight. “Good evening, Kasedi. Is Satine available?”

“_Of course. It’ll be a minute._”

“It’s no rush. How are things?”

Kasedi signaled to someone out of range of the camera. “_I’m sure you don’t need me to fill you in on the wild speculations._”

“I’ve been blissfully media-free on Serenno.”

She gave him an envious look accompanied by a sigh that fuzzed the audio for a moment. “_They can’t decide if you’ve defected to Death Watch, run off with a Twi’lek dancing girl, or destroyed Satine’s heart by returning to the Order._”

He grimaced. “Ugh. Oh dear. The official story?”

“_Honesty, of course: you’ve gone to assist a fellow Jedi. Why, what’s happened?_” She gave him a suspicious squint. He sighed.

“Something Satine needs to hear first, unfortunately.”

She nodded, still looking sceptical. “_Well, I hope it’s not too severe._” She looked out of view, glanced back to give Obi-Wan a nod, and let Satine take her place.

“_Obi! What’s going on, where are you? The comm information says you’re not on Serenno anymore._” She didn’t _seem_ upset; concerned, yes. Maybe he’d been nervous for no reason.

He nodded. “I’m at a station right now. Sati…I’m not sure what’s safe to tell you.”

She bit her lip and then the steel of a political leader settled in. “_Can you tell me why?_”

What would draw attention to her? What wouldn’t? “The…person. That we’ve been looking for. Knows that I was on Serenno, and from what I was told was deeply interested in me.”

Satine’s crystalline eyes narrowed, her aquiline features thinning. “_Who told you this? The Count?_”

He shook his head. “I’d rather not say. Just the fact that I know about this, that I’m telling you-- this isn’t a secure terminal. I suspect they know where I’ve gone by now, but I’m not staying here.”
She may have been exhausted from a day passing judgments and handling policy, but Satine was still alert enough to pick up what he wasn’t saying: by not trying to secure his call, he was letting anyone snooping on Satine’s communications know that he had told her nothing. Her expression turned sad and Obi-Wan’s heart clenched. “I understand, darling.” She blew out a disappointed sigh that stirred a loose flaxen curl hanging over her forehead. “It really is not fair of you to do this,” she gritted.

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s been eating at me for weeks, but…you just know someone would pull the incoming ship logs, and then it would be a mess.”

Satine rolled her eyes with a harsh scoff. “Of course they would. I believe the press have the right to say what they think, but sometimes they really do test my resolve.”

Obi-Wan leaned closer to the pickup. ‘I’m so sorry, Satine. I just...if Dooku comes to you, for any reason...I don’t know how trustworthy he is, anymore. Please be careful.”

Her expression showed more steel and a grim humour. “I’ve been doing this for years, Obi. I trust you to do what’s best for you.”

He bit the inside of his lip and nodded, conceding the point. “I have to go, love. Take care of yourself.”

Satine summoned a smile with visible difficulty. “Do try to stay out of trouble, Obi-Wan Kenobi. No one will be there to bail you out.” She disconnected before he could say anything more.

Obi-Wan dropped his head onto his folded arms in front of the terminal with a sigh. That had gone better than he’d expected.

Ulic’s voice was barely a whisper in his ear. “She’s furious, you know.”

“Oh, I know,” he replied, his voice muffled against his sleeve. “I can take a few well-earned jabs. It’s all the rest that hurts.”

The session timer clicked over and Obi-Wan left in search of one of the exchange shops that were ubiquitous on waystations. Spacers frequently needed to repair or replace damaged clothes and armour; the exchanges operated as a combination tailor and reseller of refurbished goods.

He spotted what he was looking for almost immediately. “That helmet, there. How easy is it to install a preexisting system?”

The droid operating the counter pipped softly to itself. “Fairly easy, the original mounting brackets are still in place.” It brought the mask down from the shelf. “The recycler filter has been replaced, seals as well.”

It was a somewhat intimidating-looking affair, close-fitting to the shape of a basic humanoid skull, the original paint job scoured off and reprimed in flat black. The faceplate popped open on unpowered pneumatic hinges and sealed under his jaw, so close as to be almost claustrophobic; the inside still smelled faintly of the antimicrobial treatments used to remove sweat and body odour. It would take more time to acclimate to, but was certainly not as recognizable as the Protectors’ buy’ce. There was a brief, disappointing moment when he tested the old HUD panel for scale and found the mounting brackets set too far apart, but the proprietor droid noticed and tossed a set of differently-sized brackets onto the counter.

“Common issue, sir. We’re prepared for anything.”
They haggled over the price, even though Obi-Wan found it fair -- it was just how business was done out here. It wasn't until he was at the central supply depot, browsing the list of available goods, that the irony of the situation struck him. Obi-Wan covered a surprised chuckle with a cough. It was just like some of the more tense missions he and Qui-Gon had shared: hiding, learning how to find and dispose of tracking tags, concealing their status as Jedi until the proper time. Qui-Gon had once mused how his former Master would have deplored the secrecy -- Dooku always did prefer to walk in with his shoulders back and expect to be given the answers, rather than seeking them for himself -- and Obi-Wan had asked if Qui-Gon wasn't making up for missed experiences.

“Will that be all for ya?”

He signed off on the tablet and handed his payment over to the older Togrutan woman behind the counter, the indigo stripes on her lekku paling with age. “Yes, thank you.”

She eyed the list. “Planning a long run, are you, Bastra?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Haven’t decided yet.”

Steel-grey eyes studied him critically. “If you got cargo space, I’ll pay you to make a delivery for me on your way.”

That was…. Obi-Wan tapped a finger on the counter, considering. “Do you usually ask people passing through to do work for you?”

The woman snorted. “Only when I don’t want it being questioned by planetary Customs agents. You got a Core accent, they’ll give you some leeway. Five thousand dataries to take on a couple extra crates to go to a friend of mine without asking questions.”

His eyebrows wanted to arch in astonishment at the offer; he squinted instead. The Force wasn’t offering any warnings, at least. “Well. Alright. Where am I taking them?”

Anakin never seemed to tire of watching the cityscape of Coruscant; he leaned as close as he could to the transparisteel window of the public airbus as buildings flashed past. Qui-Gon smiled indulgently, enjoying his Padawan’s continuing delight.

“I hope I never get tired of looking at this.”

Qui-Gon examined the current view: an endless stretch of identical towers, their flat roofs forming a pattern like cracked mud. “Many would say it’s a grey and dreary sight.”

The boy aimed a narrow-eyed glare up at him. “You don’t think that, really, do you?”

The Jedi Master patted his shoulder with a gentle laugh. “No. In the Force, it glows in an array of colours we don’t even have names for. It’s quite beautiful. But many people view living so closely with other sentients to be an unpleasant necessity. It makes them feel like they have no privacy.”

The airbus began its descent and Anakin turned his eyes back out the window to the platform below them, shaking his head. “I knew lotsa people on Tatooin who literally didn’t have any privacy, everyone sharing rooms and beds, and that was the thing they liked most. Just knowing that their family and friends were that close. What’s the bag for?”
The sudden change of topic made Qui-Gon blink, and he adjusted the strap of the satchel over his shoulder. “Just some things I thought might be necessary.”

They disembarked and crossed the duracrete to the oblong building. Didi Oddo had finally succumbed to the allure of retirement and his house in the Manarai Mountains region, and had sold the diner to the first bidder who was able to demonstrate that the food quality wouldn’t drop.

The fact that the buyer happened to be Dex, the Besalisk Qui-Gon had encountered briefly on Outland Transit Station shortly before its destruction, was a special level of irony.

“Jinn!” Dex’s welcoming bellow overpowered the jaunty music and comfortable hum of conversation as they entered. The Besalisk leaned through the window from the kitchen and aimed a finger down toward the last booth. “Good to see you, friend! Got space for you back there, be right with ya.”

Anakin’s pace slowed as they neared the end of the aisle; there was someone already seated in the final booth. “Qui-Gon?”

He was having trouble hiding a smile now. “It’s alright, Ani.”

The man in the booth glanced over his shoulder with a grin, and Anakin’s gasp could easily have stolen the air from the room. He ran the last few steps and threw himself into the seat beside Obi-Wan, wrapping his arms around the young man. Obi-Wan returned the hug tightly, smiling over the top of Anakin’s head at Qui-Gon as his former Master slid into the other side of the booth.

Qui-Gon was pleased that Anakin had instantly picked up on the need for privacy; even a few months ago his Padawan might have shouted Obi-Wan’s name for the room to hear; now he clung to Obi-Wan’s arm and hissed demanding questions regarding what the young man had been up to since the last time they’d talked.

A droid parked itself at the end of the table and waited until they had ordered. Obi-Wan wrapped a protective arm around Anakin’s shoulders and pulled the boy against his side; the increased level of demonstrative contact from his former Padawan surprised Qui-Gon, but Anakin leaned into it, happily chattering about his friends among the other Padawans.

The Jedi Master studied his former student critically. Obi-Wan’s Force presence was muted somehow; if he hadn’t been utterly assured of the man’s identity, Qui-Gon could have mistaken him for any average, non-sensitive human.

He was certain it had everything to do with Dex’s earlier, deeply suspicious comm.

“Sorry I didn’t call ahead.” Obi-Wan’s grin was shy and lopsided. “You remember what you wrote to me when I left?”

That got Qui-Gon’s attention; maintaining his smile claimed more effort. “Is it worse?”

His former Padawan opened his mouth, then closed it quickly as Dex trundled over with their drinks. The former weapons dealer leaned forward over the table to hit the dampener field and aimed a beady-eyed glare at Obi-Wan before turning to Qui-Gon. “So imagine my surprise when I get a shipment in and the pilot here--” he chuckled a thumb in Obi-Wan’s direction--“asks specifically if I can comm you for him.”

“He’s entirely on the level, as you can see,” Qui-Gon reassured him. “Dex, this is my former student, Obi-Wan.”
“Oh, yeah?” Dex shook Obi-Wan’s offered hand, still looking sceptical. “That’s not the name you gave me earlier.”

“No, but you know well that everyone has their reasons for that.” A glint of mischievous humour lurked in Obi-Wan’s eye. Dex heaved a laugh and budged in beside Qui-Gon.

“Sharp kid. What’s going on?”

At Obi-Wan’s questioning glance, Qui-Gon nodded. Dex knew secrets and when to keep them. The younger man’s jaw tightened and he released a sigh.

“I know the Sith Master’s name.” Into their stunned silence, he continued, “It’s Sidious. And I think he’s here, on Coruscant.”

Qui-Gon was the first to speak. “How did you learn this?”

The answer was going to be uncomfortable to hear, to judge from Obi-Wan’s hesitation, but it struck Qui-Gon with a suddenness that tore his breath away. “Dooku told you about him?”

“No, the Count seemed as mystified by all this as anyone else. And yet….” Obi-Wan bit his lip and glanced down at Anakin, who had gone wide-eyed and pale. “A few days ago, he advised me to leave. By an indirect manner, which makes me suspect he thinks he’s being watched. I am concerned for him, Qui-Gon. You should talk to him.”

The droid arrived with their order and Dex stole a piece of fried tuber from Qui-Gon’s plate. “This is your old teacher, Jinn?”

“Count Dooku of Serenno, yes.”

The Besalisk grumbled to himself as Anakin spoke up. “You think the Sith is here?”

Obi-Wan explained what he’d learned about Bane’s particular Sith lineage while they ate. Qui-Gon found that his appetite had disappeared, and half the contents of his plate were swiped by Dex.

“You can feel what I’m doing to hide in the Force, Qui-Gon. This man could literally be anywhere or anyone, he could stand in the heart of the Temple and you’d never notice the Shadow. Bane’s legacy doesn’t support disappearing into a cave somewhere. Sidious has wealth and power, and….” He frowned and squeezed Anakin’s shoulder. “I worry that he might come after you if your investigations are noticed.”

“You want me to stop helping you with the research.” Qui-Gon shook his head at Dex’s curious glance, feeling disgruntled. The research had been engaging, if frustrating much of the time.

Obi-Wan gave him a sympathetic look. “I know, you like helping—”

“It’s not that.” He glowered at the end of his fork. “Mace has been leaning on me to drop it. I’m loathe to give that man the satisfaction.”

His former Padawan’s mouth twitched a moment before he snorted a laugh. The tension snapped and the four of them collapsed in snickers. Dex slapped Qui-Gon’s back cheerfully.

Eventually Obi-Wan sighed, but he was smiling again. “I think we should leave further investigations up to our curious assistant on Naboo. They’ll raise a lot fewer eyebrows than a Jedi Master would. It does steer you dreadfully close to Senate members’ interests, after all.”
“They what?” Anakin was suddenly paying sharp attention again.

“Many Senators are not just politicians but business-folk. They have independent wealth and corporate involvement,” Qui-Gon explained.

His Padawan’s face pinched in a scowl. “That’s not right. It means they’re more likely to support stuff that helps their companies.”

A simplistic way to view it, but not incorrect. Anakin’s sense of right and wrong got prickly when roused. “A great many have severe conflicts of interest, yes. Some more than others, but it is not the Senate’s place nor the Jedi’s to cast suspicion upon the validity of someone’s political appointments.”

“Why not? If their planets can’t make their elections fair, someone should fix it!” Anakin’s chin had gained that indignant forward jut the teaching masters had quickly learned to fear.

Qui-Gon sighed, smiling. He had once been that innocent. “I wish it were so simple. The rights of the individual worlds to self-determine according to their cultural structures must be respected. And we do still enforce certain regulations upon them in exchange for membership.” He exchanged a glance with Obi-Wan, who seemed torn between amusement and chagrin. Not all of their missions together had been successful.

Before Anakin could start another argument, Qui-Gon asked softly, “How did you learn the Sith Master’s name, Obi-Wan?”

His former Padawan’s face tightened but he didn’t drop eye contact. “The Force...has shown me many things recently. I’m not certain what to make of it all, just yet. But...I know what I need to do.”

“That would be why you asked me to bring copies of my latest research.” Qui-Gon handed over the satchel he’d brought with them.

Obi-Wan nodded and accepted it; his eyebrows raising as he noted the weight. “I’m going to cause a bit of havoc among the Sith’s supporters.” He peered curiously into the satchel; his head snapped up to stare at Qui-Gon. “What in blazes--?”

“I have little use for them. Where you’re going...they might make a difference.”

“I’m afraid to ask where you got them!” Obi-Wan briefly drew out one of the stylized heavy blasters, secured in its leather holster, to satisfy Dex and Anakin’s curiosity before putting it away and tucking the bag against the wall beside him.

Anakin’s eyes got huge and he whispered, “Wizard!”

Dex whistled low. “That’s quite a piece. Mandalorian?” Qui-Gon nodded. The Besalisk squinted first at him, then at Obi-Wan. “You’re going to need to start somewhere. That little shuttle of yours might be good for now, but it lacks pretty much everything to really make a dent in things.” When Obi-Wan looked like he was about to refuse anything Dex might offer, the other man bared his sharp teeth in a grin. “Nah, I don’t have anything better to give you. I run a diner these days. But I know a place you can go to find some light work and build a reputation, save up enough to get something better and hire a crew. Little hidey-hole in the middle of nowhere called Takodana.”
“I’ve never seen a place so alive before.” The sheer volume of Takodana’s lush forests lit the Force with a warmth that was noticeable from the edge of the system. Tectonic disturbances aeons past had rippled the planet’s surface like sand dunes; the valleys had captured the rain that fell as the surface cooled and become a temperate rainforest of interlinked lakes and rivers between rolling green hills. It was easily one of the loveliest planets Obi-Wan had seen in his twenty-one years.

The coordinates Dex had given him took them to the southern hemisphere and what appeared to be a temple on the edge of a lake; a number of landed ships from shuttle size to light freighters occupied open spaces on the sandy soil between the tree line and the water. Ulic hovered at his elbow, staring out at the misty rain pattering through the trees as Obi-Wan found a cleared spot to set down.

“Are you sure about this, kid?”

Obi-Wan glanced over at the spirit, then took a harder look. “Are you nervous?”

“Something about this place…. It wasn’t always so peaceful. Can’t you feel it?” Ulic's mouth tightened into an unhappy line. “If you don't mind, I'll just stay here.”

There was nothing in the Force to make Obi-Wan wary; if anything, a whisper of welcome beckoned from the temple. It felt like a tree, ancient and powerful, spreading a great canopy to provide shelter. “Suit yourself.”

It had been a long and rather boring three-day run on the well-policed Corellian Trade Spine, giving Obi-Wan plenty of time to install the electronics in his new helmet and calibrate it with the Protector armour. He’d donned the armour after setting the final course adjustment that morning; now Obi-Wan tossed his jacket on over it, leaving the reconditioned helmet and gauntlets behind. The twinned modified blasters Qui-Gon had given him now sat heavily at his hips, set for same-side draw.

He fidgeted in front of the mirror until Ulic appeared nearby with a full-body eyeroll. “You look fine.”

“There's looking ‘fine,’ and there's looking like you're trying too hard. The latter will earn you a mugging.”

The Sith Lord snorted. “Be what you want to seem.”

Scogar Bastra would certainly wear both weapons and armour. He also wouldn't be an insufferable Huttling about it. Obi-Wan felt his posture shift into something less Jedi and more spacer, accustomed to the uneven pull of artificial gravity and external inertia. “Right. I’ll be back tonight.”

“I’m not coming after you if something happens. Something here doesn't like me.”

Pushing the cryptic comment from his mind, Obi-Wan set out for the footpath around the edge of the lake.

Upon closer inspection, the temple was more of a castle, built in an ancient and alien style that stretched three towers into the sky. Strings of colourful pennants fluttered from the upper levels, and the courtyard framing a statue on a tall column was lined with banners from dozens of cultures. It was a busy place: he could feel hundreds of sentients inside, and passed several more on their way in or out. None gave him more than a cursory glance, and he returned the favour.

Someone blocked his path as he reached the door, a short, russet-skinned alien with an oversized head whose face was creased with the fine lines of advanced age. They peered up at him through goggles that enlarged their eyes almost comically, skinny arms folded across their chest. Caught by surprise, the first thing Obi-Wan could think of was to bow politely, Dex’s advice running through
his head.

“Greetings. You must be Maz Kanata.”

The tiny woman’s thin mouth pinched with impatience, and she leaned leftwards to look behind him. “Your friend didn't want to join you?”

Obi-Wan realised with a jolt that the sensation of an ancient guardian tree came not from the land or castle but from the alien herself; she was deeply Force-attuned. The only reason he hadn't noticed her presence before was that the woman's essence so imbued the castle and area around it that she blended in. It was all he could do to keep his voice even. “He’s...wary.”

“Hmph. Your friend is a coward and will abandon you when you need him most.”

Another patron brushed past on their way out, nodding politely to Kanata. Obi-Wan stepped to the side and out of the way. “Not if I find what he needs first.”

They regarded one another for a moment longer before the woman’s face creased in a grin. “There's hope for you, yet. Come, follow me. I am Maz Kanata; this is my home.” A delicate hand jangling with rings and bracelets beckoned Obi-Wan to follow as she disappeared into the shadows; after a moment’s hesitation he accepted the offer.

The air inside was redolent with the scent of cooked food, incense, and light narcotics. Obi-Wan’s cybernetic eye adjusted more quickly to the dimness, allowing him to keep pace with his host through the crowd. She led him to a large table at the back of the room past the bar, unoccupied and clearly intended for Kanata’s use alone.

Kanata slid into a chair designed to accommodate her stature. “Sit, sit. So what brings a Jedi here?”

Obi-Wan hesitated. Dex had warned him to be honest, and he was beginning to understand why. “I’m not really a Jedi, ma’am--”

Her face puckered sourly. “Hmmh. But trained as one. Should have been knighted long ago. Wonder why they held you back? But that's neither here nor there. And call me Maz, young man.”

“You can call me Bastra. A mutual acquaintance sent me here; he said it's a good place to get a start.”

A serving droid appeared at his elbow, depositing a tray loaded with drinks and some sort of appetizer between them. Maz shuffled the various dishes onto the table and set about serving them both. “It is a good place for that. Work can be found anywhere, though. There must be something you need.”

The drink was warmed to steaming, fruity with an underlying bite that indicated a mild alcohol level; the food was small, two-bite pieces of fruit or vegetable wrapped in pastry. Obi-Wan accepted the invitation to eat as he considered the question carefully; Maz exuded a level of patience which let him take the time he needed. She was right: contract work could be found through the HoloNet, local jobs could be picked up from message boards or talking to the right people. What he really needed, though, was someone to help him operate. “My ship’s small, but I’ll be painfully inefficient working on my own. I could do with a co-pilot, or even an astromech, but I can't afford it right now.”

“I can help put you in touch with people who need simple things hauled. As to what you require…. There's a table over there playing sabacc.” She tilted her head toward the back corner. “You should consider joining them.”
“Sabacc?” It was a quieter but more relaxed game than he was accustomed to seeing; rather than piles of credits or representative chips, the center of the table hosted two piles of flimsi cards.

"You'll find what you need there, young man. And tell your friend he's safe here, hmm?"

Obi-Wan stifled a laugh, imagining Ulic's reaction. "I can't promise he'll accept, but I'll tell him."

Maz gave him an amused grin. "Who is he, anyway?"

He hesitated. Honesty was one matter; if Maz had felt Obi-Wan keenly enough to intercept him at the door, even through his shielding, she had to know what Ulic was. “He's my mentor."

She hummed thoughtfully. “I'm curious as to where one finds a mentor such as that. He has reason to be uncomfortable; there was a battle here once, long ago. The effects still linger, and possibly a few spirits. They won't trouble him.”

It was almost more difficult than carrying a conversation with Master Yoda, speaking with someone who seemed to know everything about him. It discouraged asking questions about Maz in exchange, the normal order of offering information disrupted. It was clever, and meant that anyone speaking to her felt the need to reveal more of themself. Maz didn't use the Force in the way a Jedi did, but she was keenly attuned and used it to her advantage. She even noticed when he realized this and gave him a nod of acknowledgement.

“There's more than one way to exist within the Force, young man. Mind tricks infringe on the will of others; better to dance around the edge and affect only yourself, hmm?” She gave him a chiding look as he flushed. “I've been around a long time, Bastra. Long enough to find my own way. Mind how your actions affect others, even the little actions. Especially the little actions. They mean more in the grand scheme.”

Her bracelets jingled as she patted his hand. “Live your life, young man, but remember the lives of others. Now go introduce yourself over there.” She flicked her hand in the direction of the sabacc game.

Obi-Wan took the remainder of his drink and wove through the crowd to the rear corner. The honour system must have been strict -- likely no one wanted to test Maz's tolerance -- as there was a neatly stacked array of crates against the walls in the corner. Now that he was closer, it was apparent the slips of flimsi in the hand and sabacc pots bore lot numbers corresponding with labels on the crates.

One of the players, a rail-thin Weequay man who couldn't have been much older than Obi-Wan, waved him over. “My friend! Are you interested in joining us?” He gestured to the empty seats at the table with a broad grin. “There's always room for more people to be defeated by Hondo Ohnaka!”

“Shut up and kriffing deal already, Ohnaka,” a tiny, whipcord-muscled Falleen woman grumbled.

The third player, a heavily-swathed and masked Ubese, croaked,"Put your cards where your mouth is, for once. I want to see you actually win."

"Well, if our new friend here would join, I could get started!” His dark features, deeply creased like the heart of a chula nut, took on a sly cast. “Or perhaps he's seeking something else?”

“That depends.” Obi-Wan nodded to the piles of flimsi. “What's the ante?”

The Falleen woman shrugged. “Something you have but don't want. Sshafauf here dropped a bunch of spare parts, I put in a few weapons left over from a job. Ohnaka seems to have staked his ego.” The Weequay clutched at his chest, playing up the drama.
“Oh! Xeiv, you wound me!”

Obi-Wan felt a grin spread across his face and drained off his glass. “I’ll sit out this round, but I have just the thing back at my ship.”

Ulic was edgy when he returned to the Veeka. “That was fast. Was it a bust?”

“No, but I may be about to make some friends.” The cargo he’d smuggled -- smuggled, he’d run contraband and he still had difficulty believing it -- for the Togrutan shopkeeper to Dex had turned out to be four crates full of a restricted-import liqueur from Toprawa. Dex had insisted on giving Obi-Wan a few six-count cases, against his objections, and Obi-Wan was beginning to suspect this was what Dex had had in mind. He pulled one of the cases from under the cargo netting and inspected the contents to make sure nothing had broken. “By the way, you’re invited to come back with me. The, ah, proprietor assures me you won’t have trouble.”

“See, that worries me more: that they know about me.”

“You can sense her, can’t you?”

“A total null could sense her, kid.”

Obi-Wan shrugged and hefted the case onto his hip, using just the lightest touch of the Force to stabilize it. “Suit yourself, then.”

The ramp hadn’t even fully closed before he sensed Ulic’s prickly presence at his shoulder. Try not to be too smug about this.

“I would never.”

An hour later, Ulic was giggling silently at Ohnaka’s intensive flirting with everything and everyone -- particularly Obi-Wan, since he was already two rounds up on the Weequay mercenary’s total.

“My dear Bastra, you must tell me your secret!” Hondo leaned toward him in a too-blatant move to get a peek at his cards. It was a misdirection covering his other hand swapping a card in his hand for one up his sleeve, and only the shifting currents of the Force indicated such; Ohnaka was ruthlessly sharp but concealed it well under bluster and dramatics.

If that was how he wanted to play it…. Obi-Wan leaned back in his chair with a sly grin and very deliberately propped his feet in the other mercenary’s lap, directly on top of the card he’d dropped from his hand. “Oh, Hondo, I never reveal everything on the first date.”

Ohnaka froze, his eyes going wide. Xeiv cackled; Sshafaud had an air of mild disgust.

<<You’re going to let a human get in your space like that?>>

The Weequay recovered quickly; his grin returned, wider than ever. “Some humans have more than one use.” The Ubese bounty hunter somehow gave the impression of rolling his eyes through his all-encompassing mask before dealing the next round.

It was late when Obi-Wan called his limit. Sshafaud had left a few hours earlier with his winnings and his seat had been claimed immediately by a Wookiee who hadn’t offered her name but put down a crate of salvage that still carried the vague, fruity-methylic whiff of space. The remaining chairs had been filled by a human couple, and Xeiv showed no signs of tiring, but Ohnaka folded in a moment after Obi-Wan. Together they took the flimsi cards bearing the lot numbers they’d won and went to collect them.
Hondo had laid claim to the case of Toprawa spirits as soon as he could; he tsked with dismay over Obi-Wan’s choice of random salvage. “Whatever do you want that junk for, my dear Bastra?”

“Oh, I can refurbish a lot of this.” He hadn’t been mistaken: a full Trade Federation B1 battle droid lay in pieces among the other odds and ends. It wasn’t an astromech, but with a little tweaking it could fill the role. Obi-Wan took his cards over to one of Maz’s droids sitting on a hoversled and requested both crates be taken to his ship.

A wiry arm slung over his shoulders and Hondo’s voice purred against his ear. “Surely you’re not leaving yet?”

Ulic’s amusement drifted through Obi-Wan’s mind, already distant. And that’s my cue to go back to the ship. See you in the morning, kid!

"Your own mother sold you into slavery?!

Hondo didn’t seem to think anything of it, waving his glass carelessly. "It was to settle a debt. No harm done, the man who bought me was the sort to treat his property kindly. And he taught me a great deal. Why, when I returned home, Mama Ohnaka learned it from me!" He cackled. "You must be from a very nice place, Bastra, if something like that upsets you. Which begs the question why you are out here all alone?"

Obi-Wan shrugged and leaned back in his chair. Contrary to Ulic's assumption, Hondo had wanted to talk business and crack open one of the bottles of Toprawan liqueur. The conversation had sideslipped into revealing personal history -- a vital gesture of trust, if Hondo was serious about them working together. "It's a long story. The short version is that I fucked up and got exiled."

"Exile!" Hondo got a crafty look on his face. "That lovely Mandalorian ship is yours, yes? But you don't have the right accent. And your name is Corellian, is it not?"

"Humans don't change our names every time we move to a new planet, you know."

"No, but you are a puzzle, my friend." The other man noticed that Obi-Wan's glass was now empty; without asking, he filled it from the bottle he'd opened. "You seem a man who’s more…perceptive than most, yes?"

Obi-Wan accepted the glass back and took a cautious sniff. The Toprawan drink was restricted primarily because the flowers it was made from were known to have hallucinatory properties when burned and inhaled. Whether the same property lingered through the fermenting process remained to be seen. “I don’t think the others noticed, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I noticed.”

The Weequay flinched and twisted in his seat to bestow a rather frantic grin on Maz Kanata, who stood with her arms folded, looking unimpressed. “Maz! My dear--”

“If Bastra hadn’t caught you at it, I would have. That particular game exists because even scoundrels have some honour. Cheat in any other game you like, Ohnaka, but not that one.” The tiny woman grinned viciously. “I’m on good terms with Mama, after all.”
Hondo spluttered and Obi-Wan covered a laugh with his drink. Maz leaned further into the other mercenary’s space and said, “And don’t go dragging Bastra into any of your schemes if you’re intending to leave him holding the bomb. I like him.”

Recovering, Hondo gestured expansively, looking wounded. “I cannot believe you would think that of me! I would never do that! ...To a friend!” His chair wobbled on its rear legs as he tipped it back, nearly spilling the mercenary to the floor.

“Mmhmm.” Maz squinted at Hondo a moment longer before turning her gaze on Obi-Wan. “Do mind yourself around this one, young man.”

He nodded politely. “Maz.”

They watched her go; when Hondo turned back to Obi-Wan, his grin was back. “Well! You seem to be well-connected, indeed! So! You are looking for work, yes?”

Obi-Wan studied him a moment before nodding. “My ship isn't that large, but it can handle smaller cargo.”

“Excellent! I have a plan. Very, shall we say, long-term, but! With the right people it can be done!” Hondo was a single operator himself, but preferred smuggling to more physical activities like security; he had a few leads out looking for not just better ships, but more of them. “If you're going to make an impression, having a small fleet helps, right?” He nudged Obi-Wan with his elbow, cackling.

“If you think I’ll be satisfied merely playing escort for you--”

“No! No, no, no, well, yes, on occasion, perhaps. But two small ships can carry more than one, and can defend each other, yes? The trade lanes are getting risky these days--”

Grinning, Obi-Wan leaned close. “What if I told you I’m a good enough navigator to avoid the main routes?”

Ohnaka’s face lit up like a Revelry Day pinwheel. “I knew I had a good feeling about you!”

Spread across the floor of the shuttle’s second cabin, the droid looked somehow more pathetic than it had in the crate. Carbon-scoring from blaster fire blackened the chassis in several places, most notably the torso. When he finally got it clean, it was obvious the droid’s power core and primary motivator were toast, and its alternator and backup core would need to be replaced along with them.

In between hauling runs both on his own and with Hondo, Obi-Wan took to scouring scrapyards and scavengers' listings on the HoloNet; the Naboo had paid salvagers to remove the detritus from their planet's orbit, and a wide variety of Trade Federation wreckage was still available nearly a year later. He managed to acquire not only a new power core and motivator series but a number of undamaged spare parts he happily hoarded; it never hurt to have a backup supply.

It felt like a violation of rights despite the subject being a droid, but Obi-Wan popped its control systems open before installing the new power core. There was no telling how recently the droid had been shot out of commission, and the last thing he needed was for a post-Naboo model to wake up and try to continue following its last set of orders. The control chip was easy to spot, connected as it
was to the droid’s internal subspace antenna; Obi-Wan de-soldered and pulled the chip carefully, and after a moment's consideration decoupled the leads from the antenna to the rest of the control systems.

It took three weeks before he was ready for a trial run. Power core only; there was no point hooking in the motivator til the droid had restored limbs reattached, and it would just be a waste of power.

“You sure about this, kid?” Ulic had been more sceptical than even Hondo about the droid’s usefulness. He floated lotus-style just above the cabin’s bare mattress in the bunk niche, the top of his head ghosting through the underside of the upper cabinet.

Obi-Wan sighed. “Worst case scenario, it tries to headbutt my kneecaps and I have it stripped for spare parts. All I’ve really lost is a little time.” Holding his breath, he hit the activation switch on the back of the droid’s head.

A blast of binary gibberish erupted from the droid's vox modulator; the component must have been damaged, because there was a harsh, scratchy tone that didn’t sound quite right.

#Reactivation diagnostic: proceeding. Status report…# It began to run down a very long list of component damage, and Obi-Wan winced, hoping the results of his scrapyard scavenging covered everything.

#Diagnostic: complete. Processing matrix: operational. System boot: complete. Status: active.# The binary recitation switched to Basic and the droid let out an ear-piercing shriek. Obi-Wan flinched and clapped his hands to the sides of his head.

“Fall back! They have reinforce-- what? Hey! Where am I? Who are you?” it demanded.

Obi-Wan grimaced. “Yell some more, I can still hear on one side.”

“Oh, very funny. Ha ha.” The droid's head twitched and regarded its disassembled chassis with an attitude of dismay. “Did you do this, human?”

“No, you were like this when I got you. Actually, you were in worse shape.”

“You didn't put me back together?” Despite the flatness of tone, there was something approaching annoyance in the way it spoke.

“I wanted to make certain you wouldn't object to me cannibalizing your fellow B1s to do so. Even your new power core is borrowed, I’m afraid.” He sat back on his heels. The array of droid parts possibly hadn't been the most encouraging sight for the B1 to activate to.

“You-- why are humans so weird? No, I don't care. And you didn't answer my questions,” it sulked.

“Well, we're on board my ship, currently on Takodana. I don't know where you were acquired originally, but I won you in a sabacc game. The sentient who collected you couldn't find a buyer, it seems.”

“Ugh. Humiliating.” The scratchy tone of its vox made it sound more sarcastic than B1s usually did.

“I rather agree, but here we are. You can call me Bastra.”

“That's not your real name.”

Ulic snickered and Obi-Wan shrugged. “‘Real’ is subjective. It's a name I use and it's the only one
several people know me by. Is that less real than the name I went by for most of my life?"

"Your philosophies make no sense."

He laughed. "Sorry. Do you have a name?"

"My designation is M62-D6," the droid muttered. "You can call me Deesix, if you must."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Deesix. I'll get on with reassembling you, if you don't mind?"

"Wait. You disabled my antenna?"

"And removed your control chip. It's only temporary. I don't know how long before or after Naboo you were on the field--"

"I was on Naboo."

"Ah, well that explains that." Wonderful, as if he needed another complication. "I didn't want to run the risk of you killing me before I had a chance to explain myself. If you want to go back when I'm done, I can reinstall the chip and drop you off someplace for the Trade Federation to collect you."

Deesix was silent for a time, watching him as he set about preparing to attach the droid's left arm.

"What do you know about Naboo?"

Obi-Wan spared a glance over the magnification lenses of his microtronics goggles. "I was there."

"Fighting us."

"Would I have been there in any other capacity?"

"You're not as funny as you think you are. If you were fighting us, why bother trying to put me back together?"

"Well." He straightened and pushed the goggles up onto his forehead. "I couldn't think of anything else to do with you."

"There's something you want me to do for you." The droid sounded resigned as it rolled its head away, and Obi-Wan wondered what kind of experiences the Trade Federation droids had to make Deesix so jaded.

"Only if you want to do it. I won't force you. But I could use a co-pilot, and occasional backup on the ground." He mostly managed to hide a smile as the droid's head jerked around to stare at him. "It's just me here, you see, and I could use some help."

"You're alone? Humans are never alone."

"Sometimes we are." He pulled the goggles back down and returned to setting the droid's shoulder; it was a tricky, multidirectional assemblage of interlocking disc joins. "I do have a friend here, but he isn't able to help me the way you could."

Ulic chuckled. "Aw. Sorry I'm useless."

"Oh, wonderful, it's sarcasm day."

The droid's head was swivelling, seeking the source of Ulic's voice. "Who else is here?!”
“Hold still, please. I told you I have a friend. I don't know if you're able to see him.”

The spirit grinned, unrepentant. “I have yet to encounter a piece of tech that can visually perceive me. Sorry, droid.”

Deesix released an electronic sigh. “Human, I have a question. Is insanity contagious?”

Chapter End Notes

Say hello to Deesix! I've been waiting for months to bring them in ^__^

Update: Here's a deleted scene that didn't fit easily into the rest of the chapter
Entrapment

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi Fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

Obi-Wan finds himself walking on the shadier side of the galaxy.

Chapter Notes

See end notes for trigger warnings.

Much thanks to norcum and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 977.05.12
Barcaria Orbital Station

“This isn't right. The contract was for eight thousand wupiupi. You've only paid me six.”

Ko-thu waved his hand dismissively. “If you look it up, it says right there six.” The human client didn’t so much as glance up from the manifest; his balding head gleamed wetly under the hangar’s chemical lamps.

Obi-Wan’s right eye narrowed and he pulled his own datapad from his pocket, making a show of checking it. “Funny, because my version of the contract -- the one I signed -- says eight. Dee!” He turned to Deesix, who was in the process of unloading the fourth and final crate. “Put it back. If they're only paying us for three, they only get three.” The droid pulled an about-face without question, marching back toward the Veeka’s boarding ramp.

“Now, Captain, really!” Ko-thu grabbed at his sleeve. “This is unprofessional of you.”

“Yes, because shorting someone who looks like an easy target because their license still smells of printer ink is so very professional.” Obi-Wan held up a flimsi printout of the original -- unaltered -- contract, a trick he’d learned from Hondo. Always make a copy in as many formats as you can. He’d even taken a holo of the information on the terminal screen. “You can pay what you owe, or I keep what you didn't pay for and file a report.”

The man’s pallid features went ashy. “Look, kid, I’m just the middleman. Six is all they gave me.”

“I'm sure. It couldn't possibly have anything to do with skimming off the fee for yourself.” The knowledge was so close to the surface of the other man’s thoughts, he may as well have painted it on his face.
Ko-thu’s fear of being outed to his boss surged to the top, and it was a simple matter for Obi-Wan to nudge that fear just a little more into outright terror. Freeing his sleeve from the man’s sweaty grip, Obi-Wan wrapped his arm around Ko-thu’s shoulders, mimicking the manner of so many politicians when they wanted to threaten someone whilst making themselves look like the only hope. He modulated his tone from harsh to smooth. “Look, I’ll make this easy for you. If you pay me in full, you get the full cargo, and I won’t report you to your boss.”

“I have your word on that, Captain?” The client latched onto the offer like a drowning man clinging to a rock.

He smiled. It took effort to not push away from the man; even his thoughts were greasy.

“Absolutely.”

“Alright, alright.” Ko-thu fumbled into his pouch and handed Obi-Wan the remaining two thousand. Obi-Wan double-checked it, then signaled for Deesix to return the final crate.

“I believe that’s us settled. But Mister Ko-thu? I’m never working with you or your employer again.”

“Fine, fine.” The other man mopped his brow and went to check the last crate, ignoring them.

Obi-Wan and Deesix finished their visual inspection of the Veeka’s hull and boarded, closing the ramp behind them. Ulic tsked at him. “That wasn’t exactly Jedi-like behaviour.” The spirit sounded amused rather than chiding, and Obi-Wan grinned back.

“Good thing I’m not exactly like a Jedi, am I? And maybe the fear will encourage him to find a different hobby. Dee, start preflight. I’ve a report to make.”

The droid’s head tilted at him curiously. “I thought you said you wouldn’t report him.” Its new vox was lower-pitched, less nasal-sounding, and modulated tone in a more human fashion, features the B1 unit had requested.

Obi-Wan laughed. “To his boss. I never said anything about the guild. If rookies are getting ripped off by this fine specimen, they need to know.”

Three months had passed quickly, a consistent string of work taking them across the quadrant and even to the odd location in the Unknown Regions -- independently run colonies and station settlers frequently needed supplies brought in from outside.

Once it had been rebuilt, Deesix had asked to see its control chip, and promptly smashed the thing between its fingers. Obi-Wan had offered to upgrade or modify the droid’s chassis or installed programming, provided he could afford or get ahold of the parts, and Deesix had presented an extensive list that started with a dark blue-and-grey paint job to match Obi-Wan’s armour, an astrogation package that required an additional memory and processing upgrade, and an improved vox emitter. The mass-produced B1 droids were too flimsy for Obi-Wan to consider taking Deesix into riskier operations, advising the droid to remain onboard the Veeka prepared to pilot at a moment’s notice, and a more protective casing had been moved to the top of Deesix’s list.

As a gesture of trust, Obi-Wan had been open about his past with Deesix. Learning precisely why he’d been on Naboo had improved the droid’s estimation of Obi-Wan’s ability to not get them killed. They’d quickly come to an operational accord -- primarily that Deesix refused to call Obi-Wan
“master”, had the right to refuse any request, and disliked being referred to in gendered terms. When questioned about the last point, the droid had declared that gendering things that lacked gender was flatly ridiculous, and Obi-Wan couldn’t argue with that.

“Hey, Dee? How do you feel about taking on a passenger?”

There was a calculated, casual note to Obi-Wan’s tone that made Ulic squint. They’d finished offloading a pallet full of new processing equipment for one of the smaller Bespin mining platforms, and the kid was perusing the small-cargo contract listings. The Sith spirit let himself manifest sitting lotus-style between the pilot and co-pilot’s seats, peering over Obi-Wan’s shoulder.

“How long?”

“Here to Ryloth; three days and a bit. Someone’s usual hauler is ‘unavailable’, probably got themself arrested. It’s both cargo and a passenger.”

Ulic scowled. “Ryloth. Kid, are you sure?”

The droid tilted its head from side to side, a gesture it had acquired from observing Ohnaka too closely. “What’s wrong with Ryloth?”

“It’s a poverty-stricken jungle rock in the middle of nowhere which primarily exports slaves and spice. Anyone you’re dealing with there is likely a criminal.” By the time Ulic had been a Jedi, the planet’s legitimate mining operations had been overrun by smugglers and cartels.

“Technically, we’re criminals now, too,” Obi-Wan pointed out mildly.

The droid pondered the matter. “Cargo and a passenger. That would be a tight fit. And Spooky here would have to figure out how to stay quiet.”

“I do know how to not scare people, you know.”

Deesix gave an electronic snort. “What’s the pay?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Twenty. Mind, part of that is fuel cost and supply compensation, we’d be left with about half that in profit.”

“Ten thousand would definitely make up for getting involved with spice dealers,” Ulic muttered.

“And here I thought Spooky couldn’t be more cynical.”

“Don’t get cocky,” Obi-Wan said with a laugh. He accepted the contract, got an immediate response, and hauled himself out of the pilot’s seat. “Take us over to Cloud City, docking platform resh-krill ninety-four. I need to go clean out the guest cabin. Put in a ten-day supply request to be delivered, the usual list.”

“What about the passenger?”

“They’re Duros, they’ll have their own supplies.”

Ulic sighed. “I hope you know what you’re doing, kid.”
Ptahmin Jukk was alarmingly short for her people, her skin tone closer to pale violet than blue, wearing a uniform jumpsuit with the patches scraped off. She met them at the platform, looking relieved, and after inspecting the Veeka’s facilities agreed it would be crowded but manageable. The erstwhile pilot had been one of their regulars, contracted long-term with Jukk’s employers, but had been caught in one of Judicial’s smuggling sting operations en route.

The three day trip kept them in the Outer Rim -- easier to navigate around the main routes since there were fewer gravitational anomalies to account for, but also riskier due to the lack of security presence. It passed in agonizing slowness: with the cargo filled with deep-frozen explosive gas, Obi-Wan didn't feel comfortable doing his usual training with drones, and using the communal area with a passenger onboard was out of the question. He spent the time tinkering with agility upgrades for Deesix’s legs, an ongoing project which the droid refused to let him install until Obi-Wan could guarantee that taking a step wouldn't bounce the droid into a bulkhead.

Syllaral was a mesa city on the edge of the equatorial jungles; to the north the greenery tapered off into scrub clinging to the rocky escarpment. Jukk leaned over the back of Obi-Wan’s seat and pointed to something that looked like clouds in the distance. “If you’re not in a hurry, the floating rock garden is worth seeing. You’re not going to find a closer town to travel from.”

“You're not going to find a closer town to travel from.”

“Floating what?” Something about the sight made him uneasy.

The Duros chuckled. “Yeah, that's what I said. They're rocks, they drift on the high winds between the mesas.”

The comm pinged to life and Obi-Wan offered her a headset. “Care to do the honours?”

“Please.”

Delivery went smoothly, and Jukk’s employer paid them an extra two thousand out of gratitude. Obi-Wan went to the spacer-frequented tapcafe while they waited for the Veeka to be refueled, seeking an exit job. He was beginning to think his wariness was mere paranoia.

Then someone eased into the seat beside him at the bar and his senses spiked, prickles running down his spine.
<<You look capable. Just off a job?>>

Despite the town being relatively well policed, Obi-Wan had gone in full armour; most of the tapcafe’s regulars were of a similar mind, and he didn't particularly stand out. Which meant he was a new face and therefore potentially ignorant. He caught the Twi’lek bartender’s glance under the cover of a sip of ale and raised an eyebrow in question. Her eyes went huge and she shook her head quickly, the tips of her lekku coiling with disgust, before finding something to do at the other end of the bar.

Obi-Wan cast a glance at his neighbor, a Twi’lek man with a sickly pallor and the flaccid skin of one who had recently lost a great deal of weight. <<As it happens, I am,>> he responded in Huttese.

The other man bared ill-kept teeth in what might have been intended as a friendly smile. <<I’m in the market for some muscle. Got a meeting, but I don't trust my business partner.>>
The Force twisted unpleasantly around the man; he was either an addict or recently recovered. His dark robes were clean, but the breath that gusted into Obi-Wan’s face spoke of liver damage. It took considerable effort not to react. <<Can I get some more details before deciding?>>

The Twi’lek picked up his glass with a hand bearing fingernails sharpened into talons. <<We have a small side operation not far from here,>> he said, his voice pitched low. <<The Council doesn’t know about it, of course. My partner is bringing their financier to do an inspection, and I need good people to keep an eye on them. Just a day’s work, thirty thousand. Half up front, of course.>>

Obi-Wan had expected a surge from the Force; he wasn’t expecting a nudge laced with green threads of urgency. <<Alright. Who do I talk to?>>

A worn flimsi card was slid toward him; on the underside was scrawled a hangar designation. <<Wait for me and the others there. It won’t be long, less than an hour, Captain…?>>

<<Bastra.>> He slipped the card into his pocket. <<Very well.>>

<<Excellent. I am Bib Fortuna. I look forward to working with you.>> The Twi’lek patted his shoulder with an oily grin and shuffled over towards a single Balosar woman with pink hair seated at a table to the back. She gave him a squint-eyed glare through the smoke of whatever narcotics stick she was imbibing.

Obi-Wan returned briefly to the Veeka to collect his helmet and fill the others in. Deesix shrugged but Ulic was immediately wary.

“Getting tangled with drug lords is a bad idea, kid. If they get you indebted, you’ll never be able to work it off.”

“Believe me, Ulic, I’m aware. I have a terrible feeling about it. But it also feels like something I need to be present for.”

“The Force telling you that, or is it just your desire to be contrary?”

Obi-Wan pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. “I know you don’t like this. I don’t particularly like it either, and the man who hired me is foul. Just trust me, okay? Deesix?”

The droid's head tilted. “I'll keep it ready to lift off whenever you need me.”

“Thanks.” Deesix presented its forearm as he passed; with a delighted grin, Obi-Wan knocked his vambrace against it. “See you soon.”

He was nearly to the meeting place when he felt the prickle of Ulic’s presence nearby. Oh, what's this, now?

*Shut up. I'm not leaving you alone with these people, kid.*

Obi-Wan was glad the helmet hid his grin.

Three people were already waiting in the open hangar around a trio of hefty cargo speeders: two humans and the Balosar woman Obi-Wan had seen earlier. The older of the humans, a pale man with greying hair and the settled build of someone well into middle age, sized Obi-Wan up from his perch on a speeder’s engine cowling. “You’d be Bastra, then?” He held his hand out for the card Fortuna had given Obi-Wan. “Name’s Teig. If you're not answering to Fortuna, you're answering to me. Done this before?”
“Once or twice.”

“Good. C’mere, let's get your comm set up.”

The other human, a skinny dark-eyed kid named Phel with warm brown skin and black hair cropped into short spikes, was possibly even younger than Obi-Wan and claimed xe’d stowed xir way across the galaxy and back. “It's the thrill of not knowing where I’ll get kicked off,” xe said with a charming, gap-toothed grin.

“Bit risky, isn't it?” the Balosar woman asked. She called herself Uedjir, though whether that was a name or occupation, she wouldn't say.

Phel shrugged narrow shoulders under a longcoat that seemed chosen more for looks than practicality. “Better’n where I was.”

Fortuna turned up shortly with a Bothan mercenary and two Kiffar women whose Force presences immediately set Obi-Wan’s teeth on edge. He took a few steps back into a watchful position. The younger of the two wore her dark hair in an elaborate braided style that wrapped around her head; the older woman was a hardened whipcord with a permanent scowl etched into her golden features, long white hair bound back in a thick tail. Both were dressed in expensive robes and regarded the waiting mercenaries with disapproving arrogance.

“These are some bad people you're mixed up with, Ulic muttered into his mind.

Really? Hadn't noticed. Mind keeping an eye out? A little extra security can't hurt.

Like you needed to ask.

Fortuna was talking a mile a minute; it sounded like nervous babble but was intended to put his business partners at ease. <<--As you can see we’re all ready to go to the site. If you’d care to take seats-- >>

The younger of the two Kiffar interrupted without apology. “How about we make sure what you're bringing is the real thing first?” She pulled a hand-sized testing device from a pouch on her belt and gestured brusquely for Teig to open the first speeder’s cargo.

“I want to see what we're dealing with, Ulic whispered; Obi-Wan felt the Sith move away.

The Twi’lek’s smile lost some of its curl and his eyes gained a dangerous glint. <<I assure you, Madam Vos, it is as pure as we could acquire. This project is too important, our backer on Coruscant is most exacting.>>

It took all of Obi-Wan’s control not to twitch at the name; Quinlan didn't speak of his family, and the reason was becoming apparent. It was almost enough to make him miss the rest of what Fortuna had said.

Ulic returned. The speeder is full of ryll, and Fortuna’s not blowing smoke about the quality.

Once the women were satisfied that the cargo met their expectations, the group split into the speeders. Obi-Wan ended up at the controls of the lead speeder whilst Fortuna sat beside him, giving directions out of the city limits and into the craggy maze of canyons, occasionally trying to make conversation with Vos. The younger Kiffar woman had claimed the rear passenger seat beside her silent Bothan bodyguard, and responded to Fortuna in terse, monosyllabic terms.

It took over an hour before Obi-Wan recognised the slowly drifting shapes of the floating rocks Jukk
had pointed out. The high-pitched, fluting whistle of a stiff breeze through narrow passes grew steadily louder, until Fortuna had to resort to using the comm units to give directions.

The floating rocks were nearly overhead when Fortuna had him turn off the well-established trail down a gully. A few trail-splits along, the Twi’lek pulled them up beside an ancient water-carved overhang that deepened into a natural cave system. The older woman eyed the darkness crossly while Fortuna had his hired hands unload plas-wrapped bales of ryll from the cargo compartment. Obi-Wan shuddered inwardly at the sheer amount of the spice he held in his hands: twenty kilos, literally a small fortune’s worth. No wonder they were being paid thirty thousand each for this job.

The Twi’lek handed around sets of night-vision goggles rather than using a torch, and Obi-Wan had a sinking feeling he knew where this trip was going. He shook his head, pointing to his mask. “Got it covered, boss.”

Fortuna grinned at him, looking bizarre and bug-eyed with the lenses strapped over his narrow face. <<I do like a mercenary who comes prepared.>> He pulled a contraption from the cargo that looked like a portable flamethrower without the pilot flame, pulled the straps over his shoulders, and hefted the nozzle. After a couple squeezes of the handle, it emitted a thick, sweet-smelling smoke. The Twi’lek led the way down the tunnel, shooting long gouts of fog in front of them; it shone a dim green in Obi-Wan’s night vision, pooling close to the ground.

Ulic clung close, practically crawling up Obi-Wan’s spine, and unusually quiet. Are you alright back there?

Nope. This is bad.

I hadn’t noticed. Something tickled the edge of his mind and Obi-Wan reached out into the Force. We’re being followed. Would you mind making sure it’s not what I desperately hope it isn’t?

I would, actually, but since I’m the indestructible one around here, I’ll check it out anyway.

The tunnel split and twisted sharply downwards; the fogger’s scent couldn’t quite mask a sharper, tingling aroma that was too familiar. Glitterstim. Obi-Wan had encountered the spice only once before whilst working with Qui-Gon, but it had left a grim impression. Somehow, Fortuna and Vos had imported energy spiders from Kessel. He wasn’t sure how the spiders survived in an environment lacking their natural prey, but he was certain the twenty kilos of ryll tucked under his arm had something to do with it.

The first signs of webs, like wispy filaments of pale light in their nightvision, cobwebbed the crevices, growing thicker as they moved forward. Whatever the smoke was, it had a soporific effect on the giant arachnids; they began to pass smaller ones hanging curled in the webbing, until Fortuna signaled a halt. A large device utterly draped in raw glitterstim sat on the floor; the Twi’lek pried open a hatch and motioned Obi-Wan forward. The bales of ryll were loaded into the hopper inside, casing and all, while the two Kiffar women ran a separator over the webs clinging to the machine, shaving crystalline splinters into an opaque case.

Obi-Wan squinted. It couldn’t just be his imagination that the webs here looked...different from the ones nearer the entrance. The colour was closer to purple than green, and shimmered on its own.

The Balosar woman’s antennapalps twitched and she glanced back up the tunnel at about the same moment Ulic’s voice reached him. You have company. Come back here but keep it quiet.

Obi-Wan signaled to Uedjir over the comms. “You hear that?”
“You must have a good scanner in there. Yeah.”

He nodded. “I’ll check it out. Come get me if you hear screaming.”

“Kriff, no, you’re on your own then.”

As soon as he was around the first curve, Obi-Wan pulled the Force around himself, vanishing from view. *What have we got? Jealous competition?*

Worse.

He felt them before he saw them, paused at the tunnel split; the two were good at tamping down the ripples they made, but Obi-Wan had had a different sort of teacher. The double-snap of his blaster in the close confines of the tunnel, after so many minutes in tense, cautious silence, was near deafening. It brought the rest of the group running, as much to get away from the spiders if they awoke as to provide backup.

Obi-Wan was making a show of checking belt pouches and stripping weapons from the unconscious figures on the ground when the others rounded the bend. He wasn’t looking, but the impression he got from Fortuna was mingled fear and delight.

<<What have we here? A pair of spies?>>

“Worse.” Obi-Wan held up a lightsaber. “Jedi.”

It wasn't the nastiest surprise Ulic had run across recently, but when the two cloaked people had twitched and glanced in his general direction, he knew they were in trouble. Well, Obi-Wan was. The young man had caught both with neat stun shots, and was now reciting a long litany of curses in his head as he did his job searching the two for weapons.

*I get being unhappy about this, but you seem a bit more than upset, kid. Talk to me. In real words, if you don't mind.*

*I just stunned a very good friend, Ulic. Worse, I can't hide them before the others get here.*

Ulic frowned; that was a strong note of panic in Obi-Wan’s mental voice. *There's more to it, isn't there?*

Obi-Wan’s response was dark and grim. *You’ll see.*

The spice-runner and his co-conspirators were gleeful, offering Obi-Wan praise for his work. Teig scowled at the unconscious Jedi as he cuffed their hands in front of them.

“This is great, but they'll be trouble once they wake up. Why didn't you just kill ‘em?”

“Three reasons.” Obi-Wan handed the lightsabers over to Fortuna; everything else the Jedi had been carrying he’d stuffed into his pockets. “Firstly, if two Jedi are found dead after being here, it’ll draw attention to this part of Ryloth you don't need. Second, stun blasts are much harder to deflect with a laser sword.”

“And the third reason?”
Ulic watched as the kid assumed an air of satisfaction despite the disgust coiling in his mind. “Jedi are fucking valuable to the right sort of buyers.”

**Damn, kid, that was cold.**

*Get me something to vomit into,* please.

The younger Kiffar woman pulled the hood back on the larger of the Jedi and hissed. “Mother, you won’t believe this. Our long-lost cousin returns.”

Well, shit. The Force had an awful sense of humour sometimes. *Obi-Wan?*

*I don't know the younger one, but that would likely make the older woman Sheyf Tinté Vos, and someone the Order went to great pains to get Quinlan, here, away from.*

If that wasn't enough to make Ulic long for the ability to really use the Force again, Fortuna's greedy hand-rubbing at the sight of the young Twi'lek Jedi was definitely giving him itchy lightning fingers.

<<This one...she is known to me.>> Fortuna turned to Obi-Wan with an ugly smile. <<You, my friend, have turned potential disaster into providence. There will be a bonus for you.>>

It was a miracle the kid didn't straight-up throttle the man with his bare hands; he shrugged instead. “It's my job.”

<<So modest. How often have you faced Jedi that you know so much?>>

Ulic winced at the deep well of pure hate Obi-Wan was releasing; it turned the Force around him the nasty crimson of old blood. “Often enough. Lost an eye to the last one.”

Fortuna looked impressed. <<I had wondered. Let me make a call.>> He pulled out a holotransmitter and took a few steps away for privacy.

*Please tell me you're recording that, Obi-Wan.*

*I'm young but not that new to this. He just named his contact here Pol Secura. That's Aayla's uncle.*

No wonder the kid was burning off hate. Ugly family business all around. *What's the plan?*

*Try to get Aayla out. Somehow. Quin's less likely to be used the way she will, and I know him well enough to track him down later.*

Fortuna closed his comm and returned, rubbing his hands again. <<I have a use for this one. Ladies Vos?>>

Tinté Vos looked grimly delighted. “Oh, I have little use for my no-good nephew now, but my daughter knows someone who does. Dose them both, the glitteryll will purge their short-term memories.”

Obi-Wan was nearly shaking with rage as he was made to support the limp Twi'lek girl while Fortuna fed her raw spice straight from the collector; if it didn't give her an overdose, Ulic would have been very surprised.

<<You and Phel, take her to my speeder and lock her in the cargo. Wait there for the rest of us.>>

Drifting behind the two, Ulic kept an eye for signs the others were following. *If you're getting her out, now's the time, kid.*
Obi-Wan had the girl draped across his shoulders in a rescue carry; the other mercenary was peppering him with excited questions about how he’d managed to sneak up on Jedi. *I could mind-trick the kid, but if they're recording it would give me away immediate-- oh. Heh, that might do. Warn me if you see the others coming.*

The pair had nearly reached the speeder when Obi-Wan stopped, swaying dramatically, and mumbled something. The other mercenary turned, raising the mask xe wore with a concerned look. “Bastra?”

Louder, Obi-Wan repeated in an odd monotone, “I will put you down gently, and knock out my friend.”

“Hey, wait-!”

A pair of darts from Obi-Wan’s right vambrace buried themselves in the thin flesh beneath Phel’s collarbone; the mercenary wavered with a curse and then collapsed. Ulic cracked up laughing.

*Shut it! You're going to make me laugh, and mind-tricked people don't laugh!* Continuing the masquerade, Obi-Wan announced his intention to put the young Jedi in the speeder and take her to a place where he could summon his ship.

*Nice.*

*We're not safe yet.* After making certain the young Jedi was secure in the rear passenger seat, Obi-Wan grabbed the controls and hit the accelerator. The speeder's engines wailed to life and they shot off down the trail.

*Sure you want to go this fast in a canyon run?* Keeping up was a simple matter when physics was no longer an issue; Ulic anchored himself in the front passenger seat through sheer willpower as the wind whipped loose sand past Obi-Wan’s head.

*If Anakin can do it at six hundred kliks, I can certainly manage at two hundred fifty.* Obi-Wan switched his comm on. “Ohh, they're unhappy. That's a lot of Huttese swearing in my ear. Dee! ...No, I’m fine, sorry to disappoint. I need you to come pick us up, fast. Remember those floating rocks? ...Yeah, follow my beacon, I’ll find a mesa or something. I don't care what you tell docking control, say it's a medical emergency. ...Because it is! ...Yeah, I wish. Five minutes? Don't hit the rocks, I have it on good authority they have religious significance. ...Because I’d rather not piss off an entire planet, thanks!”

“I bet they have a tracer on this speeder.”

“Of course they do,” Obi-Wan said. It sounded like he was gritting his teeth from the effort of trying not to run the speeder into the narrow canyon walls.

The trail finally opened out into a long valley, its bottom covered in desert scrub and lost in shadow far below. High above, held aloft on the breeze, porous volcanic boulders drifted, air running over the pockmarked surfaces emitting an eerie multi-toned whistling. The winds howled past, sending the speeder into a spin as it slipped down the canyon wall. Obi-Wan hissed a curse in a language Ulic wasn’t familiar with and gunned the throttle, using the wind direction and the Force to keep the speeder level against the stone.

“Allright, maybe not the brightest idea I’ve had!” the kid yelped.

“At least it’ll make you hard to follow. There! Crevasse on the right!” Ulic cringed in anticipation as Obi-Wan yanked hard on the controls, pulling the speeder’s nose almost vertical. The vehicle hopped
the gap and slammed, repulsors-first, into the wall, kicking up a spray of rock shards before settling to the tumbled stone that flattened the bottom of the canyon. The speeder drifted a bit, bumping gently into the opposite wall.

Ulic’s control had slipped, leaving him hanging in midair; he pulled himself back to his seat, giving Obi-Wan a mental nudge. “C’mon kid. Find a space for the droid to land.”

The kid was checking his Jedi friend; the restraints had held, and she appeared to still be out cold. “Yeah. Shit, I hope that didn’t give her a concussion.”

They found a wide enough gap in the canyon for the Veeka to set down. Deesix immediately started giving Obi-Wan a pile of shit about things even as it helped Obi-Wan move Aayla to the passenger bunk and strap her in. Obi-Wan loaded a hypo with a sedative and dosed her.

“I need you to go park the Veeka on a moon or something for a bit, Dee. It's complicated.”

Ulic frowned. “What are you planning this time?”

With some prodding, Obi-Wan got the droid to follow him off the ship. “It's the moment we make every droid’s dreams come true. I need you to stun me out, Dee.”

Sith and droid protested simultaneously. Obi-Wan held up a hand. “I have a reputation to maintain. Better to look like I’ve been abandoned than complicit.”

Ulic sighed. “Hope you know what you're doing, kid. I can't stick with you from the moon.”

“No, I need you to keep an eye on Aayla and warn Dee if she starts shaking the sedatives off.” Obi-Wan hissed a harsh breath. “I don't like this, either, but just do it.”

The blue stun blast knocked the kid back into the side of the vehicle; he slithered to the ground in a dead slump. Contemplating the unconscious human, Deesix muttered, ”That wasn't nearly as satisfying as I thought it would be. Let's go, Spooky.”

Obi-Wan awoke to a boot jabbing him sharply in the side.

<<Wake up! Useless scum, what am I paying you for?>>

He groaned and rolled over. No matter how many times he'd been stunned, he always woke up with a splitting headache and a nasty tingling in his extremities from nerve stimulus. “Ffffffuck.”

<<She shouldn't have woken up from that so soon,>> Fortuna snarled. <<What did you do?>>

Obi-Wan pulled on the Force, colouring his words with as much truth as he could muster through a sickening migraine. “Nothing, dammit! I was carrying the girl out, now you're kicking me.” Having never been on the receiving end of a mind trick, Obi-Wan didn't actually know what it would be like. Feigning memory loss was the best he could come up with.

He pulled his helmet off in case the nausea got the better of him and looked around, hoping his baffled expression was convincing. The group had managed to track him down but it had taken a while; from the colour of the sky, he’d been out for an hour. Phel was sitting in one of the speeders, looking annoyed and groggy from the tranq shot; everyone else was standing around glaring at Obi-

the gap and slammed, repulsors-first, into the wall, kicking up a spray of rock shards before settling to the tumbled stone that flattened the bottom of the canyon. The speeder drifted a bit, bumping gently into the opposite wall.

Ulic’s control had slipped, leaving him hanging in midair; he pulled himself back to his seat, giving Obi-Wan a mental nudge. “C’mon kid. Find a space for the droid to land.”

The kid was checking his Jedi friend; the restraints had held, and she appeared to still be out cold. “Yeah. Shit, I hope that didn’t give her a concussion.”

They found a wide enough gap in the canyon for the Veeka to set down. Deesix immediately started giving Obi-Wan a pile of shit about things even as it helped Obi-Wan move Aayla to the passenger bunk and strap her in. Obi-Wan loaded a hypo with a sedative and dosed her.

“I need you to go park the Veeka on a moon or something for a bit, Dee. It's complicated.”

Ulic frowned. “What are you planning this time?”

With some prodding, Obi-Wan got the droid to follow him off the ship. “It's the moment we make every droid’s dreams come true. I need you to stun me out, Dee.”

Sith and droid protested simultaneously. Obi-Wan held up a hand. “I have a reputation to maintain. Better to look like I’ve been abandoned than complicit.”

Ulic sighed. “Hope you know what you're doing, kid. I can't stick with you from the moon.”

“No, I need you to keep an eye on Aayla and warn Dee if she starts shaking the sedatives off.” Obi-Wan hissed a harsh breath. “I don't like this, either, but just do it.”

The blue stun blast knocked the kid back into the side of the vehicle; he slithered to the ground in a dead slump. Contemplating the unconscious human, Deesix muttered, ”That wasn't nearly as satisfying as I thought it would be. Let's go, Spooky.”
Wan. Quinlan was nowhere to be seen, likely shut in the cargo and drugged to the gills.

“Was all that about tackling Jedi earlier just bantha poodoo?” Uedjir demanded.

Obi-Wan let his head hang between his knees and focused on breathing through his nose. “Nope, but the trick is to hit ’em first. Jedi gets the first move, the fight’s over. She was dead out, I swear.”

Tinté Vos’s lips curled back from her teeth and she spat into the sand in front of him. “Now the Jedi will know where we’re set up, idiot. As much as I relish taking revenge on my nephew, you should have just killed them.”

His head was really hurting too much for this. “Any of you could have put them out of commission while they were out. Don’t blame me if you decided to get greedy about it,” he growled.

Fortuna hissed. <<Get out!>> he ordered Phel. The kid glared at the Twi’lek but hauled xirself out of the speeder. Their boss threw a pouch at Phel’s feet and then another at Obi-Wan. <<The rest of your pay. We’ll see if you survive to use it.>>

They watched in silence as the rest of the group climbed into the speeders and left. Phel scowled at Obi-Wan and bent to retrieve the pouch. “Sleemo stiffed us a quarter of our pay. Because you fucked up!”

Obi-Wan picked himself up carefully, leaning against a rock. “You try keeping it together with a witch whispering in your ear. Don’t suppose you got a ship you can call in?”

“Fuck do I look like? No. And your ship’s been hijacked, sounded like.”

The nausea was passing; Obi-Wan pulled his helmet back on and looked up Deesix’s last check-in. “Well, you can start walking for three days thataway, or you can trust me and wait here another hour.”


The Veeka arrived after an unpleasantly tense hour during which Phel refused to speak to Obi-Wan. For his part, Obi-Wan had shut off the external vox and checked with Deesix on Aayla’s condition. When Phel saw the droid at the helm, xe shot a suspicious look Obi-Wan’s direction.

“This is your ship.”

“Yes.”

“The one the Jedi ran off in.”

“Guess she didn’t need to go very far.”

Deesix met them at the ramp with a blaster. “Do I need to stun you again?”

Obi-Wan patted the droid’s upper arm as he passed. “Not this time, thanks.”

“What about them?”

“Oh.” Obi-Wan pulled his helmet. “Phel, this is Deesix. Dee, we’re giving Phel a lift off this rock. Anywhere in particular?”
Ulic hissed, *You're taking the kid?*

*It is technically my fault xe got stranded. I’ll leave xir back in Syllaral if that’s what xe wants, but I doubt it.*

Phel was looking increasingly scandalized. “It was a setup. I don’t believe it. It was all a setup?”

“Not as such. I had to make it up as I went.” Obi-Wan tossed the pouch Fortuna had thrown at him into Phel’s hands; xe nearly dropped it. “Sorry I fucked up your job. Where do you want to go?”

“I-I…uh…”

_Aww, that’s cute. Are you having fun messing with xir?*

*Maybe just a little.* Obi-Wan suppressed a grin. “Okay, let’s simplify a bit. Is there anything you need to deal with back in Syllaral?”

“Uh. I gotta pay for the doss and collect my stuff?”

“While you do that, I’ll square things up with the dockmaster. I have a bit of snooping to do anyway.” He guided xir to a passenger’s seat and settled into the co-pilot’s chair.

“What kind of snooping?”

Obi-Wan offered a tense, wry smile. “Well, unless you know where they’re taking my other friend, I’m going to have to seek him out the hard way.”

“Oh.” Phel blinked. “Nar Shaddaa. The old lady said something about sport. Probably going to dump him in the underlevels and let people take bets on how long he’ll survive. They’re your friends? _Actual_ friends?”

“I’ve worked with them a time or two. Nar Shaddaa, hmm?” Obi-Wan considered the distance. “Two days. You can use my bunk, I can sleep anywhere.”

Ulic sounded utterly thrilled. _Nar Shaddaa. This job gets better every minute._

Phel twitched and looked around. “Did…you…? Never mind. What about the other cabin?”

“There’s an unconscious Jedi in there, and no offense, but I don’t entirely trust you,” Obi-Wan said, glancing over his shoulder with a humourless smile. “We’re going to have to keep her sedated until the drug wears off, and I’m afraid I have little familiarity with whatever it is they’re doing down there.”

“It’s called glitteryll. They feed the glitterstim bugs ryll and get a weird result that fucks up people’s memories. It’s mostly used to keep slaves from getting rebellious.” The idea didn’t visibly upset xir, but the Force rippled with a frisson of unease.

“You’re doing a terrible job of convincing me not to help the Jedi shut that down,” Obi-Wan muttered. A substance like that, under controlled conditions, could be a hell of a psychiatric treatment tool, but of course it was being used to hurt people. He pulled up the nav system and set up a route to Nar Shaddaa that had them skirting the trade routes. “How long does a dose usually take to wear off?”

“A day or two? But what they gave those Jedi was a lot more than a single dose, and it was raw as hells, so I dunno.” Phel rubbed gloved hands through xir short, spiky hair. “You’re really going to
The place was a pit. An awful, disgusting pit. Where the ground was dry, every footstep stirred up a stench of swamp gas; where it was wet, it smelled even worse. Whatever it was that coated the sand clung tenaciously to everything it landed on; if he ever got out of here, he was going to have to soak for a week in engine degreaser.

The red-skinned, horned man who’d found him had claimed there was a both a bet on about how long he would survive and a bounty on his head; then the man had pulled a blaster on him. Whatever it was that had taken his memories and left a cracked fog in their place hadn't affected his training; he must have had training, to be able to get the blaster away from Vilmarh and know how to pull the power pack. Now, they scuttled through the slums from cover to cover. He didn't trust this Vilmarh in the slightest, but what choice did he really have?

They took a moment to catch their breath in the lower floor of an abandoned building that had once been a cantina. Rot had set in and part of the upper floor had collapsed into one corner, leaving the taproom open to the sky -- what could be seen if it. Foetid water dripped from darkened, mouldy patches on the remains of the ceiling, and he pulled the hood of the long cloak he wore over his head with a grimace.

“Sure you're not giving me the run-around here, Villie?”

The other man glared at him; he’d kept Vilmarh’s blaster after their little scuffle earlier and hadn't been shy about using it to keep them moving. “Would I do that?”

“My memory might be bad, but I haven't yet forgot that you tried to shoot me in the face.”

The horned man shrugged uncomfortably. “Told ya: I've made a new bet that you can get out of here.”

He tilted his head with a sarcastic grin. “Bets don't count when you make ‘em with yourself.”

Villie’s pointed ears twitched as his eyes went wide with alarm. He shoved the other man toward the back of the room. “Boska!”

They took cover behind the rot-eaten bar; he peeked through a hole in the plaster in time to see two horned figures enter the building, silhouetted against the dim daylight that filtered through the permanent overcast. Two loud cracks followed by a deep humming noise broke the silence, and a blinding beam of hard light appeared in the hand of each, driving back the shadows in the room. His eyes flicked to Vilmarh; in the dimness the other man’s face looked terrified. “You think I’m bad?” he whispered. “Them’s the real bad boys.”

There’d only be one chance at this; he aimed carefully through the gap under the bar and fired. The shot caught one in the side of the head; the alien cried out and dropped his weapon, the beam going out as he clutched at his ear. The other Bad Boy yelled and rushed forward, swinging his weapon
wildly.

He tossed the blaster back to Vilmarh and dived from cover, rolling low under the slashing arc of the beam and kicking the Bad Boy’s ankle from under him. Hopefully the same trick from earlier would work: he held out his open hand and the hilt of the other beam weapon sailed across the room into his palm, the green blade flaring to life. He caught the blue blade on his; the moves came to him like instinct, one-two-three, a kick to the side of the knee, and the Bad Boy’s hand dropped, followed by his arm. And then his shoulder and part of his torso, as he fell in two directions at once, the stench of cauterized meat sharp in the air.

And then the world turned sideways, images, smells, and thoughts pouring through his mind like a waterfall. Coming from the weapon he held.

A temple. A city the size of a planet. Friends, teachers, family (his mind cringed from them in disgust). A blue-skinned girl -- Twi’lek. Padawan. His Padawan. A mission, long, drawn-out, taking them from one side of the galaxy to the other.

It might have taken only a moment, but he remembered. Not everything, no. But enough. He was Quinlan Vos, and he was a Jedi.

“Kid--!”

Vision clearing, he turned to face the threat -- the first Gotal bounty hunter had recovered and pulled a blaster from somewhere. Then he squeaked as a vivid blue blade emerged through the middle of his chest and ripped upward in a graceful arc. Their attacker fell face-down into the refuse on the floor, revealing behind him the same blue-skinned girl from Quinlan’s vision.

Aayla, her name was Aayla. Quin started to smile with relief, but when the girl deactivated her weapon and straightened from her furtive crouch, he realized something wasn't right.

“Ah! My dear, such a vision!” Vilmarh emerged with the worst fake smile Quin could remember seeing, already trying to ingratiate himself with the person wearing Aayla’s face.

She smiled sweetly and said, “Fancy meeting you here, Villie.” Her left fist snapped out and caught the Devaronian with a mean hook to the ear. He twisted gracelessly on the spot and dropped cold.

Quinlan backed up and lit his saber again. “Who are you?”

The person wearing Aayla's face looked around quickly and took a step out of the line of the door. Their entire form shimmered and then vanished, revealing a slightly taller male form in dark body armour, his face covered by a mask. “We're friends, Quin. How’s your memory?”

“Hazy but getting better. Are we really friends?” He squinted suspiciously.

“I can prove it, if you’ll let me.” He tossed his deactivated lightsaber to Quinlan. “No tricks, only truth.”

The moment the weapon touched his bare fingers, Quinlan recognised it and the voice that filtered through the helmet. He sucked a startled breath only to cough on the moldy air. “Obi-Wan?!”

The man nodded. “Sorry about the subterfuge, but I had a cover story to solidify. We don't have time to linger, I'm afraid. There's a tracker in your cloak somewhere; ditch it.” He accepted his lightsaber back and made it disappear into his jacket. Quinlan shivered in the damp air as he tossed the cloak aside, collected the third lightsaber -- Aayla’s lightsaber -- and eyed the gloved hand that was offered. “Take my hand and stay close. I don't know what my range is, but I think I can hide us both until we
get to my speeder bike.”

Whatever his friend was doing to conceal them, it felt like being wrapped in a warm cloak; the world fuzzed a little at the edges. Obi-Wan led him a short distance from the abandoned cantina to an overhang where a ragged young Rodian was perched on a bike that looked to have been cobbled together from spare parts. He tossed a couple coins to the kid, saying, “Forget you ever saw us.” The kid gave the Rodian equivalent of a grin and booked it into the shadows.

“Now...”

Quinlan raised an eyebrow at the rough longcoat the shorter man held out. “You want me to wear this?”

“It’ll hide your very Jedi-like garb long enough for us to get back to my ship unnoticed. Don’t lose it, it’s borrowed.”

The coat was a hair too small and tugged uncomfortably across his shoulders, but Quinlan managed cover his robes well enough while the other man kicked the bike to life. “It’s unnerving not being able to see your face, you know.”

There was a soft laugh. “That’s rather the point. Get on. Aayla's waiting.”

The Veeka had barely enough room for four people and a droid, but they managed. Fortunately it was only a day and change to the Jedi Temple on Chalacta. Obi-Wan was glad he’d ordered a ten-day supply package on Bespin; it was just enough to keep them going, what with Aayla still being unconscious.

Ulic had all but vanished, avoiding Quinlan as much as possible, and Obi-Wan found himself missing the Sith’s presence and sour-toned sarcasm. It helped that Quin had bunked down on the floor of the passenger cabin to stay close to Aayla, mostly meditating to start clearing the glitteryll from his system.

Before they landed, Obi-Wan took Quin aside and handed him a data disc.

“What’s this?”

“I did some spying for you. There should be enough in there to make up for the mishap on Ryloth.”

He’d included the holorecord of Fortuna talking to Aayla’s uncle as well as a report on the operation on Ryloth and everything he could dig up from the HoloNet about Fortuna, Tinté Vos and Pol Secura’s business interests. When he’d found a link into his and Qui-Gon’s earlier research via Chom Frey Kaa’s more sordid hobbies -- the senator was clearly the wealthy backer on Coruscant Fortuna had hinted at -- Obi-Wan had dumped everything he could find on Frey Kaa as well.

If they didn’t move the operation or even just torch the spiders, he’d be very surprised, but there was still enough evidence to be incriminating.

Quin squinted at him as he tucked the disc away. “I’m surprised you’d do this, Ob- Bastra. All things considered.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “There are limits, Vos. Mine is attempted slavery.”
He and Phel kept their masks on as the Jedi Healers took charge of Aayla; Quinlan identified them simply as helpful, honourable mercenaries. The Temple wasn’t in a position to offer a monetary reward for their assistance, but fresh supplies and fuel were provided free of charge. It was about what Obi-Wan expected, although Phel grumbled a bit under xir breath.

“Jedi aren’t meant to be wealthy, you know. If you help one, the odds of getting paid in coin are pretty slim.”

Phel dropped into the co-pilot’s seat and wiggled xir fingers like a stage magician with a sly grin. “I bet it’d be easy for one to get rich, though.”

Obi-Wan ran through the preflight checks himself while Deesix finished decoupling the fuel lines. “Precisely why they have so many godsdamned rules about using their powers.”

“You’ve worked with them a lot, huh?”

“Often enough. Our next stop is Takodana. Ever been there?”

“Never even heard of it.”

“It’s a nice place. Plenty of ships in and out to stow away on--” he teased.

Phel snorted. “I was just telling stories, you know. It’s not true.”

Deesix returned from doing the hull check and tilted its head to glare at Phel. “Can you pilot?”

“I can learn,” the kid said with an alarmingly endearing grin. Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh, biting his lower lip; he’d clearly been infected with Qui-Gon’s habit of collecting strays.

The droid leaned closer, almost forehead to forehead with Phel. “You can watch.”

Chapter End Notes

TW: implied slavery, implied brainwashing, abusive family

I took a few liberties with translating Quinlan's amnesia adventure. Not sorry!
Trickster

Chapter Summary

During the Battle of Naboo, Obi-Wan Kenobi fell, reaching for the Dark Side to defeat Darth Maul; his actions saved the life of Qui-Gon Jinn, but he was ultimately cast from the Jedi Order for his failure.

What doesn't kill you can become a lucrative business contact.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation year 977.06.05

The Veeka

"Bastra?"

Obi-Wan spared just enough attention to respond. "Back here, Phel."

You're an awful troll, you know. Ulic sounded amused.

Maybe, but it's got to be done. The spirit had been hesitant to reveal himself since the younger human had joined them a couple weeks earlier - particularly after it became apparent that Phel could sense when Ulic was in the room - and had been vocally chafing about it. Unwilling to simply kick the kid off the ship for the sake of his mentor, Obi-Wan had chosen to break the ice the easy way.

For relative values of easy.

The door into the cargo hold hissed open and Phel immediately stumbled back into the short corridor in shock. "Karking hells-"

"Sorry, this'll be over in about thirty seconds," Obi-Wan said over the crack of the training remotes' low-powered blasts. He adjusted his aim to avoid deflecting the bolts in Phel's direction. The kid remained just outside the door anyway, watching in awe. They were still at the trust-building phase, and this was Obi-Wan's latest revelation to xir.

The remotes' session timer ended and the spheres pipped softly as they went into standby. Obi-Wan pulled the blindfold off and gave Phel a smile in greeting. "Good morning."

Trollllll.

Shush.

Phel edged into the empty hold eyeing first the remotes then Obi-Wan. "You were deflecting lasers.
With your bare hands-"

"Well, I am wearing gloves. I'd get burned otherw-"

"Blindfolded! What the kriffing hells, Bastra?"

Obi-Wan held his hands up, open and empty. "If I don't train sometime, my reflexes will be shot. Better in here than in the common area, I've few enough dishes as it is."

"How were you doing that?" Phel demanded.

*Xe doesn't seem to be taking it well.*

Collecting the remotes, Obi-Wan shut them down and returned them to their case. Then he levitated the case back to its place on the built-in shelves with a wave of his hand. "I told you I've worked with Jedi before."

Phel's mouth had fallen open as xe watched. "Can you teach me how to do that?"

Ulic started laughing.

---

Bastra had always seemed a bit of a weirdo, in the short time they'd known each other since that disastrous job on Ryloth. Sometimes it was like he was laughing at a joke only he could hear, and there were times his one eye seemed to look through Phel and see something completely different. Then there was that prickly feeling that came and went, and the sense of someone talking on the other side of a wall. Even the droid was something of an oddball, although they had bonded over a mutual dislike of being gendered.

So it almost wasn't a shock to see the older human bouncing blaster bolts from his hands like bubbles. Almost. Phel guessed there was probably a way to replicate the effect using micro-mag generators. It was getting your hand in the right place at the right time that was the real trick: xe'd never seen someone move that fast.

Now they were sitting at the small table in the lounge, holding hands across its scuffed plas surface. He'd asked permission first, but Phel wasn't really sure what Bastra was going to do. It sounded like mind-reading and, well, everyone had things they wanted to keep secret, right?

Bastra gave a soft laugh, his one real eye still closed. "I'm not going to touch your mind at all, actually. I have it on good authority that it's possible to tell whether you have potential, but I've never tried this before."

"So how come you knew what I was just thinking about?" Phel asked sourly.

"You were thinking it very loud. Sometimes it's difficult not to hear."

Xir fingers flexed nervously against Bastra's, feeling toughened weapons calluses and roughened skin from wearing combat gloves. "I can't believe you didn't tell them you're a Jedi."

"One: I'm not, and two: they'd either have tried to kill me or sell me. But you're crew here, for now, and it's something you need to know if you're sticking around." Bastra's eye opened for a moment; he gave an apologetic smile. "My last crew freaked out when I did something without warning. It
saved us, sure, but it scared the crap out of them."

"I bet it did."

Bastra closed his eye again, frowning. "You do have some potential. May I ask where you're from?"

Xe considered not answering for a moment. But Bastra had never asked before, and it seemed relevant. "Originally, I don't know. We moved a lot, I spent more time on a ship than a planet."

There were other places, but Phel preferred not to talk about them.

The older human hummed under his breath. "That would be why you didn't get noticed. Jedi search for very young children who actively demonstrate strength in the Force. Sometimes they can even perceive it without trying; there's a boy I met recently who's like looking straight into a sun. I might be able to teach you a few things, but it depends how much patience you have," he added with a grin.

"Things like what?"

Bastra opened his mouth to answer, but then someone else said, "Not much, maybe enough to predict danger. I can't see you getting to the point of telekinesis unless you really like to meditate."

Phel felt the blood drain from xir face. "Uh. Bastra…?"

Chuckling, Bastra leaned back against the wall, folding his arms across his chest. "And you called me a troll. This is Ulic, Phel. He's dead."

"Eloquently put." The form of another human appeared sitting in the air at the end of the table, a dark-haired man in his thirties wearing robes and armour right out of a historical holodrama. "But accurate."

It felt like xir features had frozen into that shocked, wide-eyed expression. It was too much, just too much. Phel shoved xir chair back and stumbled to xir feet, seeking the relative sanity of the cabin xe'd claimed. Xe was almost through the door when a horrible thought popped into xir head; xe swallowed and then asked, "You haven't, uh-

"Give me credit for having some respect for personal space, kiddo. I haven't been spying on you," the ghost said from the other room, his tone gentle rather than mocking.

"Oh. Good. I'll, um. Yeah." Phel closed the door and then leaned back against it, shivering.

*What the kark have I got myself into here?*

---

It was something of a relief to let himself just be visible again. Ulic knew the kid would calm down eventually, but the irony of the droid accepting his presence more easily wasn't lost on him.

"I kind of feel bad."

Obi-Wan glanced over his shoulder with a regretful smile, "Well, it's not like we knew xe'd ask to stay for a bit. Xe seemed pretty pissed off with me initially."

"Can't blame 'em, under the circumstances."
"Oh, no. I'd feel about the same if our positions were reversed."

Watching hyperspace through the transparisteel always gave Ulic a weird sensation of vertigo he hadn't suffered in life - at a guess, it was because he had to consciously anchor himself in place if he wanted to interact properly, or retreat into his old crystal if he didn't want to literally fall behind and then get dragged through the void like a toy on a string. It might have been hilarious if it wasn't so disorienting; spirit or not, no sentient mind was designed to process traveling that fast through realspace. It was one of the few times he found himself envying true spirits' freedom of movement.

Phel was in the common area, sitting sideways on the bulkhead bench at the table and reading something on a datapad. Under the massive coat, xe had the bony, malnourished build of someone whose primary source of sustenance was ration bars and adrenaline, and Ulic took a moment to remind Obi-Wan to make sure the kid ate regularly. Xe glanced up as Ulic passed through. "Um. Uh, sorry. About earlier."

"It's no problem, kid. First time I let Bastra see me, I was surprised he didn't try to kill me," Ulic replied with a shrug. He was about to go dissipate into the crystal when the kid set the 'pad down. "Can I ask some questions?"

Intrigued, Ulic settled himself in midair beside the table - with the two chairs pushed in he couldn't easily "sit" across from xir. "I'll answer what I can."

Phel rested xeir head back against the bulkhead for a moment, considering xeir words. "Bastra said...the Jedi look for little kids. Wouldn't it be easier to train older kids? Most trade schools start at thirteen Standard…"

"And these days, that's when Jedi apprenticeship starts," Ulic said. "It was different back in my day, and I can't say I like the way things have changed, but they have a couple reasons for it."

"Oh, yeah?" The kid actually looked interested, focusing properly on Ulic rather than sliding xeir eyes to the side like xe'd been doing for the past day. "Well, a lot of people consider what Force users can do to be magic, and little kids have an easier time accepting it. You tell a four year old they can lift a box twice their size using only their mind, and they'll just do it. Teenagers, young adults, they've already settled into their understanding of how the universe works, they'll tell you it's too big, too heavy. Little kids are just more creative, more willing to test the boundaries of their world."

Phel mulled that over. "How old was Bastra?"

"I'd be very surprised if he remembers anything from before he was brought to the Temple on Coruscant. Like I said: they look for 'em young." He couldn't hide the note of disgust in his voice. "Doesn't sound like you approve," the kid said with a half-smile. The gap between xeir front teeth had no business being endearing like that.

"They have a point about kids accepting the hoodoo more readily, but there's a darker reason for it. The Jedi think their way of relating to the Force is the only way, so they try to get their people young enough that they haven't been taught anything different. Separate them from their families, because gods forbid they be exposed to anything other than what the Order wants them to hear." He was growling but couldn't stop himself; what the Order had become in the intervening millennia disgusted him.

Phel's face twisted in distaste. "Sounds like a cult."
"Almost is, by now; it's definitely an orthodoxy. When I was growing up, it was a lot different. Can I ask how old you are?"

The kid hesitated, then shrugged. "Seventeen Standard."

Younger than xe looked. "I started my training - actual training - when my brother and I were about your age. Until then, our mom taught us the basics. She was a Jedi Master, herself, but she didn't think she could be impartial enough to train us. So we were sent with other potential students to study together under another Master." He gave a wry grin. "Everything I just said would be considered heretical these days."

"But Bastra's willing to teach me anyway?"

"If you haven't noticed, kid, he's kind of a heretic himself now. And there's nobody he needs to ask for permission or report to since he left."

"Why'd he leave?"

Ulic shook his head. "That's not my story to tell. Can I ask what your plans are?"

"Dunno." The kid shrugged carelessly, but xe was frowning. "Never really made any."

Someone had definitely had a shitty youth. Ulic smiled, as gently as he could manage without looking condescending. "Might want to consider making some. Oh. And about that crystal?"

"Crystal?" Phel had a solid sabacc face, but Ulic had already sensed it.

"The one in your coat pocket, that you lifted out of Bastra's locker. You want to put it back at some point."

Xe smirked, arching an eyebrow at him. "Why, what are you gonna do about it, tell Bastra?"

"Oh, he already knows. But it's not his, it's mine. So unless you don't mind being haunted for the rest of your life… Just something to think about," he added with a wink as he faded from view.

In the cockpit, Obi-Wan was struggling to contain his laughter; the young man's mental voice rippled with it. And you called me a troll.

The first time they'd brought Phel to Takodana the kid had tried playing at being unimpressed, a callous, half-lidded expression on xir face. Obi-Wan knew the expression well; he'd worn it enough times as a Padawan when he wanted to appear unflappable. It was a solid indication of nerves and someone feeling well out of their depth.

Now xe paused and breathed the rich green scent of Takodana, clearing the flat shipboard air from xir lungs with obvious delight; Obi-Wan did the same. The sun was out, and the smell of warm, damp earth and passing rain struck Obi-Wan with an unexpected feeling of belonging. It wasn't Coruscant, which had a sharp wet-duracrete smell with a hint of ozone and charcoal after a storm, but Coruscant was no longer what he thought of as home. He couldn't remember when that had changed.

He was moving before he realized it, hands tingling under the insulated gloves as two rapid shots
bounced away. Someone cursed and fired again; Obi-Wan threw himself in front of Deesix and blocked the next bolt with a flare of irritation. "Stop!"

Phel had xir blaster out and aimed; so did Deesix. A towering figure emerged from the treeline, rifle aimed at Deesix. "Get out of the way, idiot, that's a battle droid!"

"That's my crew, dammit!" Obi-Wan snapped.

The big alien glared at him, thick tendrils descending from the back of his head like smaller lekku thrashing. "Are you karkin' serious?" Behind him, a Bith and a Chadra-Fan appeared, blasters out but pointed skyward.

*Break the tension*. He wasn't certain if the thought was his or a message from Ulic. "No, I'm a standup comedian. This is my opening joke, what do you think?"

The corner of the Feeorin's mouth twitched upwards grudgingly. "I think it stinks." He put the rifle away, however, and Obi-Wan gestured for Deesix and Phel to stand down. "How the kriff did you get a B1 unit?"

The Force was still crackling, but the danger was past. Obi-Wan glanced over at Deesix, who said, "He made me an offer I couldn't refuse."

The Bith spacer tilted his head. "That's...a different voice. You've been modifying him?"

"It," Deesix corrected sourly. "I asked him to."

"Huh." The Feeorin squinted at the three of them for a moment before stalking down the rise; he offered a massive, green-skinned hand. "Name's Nym."

Obi-Wan accepted the clasp. "Scogar Bastra. This is Deesix and Phel."


"How the hell did you block those shots, anyway?" Nym was giving him a beady-eyed suspicious glare.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Practice. Are we done trying to shoot at Dee?" he asked with a lopsided grin. "I've a delivery to make."

The Feeorin pursed his lips, tapping the side of his rifle above the trigger guard. "For now, yeah. I'm watching you, droid."

Deesix rolled its shoulders in an approximation of a shrug. "If you pay me, you'll get a better show."

Phel choked on xir laughter as Nym's features folded in a scowl.

"It's a whole karking circus, isn't it?"

The ripples in the Force had settled, though, and Obi-Wan turned toward Maz's castle to hide his grin. "You get used to it."

They were welcomed at the door by Maz hollering, "Scogar Bastra!" across the room from her table. The two spacers sitting with her barely blinked, although a number of the crowd between the table and the door paused their conversations to look.

Obi-Wan shook his head with a smile, waving in acknowledgement. "And that's our summons." He
turned to Nym but forgot what he was about to say at the sight of the Feeorin’s alarmed reaction.  "You must be new around here."

"You're regulars, huh?"

Clapping the taller man on the shoulder, Obi-Wan tilted his head toward the tiny proprietor, who was standing on her chair and beckoning imperiously.  "Shall we introduce you?"

By the time they reached the table, a droid was leaving a tray of drinks; to Nym's disquiet, the drinks included his crew's preferred choices despite not having been asked. Even Bastra's droid had joined them without being harassed at the door - unusual, since most places hated having mechanicals taking up space. The red-haired human reached into his jacket and tossed a package to the little orange woman, who caught it with a smile; she unfolded the waxed paper on one side and breathed the contents with a contented sigh.

"Kalacci tea. You do know how to make a lady's day, young man."

"I do try."

"Come, sit. You keep making new friends, Scogar," she said, smiling at Nym. "I am Maz Kanata; welcome to my home." The packet of tea had disappeared somehow and he felt a shiver run down his spine.

Introductions were made. The two dark-skinned human spacers already there were Jhono and Adité, pretty obviously a couple, from Socorro by their dress and the colourful scarf wrapped around Adité's hair. They were unknown to Bastra and his crew, which made Nym feel a little better. The redhead couldn't be much past childhood and still had a bit of youthful bounce to his step that was exhausting just to watch; even his younger crewmate in the massive coat was more cynical.

Kanata was the one with the reputation. Nym waited through the small-talk with fading patience, but when the tiny woman asked him, "So what brings you to my home?" he was ready to talk business.

"I came to see you, actually." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table to claim everyone's attention, although he didn't take his eyes from Kanata. "I've been working with Republic Judicial, cracking down on pirate attacks on legit haulers. It's becoming something of a problem," he added, heavy on the sarcasm. "You used to be a pirate, Kanata, and considering the operation you're running here, I bet your old connections are alive and well."

The tiny woman smirked at him, eyes crinkling behind the bug-eyed lenses. "Well. Fewer than there used to be, but time passes. I've heard of you, Nym; you're a pirate yourself. What changed, I wonder?"

He couldn't suppress a growl under his breath. "The karkin' Trade Federation, that's what changed. Kicked us out of our base, murdered a bunch of my crew. I got a pardon from the Chancellor for gettin' some of my own back over Naboo last year. Judicial asked for my help 'stead of arresting me, seemed a good deal."

Kanata waved her hand, bracelets jingling. "Well. You're in a room full of pirates, dear. What are your intentions?"
Nym grinned without humour. "There are patterns. I wanna know who's siccing them on the trade routes. If people are willing to talk first rather than shooting-" the human, Bastra, snickered, but Nym ignored him, "-then we can avoid unpleasantness altogether."

Adité shrugged. "Well, if you're starting here, Jhono and I don't know anything."

"Pirating ain't our thing anyway," Jhono put in. "But you can talk to that lady over there…" He pointed to an extravagantly-dressed humanoid holding court at a raucous table. "That's Li-Murev Dal-Bhat-"

"Heard of her," Nym interrupted. The Bloody Wing wasn't a group to be trifled with.

"Yeah, if she's not involved, she'll know someone who is." The round-faced man grinned, showing perfect teeth with a con-man's wink. "Getting them to talk will be the challenge, of course."

"I think I can handle it."

Bastra had gone quiet, seemingly focused on his drink, but there was that sense of his attention being focused on the conversation. Nym waited until Maz had shooed them all away to go do her thing, then caught up with the one-eyed human at the bar.

"Got a feeling you had something to add to the conversation back there."

The human frowned down at his glass; for a minute Nym was worried the kid would tell him to piss off. Just as the silence was becoming uncomfortable, Bastra said in a low voice, "My first crew was attacked by a bunch of pirates, shortly after our captain turned down a demand that we rescind our guild license and work for a conglomerate. It was too much of a coincidence, so I started looking into things."

His fingers rested a moment on Nym's prosthetic left hand. "Meet me here tomorrow, I'll have a list for you."

"A list, huh?" There was something about the human's expression that was too-carefully neutral. "You don't want to just run back to your ship and get it now?"

Something that was barely a smirk appeared. "I have sources to protect, Nym. You don't get the raw data."

"And what's this gonna cost me?"

The kid shook his head. "Nothing. Although if you need an extra ship along to help deal some damage, we might be available."

Nym decided it was worth the risk. "That prosthetic…it's Naboo make, isn't it?" He'd seen a couple of similar design at one of the medical facilities after the battle; the risk was rewarded when the human's smile thawed.

"That's right."

"Fightin' the Trade Federation?"

"In a manner of speaking."

Cagey bastard. "We might need a hand. What's that Aka'jor of yours packing?"

The list Bastra gave him the next morning, painfully early over cups of caff and some sort of
breakfast pastry, turned out to be ridiculously thorough. Pirates, mercenaries, privateers, a rundown of assaults and theft going back further than the Yinchorri banthashit. All of them linked back to the Trade Federation or one of its easily hateable allies in one way or another.

Nym really wanted to know where the human got his information, and at the same time he really didn't. He also wanted to ask why the kid was willing to just hand this over to a random stranger who could have been lying for all the human knew. But there'd been that trick with deflecting blaster bolts the day before. Nym wasn't some wetback fresh off the homestead; if Bastra had the Force, he was smart to keep quiet about it.

Just so long as he wasn't a karking Jedi, with their damned rules and detachment and hypocrisy.

Working with Nym was rewarding, in more ways than one. The pay was good, and working with Nym's group and the other contractors he hired helped build Obi-Wan's reputation as Scozar Bastra. Phel stayed, ostensibly to build up some funds and skills for the future. Obi-Wan rather suspected xe had simply found a safe place to start from, and he was determined to continue providing it.

The work also kept them busy without much chance to sit down and teach Phel how to listen to things beyond xir sight. Using a broken piece of piping, xe started learning how to predict a remote drone's shot, but xir reflexes were unable to keep up with xir senses. Ulic and Obi-Wan spent several quiet discussions on how best to move Phel forward; learning to meditate was the best either of them could think of, but they both agreed that xe had a number of issues stemming from an unpleasant childhood to work through.

"Neither of us is a mind healer, unfortunately, and we know xe doesn't trust a doctor as far as xe could bury them," Ulic said one night. Obi-Wan nodded, frowning.

"You've been helpful to me, but Phel doesn't seem likely to respond as well to your brand of self-examination."

"Different upbringings. Maybe we should just start testing and make sure xe knows xe can tell us when it's not working? We won't be able to start xir on calming down until xe is actually capable of finding calm. If that means...I dunno, putting on Gamorrean klash music and standing on xir head, then that's what we're going to do."

The giddy novelty of willfully breaking the law and getting away with it was taking its time fading; Obi-Wan still felt a quiet amazement that his life had become this. Jedi gone undercover were expected to flaunt as many legal restrictions as they needed in order to get the job done, but he was neither a Jedi nor technically undercover; there was no protection from the consequences if he was caught. He'd expected to feel more conflicted about the work, but many of the jobs that fell his direction involved moving food and medical supplies to worlds that were under embargo from some angle or another. He made notes on such situations and sent them off via courier to Kardin Lo on Naboo, knowing the Muun would find connections Obi-Wan might otherwise miss.

Finally taking some real shots at Sidious' support had both him and Ulic feeling less edgy and impatient. Having a large group to work with under Nym - the Lok Revenants had been disbanded "officially" but they were all still employed by the Feeorin and made little attempt to disguise their piratical nature - made up for the Veeka's minimal stature. They still needed something more capable, but between the legal and illegal work, Obi-Wan was feeling confident that might change sooner
than he'd initially thought.

Obi-Wan squinted at Hondo, but let the fast-talking Weequay continue the negotiations. Garchai, a Dug captain they'd worked with on occasion, sat on Hondo's other side, looking bored.

"You must appreciate, Captain, that we hesitate to split the cargo among independent operators," the human client was saying, although her objections weren't as strong as they had been. Bacrana Comestibles' contracted haulers were leery of going beyond the Inner Rim now, after a number of losses, and Hondo had latched onto an advertisement for an Outer Rim run. Among the three ships, the load was manageable, but the request had been for a single ship. Hondo was talking up the benefits of a divided cargo - which, he was careful not to mention, included a higher total payout at guild rates for the three of them than what had been listed. Trust Ohnaka to try to squeeze a few more credits out of Inner Rim businesses. They were good for it: Obi-Wan had done some research when Hondo had commed, grinning like a tooka with a prize bird in sight.

"Oh, of course, we understand entirely. But! Look at it this way: with three ships, we can defend each other from any pirates, and there's a better chance of at least some of your cargo reaching Christophsis."

Garchai snorted, her upper lip flapping. <<Your confidence warms your associates' hearts, Ohnaka.>>

"I am being realistic, my friend! The risk of losing only part of one's shipment is preferable to the risk of losing all of it."

The BacCom representative was trying so hard to look like she needed more convincing; Obi-Wan could feel that she'd already been sold on the idea the moment they'd walked into her office. *Three nobody spacers who won't be missed if things go wrong, it's too perfect.* She was holding out for the sake of appearances, and the only thing that stopped him from discouraging Hondo was the utter lack of warnings from the Force. Something bigger was at stake here; if they got caught in the middle, it wasn't out of maliciousness.

Although the woman's disdain for them was about as thick as her perfume.

Eventually an arrangement was hashed out; they reconvened with their crews, who were waiting at a cantina close to Amma's spaceport. Deesix and Garchai's astromech sulked under the awning beside the door, muttering to each other in Binary about bigoted bartenders. Obi-Wan paused and whistled,

#At least there are charge ports out here.#

#That's about all there is to be said for it,# Deesix responded. #Order something not on tap, the lines haven't been cleaned recently.#

#Who told you that?#

The astromech's dome rotated back and forth in surprise. #Cantina computer is monitoring the charge ports; there's a usage fee, but the computer is gossipy.#

#Don't worry about the fee. We shouldn't be too long.#

He found Phel playing a dice game with Masidi, a Weequay from Hondo's crew; they were both
cheating blatantly and giggling about it. Xe grinned at Obi-Wan as he took a seat.

"Job came through, huh?"

"They'll drop off the cargo in the morning, but I'm going to run the nav tonight. It's pirate trouble, as usual, and we want to skim the route."

Masidi clicked his tongue at Obi-Wan. "You need to teach us the secrets to doing that sometime. Boss been trying to figure out your tricks for weeks."

"It's just numbers."

"Really complicated numbers that involve variables that don't exist half the time."

"Quantum mathematics leaves both nothing and everything to chance," Obi-Wan said. The Weequay's eyeroll made him grin.

Masidi and Phel left together once their cups were empty; Obi-Wan moved over to the larger group. Hondo and Garchai both had small freighters; between the two ships, there was more than enough room to handle the cargo for this run. The Veeka had been included solely because of Obi-Wan's navigation skills; he sent a reluctant mental thanks to Master Aaryth for the advanced astrogation courses.

He was lost in thought and thus caught completely off-guard by Hondo draping himself across Obi-Wan's lap.

"My dear Scogar, you're too quiet!" The mercenary's right arm curled around Obi-Wan's shoulders. "Worry about tomorrow tomorrow, yes?"

Obi-Wan laughed and accepted the fresh round Hondo offered. "My teachers always did tell me I look too far into the future."

"See?! Live for the moment!" Hondo cackled. "You should listen to your elders! And as your elder-"

"You're barely older than I am, Hondo."

"Minutes or months, elder is elder! We are discussing plans for the now, not the later." Hondo waggled his hairless brows at Obi-Wan. "So! Are we going back to your ship tonight, or mine?"

Obi-Wan took a slow sip his drink, eyes locked on Hondo's. Their flirting over the past few months had grown intense, and wasn't without some genuine interest. That particular question had been asked before and laughed off a dozen times. This time, he let it hang in the air until Hondo's sly expression began to falter, then smiled. "Mine. Unless you want to push our departure time tomorrow back, I still have our nav calculations to put in tonight."

"Ugh! Always business first, with you!" But the arm around Obi-Wan's shoulders tightened with barely contained excitement.

Deesix merely tilted its head when Hondo returned to the ship with them, and ensconced itself with the navicomp once Obi-Wan had plugged in his course adjustments. Nav systems relied on known coordinates and gravity wells; convincing the well-meaning programming that it was safe to leave hyperspace in the voids between systems - far from locations where a distress beacon might be noticed - was a challenge. Ulic was nowhere to be found, but the Sith was perceptive like that.

As soon as the door of his cabin closed behind them, Hondo had Obi-Wan pressed back against it,
kissing him eagerly. Delighted, Obi-Wan slipped his hands into Hondo's coat, pulling the other man
flush against him; he pressed his thigh between Hondo's legs and was rewarded with a shaky gasp.

"Humans are such furry creatures," Hondo murmured against Obi-Wan's lips, deft fingers cupping
his face and scratching lightly through the short, minimal beard framing his jaw.

He grinned back and started working Hondo's coat off his shoulders; it was heavy and more
armoured than it looked. "You have no idea. It only gets worse as we get older, too. Jokes about rug
burn exist for a reason."

The Weequay pulled back for a moment, staring at him in alarm. "I'm starting to rethink this." There
was still a glimmer of wicked humour in his eyes, though, which had Obi-Wan laughing.

"No you're not."

"Hmm, no. Now I want to know how far down that fur goes," he purred as he found the clasps for
the top of Obi-Wan's armour. Teeth closed lightly on Obi-Wan's earlobe; he shivered, barely
suppressing a groan, and dug his fingertips into Hondo's skin under his shirt.

"You'll just have to find out, won't you?"

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Bastra's nav calculation was as good as ever. Hondo settled into the captain's chair, humming with
satisfaction. Garchai had stopped muttering her doubts when the final course had been sent; it
effectively avoided the predictable path adjustment points, and if it consumed a bit more fuel than the
standard routes, it made up for it in terms of safety.

He allowed himself a moment to remember the night before - fondly, if he was forced to admit so.
Most humans in his experience displayed an unfortunate desire to bond after an encounter; to his
relief, Bastra hadn't given any indication that it was anything more than dalliance. Their morning
discussion over caff had been delightfully businesslike and free of awkwardness.

Someday he would discover what the human concealed so secretively.

"Comms up," Masidi announced.

"Excellent!" Hondo braced his elbows on the armrests. "Are we ready, my friends?"

<<Ready to go. Might have a bead on an exit job, too.>>

"Oh, I like the sound of that. Nav mark. Countdown from three..."

Despite skipping over the trade route like a smooth stone over water, it was only a day's travel to
Christophsis. Hondo settled back in his chair as hyperspace reached out to seize their ships. The last
few months had been good, satisfying even.

Mama Ohnaka had always said it was unwise to get too comfortable. Perhaps it was time to start
thinking bigger.
Phel frowned, trying to ignore how much the tip of xir nose itched. Bastra had tossed a couple large, flat cushions Phel didn't remember seeing before on the floor of the lounge, dimmed the lights, and brought out a genuine candle. There was incense involved, and it was all disquietingly ritualistic as the other human settled them on the floor.

Xe was trying to pay attention to Bastra's voice, low, smooth tones clearly meant to be calming. But it all reminded xir of...other things. Things xe would rather not remember; they were definitely not relaxing.

The soft clearing of Bastra's throat brought xir eyes open. The man was smiling gently. "Not working? You can always say something, you know."

Xe sagged and let xirself flop back onto the floor. "It's not...not this. It just-

"You don't have to talk about it. I could feel how tense you were. How about you tell me what you do to relax."

Phel shook xir head, still staring up at the shadowed ceiling. "I don't do that anymore. Only just started figuring myself out, you know?" Best not to think about the spice. Or the others. Did Myles even make it out? The weeks spent in a clinic, fed off an IV line, shaking from withdrawal.

The incense aroma vanished in a sudden out-of-place breeze; Phel looked over to see Bastra fanning the air with his hand. "Let's start over. Clearly the methods I was taught aren't good for you." The mercenary was smiling, but it was a nice sort of smile rather than mocking.

"When you said you could teach me, I thought it'd be more...you know..." Phel mimed shooting a blaster.

"That's what everyone thinks." The ghost appeared sitting near Bastra. "But that comes later. Once you get in touch with the Force, your reflexes get sharper. But you've got to be able to listen to it, and that means quieting your mind."

Scowling, Phel propped xirself up on one hand. "Guess that's never going to happen." Xir mind always felt full of random thoughts clamoring for attention, without the spice to bring blissful blankness. It had been overwhelming at first, but now the chatter was a pleasant reminder that xe was free.

Bastra and the ghost looked at each other; Ulic's lips were pursed thoughtfully while the mercenary's eyebrows peaked. "Could work," the ghost said after a weird moment of silence. "Quietting your mind doesn't have to mean telling everything to go away - actually, that's not a good idea for someone just starting out. Let the thoughts happen and just...examine them. One at a time, give each a moment of your focus." He smirked at Bastra. "And do it in an environment that doesn't make you feel awful."

Bastra's one eye rolled dramatically. "Point taken." He rolled to his feet and brought the lights back up. "We can deal with that some other time. I have a feeling getting to Christophis won't be as easy as Hondo wants."

That brought Phel upright. "Bad feeling?"

"No." He shook his head. "Just...a feeling. It probably won't be boring, though."

Bastra was right. Phel still hadn't decided if xe wanted the man to be wrong more often.
The comms went live as soon as they dropped out of hyperspace, just a tick early, and found themselves staring at the business end of a small blockade.

<<Who the hells are these guys?>>

Bastra laughed. "We'll find out in a minute if they have demands to transmit." He was motioning for Phel to turn around; the console behind xir was already lighting up with weapons controls.

You can do this. It's just like the last time. Every damn time, xe got the jitters, like xe'd sucked down two litres of high-test caff. Bastra said it was just nerves and that he got them too, but the man somehow managed to look stone-faced calm in even the worst fights.

You're being loud again.

It was impossible to tell whether that was Bastra or the ghost, their accents were too similar; Phel settled simply for whispering, "Sorry." Focus on the boards. That was a lot of red.

"Unidentified ships, this is Christophsis Customs Patrol-"

"The hells you are," Bastra muttered. He was flipping switches and something in the aft of the shuttle started up with a heavy purr. Phel suppressed a hysterical giggle.

"-You are hereby ordered to stand down and transmit your cargo manifest."

Ohnaka's voice came over the private channel. "Let me do the talking, yes?"

"Just stall them, Hondo. You're good at that."

"You know me so well!"

<<That is way too much information.>>

This was it, this was how Phel was going to die: choking on laughter while being threatened by pirates masquerading as border patrol.

"Are you alright back there?" Bastra's tone was so archly innocent it was obvious his mind had fallen into the same gutter.

Ohnaka's voice cut through the repeated demands, boisterous and noticeably intoxicated. "Coruscant Patrol! Manifest! Yes, yes, of course, let me find it here."

Bastra made a choked sound and murmured, "Little gods, where does he find these things?" A glance over xir shoulder gave Phel a glimpse of what was clearly a Sriluuran risqué holodrama.

"I didn't need to see that."

"Neither did I," Deesix grumbled.

"Unidentified ships, are you trying to get yourselves blown up?"

"Oh! So sorry, so sorry. That was the wrong file-"

Phel twisted to look at Bastra. "Are we absolutely certain these guys aren't who they say they are?"

"Positive. Christophsis CP only operates within planetary orbit; we're much too far out. Our cargo is a hundred percent cleared, but they're going to claim that something's wrong about our paperwork
and insist on boarding for an inspection. Then they hold us all at blaster-point and either take our cargo or hijack the entire ship."

"You sound way too calm about that."

Bastra's laugh was grim. "If they ever get that close, they'll regret it. But they won't. We're queued for a micro-hop at an angle shallow enough we won't need to realign to avoid hitting them."

"Is that possible?"

"In theory. Timing is everything."

Ohnaka was still blustering, having sent another incorrect file - the full script from a holodrama about insects, this time - and the pirates were just this side of losing their minds trying to stay in character.

"Why don't they just start shooting?" Phel gasped through nervous giggles.

"Because a target that willingly invites you in is so much easier to deal with. Less risky."

Xe frowned. "So why are we just sitting here slowly pissing them off?"

"Well, it wouldn't be much fun if we didn't make them regret wasting our time, would it?" Bastra threw a beatific smile over his shoulder. "This is a trap, but not for us. I do hope Hondo warned Garchai."

Xe turned their chair fully around to stare at Bastra. "How the kriff do you know that?"

"Oh. I had a feeling." There was that damned smile again, but Bastra sobered. "We need to bait them into coming at us-"

"So it looks like they're attacking harmless spacers," Phel finished, eyebrows going up. "That's why you wanted someone on weapons."

"Just in case. We can't shoot first, and we can't run. Bastra gritted his teeth in something that wasn't a grin. "I hate this game."

"Wait, you said- You said this is Christophsis? We are meant to be at Coruscant?" Hondo started berating a non-existent idiot navigator, and the pirate captain's control finally snapped.

"Unidentified ships, you are ordered to stand down and prepare to be boarded. We'll conduct an inspection personally, if you're too incompetent to do it yourselves!"

The red icons on Phel's screen started moving toward them and Bastra opened the private channel. "Shields front, power up for micro-hop, let's give them a reason to fire."

<<We're going to be having a talk about this later, Bastra!>>

"Ah, guess Hondo failed to mention it."

"I was preoccupied!"

The voice on the open comm was sneering with delight. "Looks like we have ourselves some smugglers, boys! Take 'em out!" Laser-fire began to pepper their forward shields, its power depleted from the range but getting stronger every second.

The red icons crossed the yellow-shaded range boundary, and Phel hit the alert button. Behind xir,
Bastra laughed. "Micro-hop on my mark…"

A high-pitched warbling alarm went off and Deesix yelped, "Hyperspace proximity, we have incoming!"

"That's our cue! Mark!"

The stars visible through the viewport stretched for a tense second, the pirate ships seeming to smear like paint as they snapped past. Something exploded, there and then lost behind them as space rebounded back to normal. Bastra hit the comms. "Who hit whom?"

Garchai's Huttese sounded less cranky. <<Shields took it, but one of those slimebags lost a wing,>> she cackled. <<How did you know what would happen?>>

"To be perfectly honest, I didn't know for certain. But when we landed, I ran a scan and spotted what looked like a piece of debris issuing a low-freq signal."

Phel got up and leaned over the man's shoulder as he pulled up the scan results. "Some sort of probe?"

"Clever, my dear Bastra. But enough sitting about making chit-chat, we have a run to finish and payment to collect."

They were just nearing Christophsis orbital range when Bastra's comm pinged. The man chuckled. "Thought so. Fancy seeing you here, Nym."

"What the kark were you thinking?"

"That we could serve you some targets on a platter. You're welcome, by the way."

The big alien's ill-tempered grumble caused static on the channel. "If I'd known it was gonna be you-"

Snorting, Bastra leaned back in his chair. "But you didn't. Honestly, by now you should trust me to know what I'm doing. Nice trick with the probe droid."

"They have their uses. But next time, comm me first, dammit."

"They would have noticed an outgoing transmission, you big green di'kut. See you back at Takodana?"

"Not this time." Nym sounded upset, and Phel frowned. "Just got word the Trade Federation's moved in on Lok. No damn Nemoidian toad is gonna claim my homeworld unchallenged. The Revenants are back in business. You ever feel like pickin' a fight, come by Karthakk, we'll even pay you for the privilege."

Bastra nodded although the transmission was audio-only. "Give 'em hell, my friend. And call me if you need an extra set of hands."

"Force be with you, loca ulwan. Stay out of trouble."
It was dark, the dank chill of a cave seeping through the plastered stone walls a sharp contrast to the arid heat outside. Despite their attempts to keep their steps silent, the scuff and tap echoed hollowly along the empty halls. Golden light from the wide-beam torch he carried cast deep shadows into the recessed alcoves. After the roar of the firefight in the main hall, the quiet pressed in on his ears.

"Are you absolutely certain there's nobody left?" he whispered. The 's' sounds slapped back from the passage walls like chimes, and the boy winced.

One of his companions gave a soft laugh. "We would sense it, youngling." His voice was still kept low, however.

It was only the second time he'd met a Jedi in his life, but still more than most could claim. His palm felt damp around the too-big grip of the blaster he'd lifted from one of the pirates' cooling corpses, and he had to remind himself it was just the humidity, not blood.

There hadn't been any blood at all.

His other companion made an unhappy sound. "You're certain it's this way?"

He scoffed. "I only worked here most of my life, Master Jedi, until that bounty hunter came and put Her Ladyship out of Tatooine's misery. I suppose the pirates who took over could have put new walls in-"

"I get the point, thanks."

"Be easy, Padawan," the taller Jedi said quietly. "Trust in the Force."

"Yes, Master Mundi. It's a shame the Krayt Dragon that ate her had to die as well."

Their guide threw a wary glance at him over his shoulder. The younger Jedi grinned back.

"This one." Their guide turned down a narrow passage that branched off from the main corridor. "It's a shortcut."

"Sure, why not? Those have never led us to unfortunate places."

"Padawan."

He stopped and turned, the light briefly catching the Cerean and human Jedi's faces before he pointed it at the floor between them. "Look. You asked for a guide. If you think you can do better, you're welcome to try."

The tattooed boy scowled. "Sorry. I just don't like the feel of this place."

"Understandable. Gardulla loved her blood sport. But don't take your anxieties out on our guide, A'sharad."

"Yes, Master."

The door their guide led them to was locked, but it was unable to withstand the Jedi's lightsaber as he cut a human-sized hole through the durasteel; the cored-out part drifted to the floor as if it weighed no more than a feather, tossing up a small puff of dust, and their guide stared. Catching himself, he stepped through the hole - cautious of the still-glowing edges - and cast the beam of his lantern around.

"I thought so," he sighed. "A lot of the nice stuff got stolen when we were clearing out, and I guess
the pirates took some, too. Just the little things, though. It was back here the last time I saw it." He led the way around a rudely graffitied marble statue of a Hutt and the stripped remains of a skiff. "Yeah! There it is!"

A pile of sand-blasted tarps, canvas, and badly-handled tapestries covered a lumpy shape in the corner. Between the two of them, the Jedi were able to shift the mound to one side raising a rank cloud of dust.

Wafting a hand in front of his face, their guide ran reverent fingers over the pod's curves, frowning with regret and anger at the damage. The engine nacelle that had been most accessible at the edge of the fabric covering had been parts-stripped by scavengers, although the sand-blasted yellow air scoops remained; the other engine was fire-blackened, the casing torn and half-slagged from the accident that had grounded the craft.

"It'll take a lot of work to get her flying again, sirs. Sebulba tinkered with it a lot and then, well..."

The Cerean Jedi smiled and touched his shoulder. "We know, youngling, it's alright. We'd like to ask if you want to help get her working again."

The boy's eyes widened. "Sir?"

The younger Jedi grinned. "Anakin said you helped him build it the first time. You can come back with us to Coruscant, if you want. There's a place for you to live, and the Order would pay you for your service."

Kitster Banai felt a thrill of excitement run through him. Being a porter at one of Mos Espa's hotels had been the best he could have hoped for, but the chance to go to the Core? To be paid for his work? To see his best friend again? It was better than he could have dreamed. "Sirs, it would be an honor!"

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is the first in a two-chapter Anakin & Qui-Gon arc. I promise it'll be fun!
Reformation year 977.09.13
Jedi Temple, Coruscant

“When we gave you this assignment, Qui-Gon, we expected you to handle the investigation with your usual level of…”

“Efficiency?”

“Tact.”

Qui-Gon suppressed a smile. Mace already looked close to losing what patience he had left, there was no need to test the remainder. “Given that my usual working partner is no longer a member of the Jedi Order and that I have a Padawan with the barest minimum of training, my methods have by necessity been forced to change.”

The other Master’s lips thinned and he breathed through his nose sharply. “If this is your way of--”

“Do not finish that sentence, Mace.” Qui-Gon’s humor evaporated and he pinned the other man with a ferocious glower. “Anakin doesn’t have the experience nor training for my usual methods; if it were any other Padawan in his place, I would still have to alter my approach because Obi-Wan was fully ready to be knighted. I chose this tactic because it plays to Anakin’s very notable strengths, and if there is one thing the child needs at this stage, it is something to boost his confidence in himself and his abilities.”

He pushed away the distress that had become a frequent companion to the subject of Obi-Wan; his former Padawan had utterly vanished without a word after his visit seven months previous. Anakin had ceased asking if there had been any comm calls while he’d been at class, but sometimes Qui-Gon would catch him checking the logs with a frown.

“He should know to trust in the Force--”

“One cannot trust in the Force without also trusting oneself to use what the Force provides. Maybe it’s more high-profile than you prefer, but this is high-level corporate corruption. In order to get the
information we need, our options are limited.”

The Head of the Order scowled and drummed his fingers on his upper arm in irritation. “Fine. But next time, be specific about what you need money for. Frivolous purchases are not acceptable.”

“Believe me, Mace, there was nothing frivolous about this.”

Mace scoffed and turned to leave, almost tripping over an MSE droid that zipped past with a cheeky warble; he bit back a strangled curse and stormed out of the secondary hangar.

Qui-Gon cast a sideways look at the little droid; he’d picked up enough Binary during his work with Obi-Wan to recognize the ridiculous insult. Though what dirty socks had to do with it was a bit puzzling.

Anakin scowled and yanked the offending module off its mounting. “What was Sebulba thinking, installing a compressor here? That’s just going to choke the intake, not hypercharge it.”

“So all those guides on the HoloNet are wrong?” Kitster asked, grinning. His best friend may have looked more civilised since being brought to the Jedi Temple, but he would still drop Huttese curses like the most hardened of smugglers. They’d been working over his old podracer for months and the tirade of disgust at his old rival’s treatment of the vehicle had yet to run out.

“Most of the podracer guides on the HoloNet are there to trick the creators’ opponents into messing up their engines,” the other boy grumbled. He accepted the desoldering tools back from Kitster and leaned back into the engine cowling with another muttered curse.

It shouldn’t have been possible to miss someone Master Jinn’s size approaching, but the Jedi still managed to make Kitster squeak in surprise when he appeared at his shoulder. “Things seem to be going well.”

“Such as they are, sir.” Kitster offered him a datapad containing a steadily growing list of parts. “If you want this to be as efficient as it was last time, a lot of the components will need to be replaced with lighter versions. I mean, Anakin’s grown a lot, there’s a reason most humans don’t race pods. Sir.”

“Oh, I understand that.” Master Jinn accepted the list and scrolled down the page, his eyebrows arching at the details. “I’m certain some of these we may already have in the maintenance stores. May I borrow this?”

“Well…” The boy hedged, feeling trapped. Master Jinn did need the list if he was going to check, but they were filling it out as they worked and he didn’t want their datapad walking off for any amount of time. But how did you tell an adult who was In Charge, ‘no’?

Anakin rescued him, his head popping out from the engine with a scowl. “We’re still working on that, Qui-Gon. You can copy it, though.”

“That’s a good point, Anakin. My apologies,” Master Jinn said as he pulled a data stick from a pouch on his belt. He even sounded sincere, and Kitster’s jaw dropped a little.

He waited until Master Jinn had left, flagging down one of the other Jedi working in the hangar, to
hiss, “You told him no?!”

Anakin gave him a grease-streaked grin. “You can do that here, you know.”

“But...he’s your *Master.*”

“No.” His friend shook his head firmly. “He’s not my master *that way.* We’re allowed to say no. To most things,” he amended quickly, “sometimes we’re given orders. But there’s a lot of freedom in how we follow them. Qui-Gon is my Master because he’s a teacher; it’s a rank, not a status. If some random person you don’t know asks you to do anything here in the hangar, no matter their attitude or rank, tell ‘em to talk to Garen.” He pointed to the younger Jedi Master Jinn was conferring with. “And if they get pushy, tell ‘em you don’t work here. ‘Cus you don’t, you’re *special staff.*”

“Special staff, huh?”

“Yep! You’re our assistant on this super important mission for the Council, and that’s a big deal, right?” Anakin’s expression was so serious, Kitster had to rethink what he was about to say.

“How big a deal?”

“Huge. That’s why we were allowed to offer to fly you to Coruscant, right?” He frowned. “It’s lucky you were on an indentured contract with the hotel rather than owned, I don’t think they’d have offered to buy you free.”

At Anakin’s request, Kitster fished a microspanner out of the toolbox. Half the tools had been specially made from scrap by Anakin over their years building his racing pods and restoring bits for Watto; the rest were shiny new things. “So what’s the big deal, then? I thought they were gonna have you race? Better now, anyway, if you grow too much more you’ll be too big for it.”

“Well--” Anakin mumbled a curse as something stuck, “--it’s a cover. Means we look like we’re doing one thing, when something else is happening. Someone tattled on a company that deals in pleasure servants and stuff around the invitational circuits, where they won’t upset the Hutts. So Judicial asked the Council to send their best in to check it out, see if there’s any truth to the story.”

The two boys exchanged a knowing look: they knew there were always a lot of fancy young people brought in during the Boonta on Tatooine who weren’t there to watch the races, themselves. “We could go in as spectators, but in order to get access to the important people, we have to look more impressive than that. This company’s CEO sponsors a bunch of big-name racers -- remember Ebe?”

“Yeah, he was nice to us.”

“So if I look like some hotshot pilot on track to win the Mid-Rim Invitational, we’ll eventually get invited closer.”

“But if you’re flying in the races--”

“I can’t do any poking about. That’s why Mom is coming, too. She knows the slave culture, she can get answers from people who wouldn’t talk to anyone else. But don’t talk about her near the other Jedi, I’m not supposed to be seeing her.”

Anakin’s dark scowl silenced Kitster’s question, although he *desperately* wanted to know why his friend wasn’t supposed to contact his only family. He chose a different -- and more personal -- question instead. “So why am I going?” The thought of being dragged from planet to planet, the potential of getting *lost, or left behind,* or even *taken,* weighed heavily on him.

“Cus you need to help me maintain this thing and keep an eye on it. There’s some little droids who
are coming with us, too, to be our security system. And we have our own transport so there’s no risk of other passengers messing with us.” He rested a reassuring hand on Kitster’s shoulder. “Sound good?”

“I guess….”

“Qui-Gon said he’s done stuff like this lotsa times. It’ll be fun!”

“And now you coil it up like this. A pin here, here, and here.”

“Oh!” Shmi turned her head from side to side, examining Rabé’s work in the mirror.

The girl grinned back at her via the reflection. “Go on, test it.”

Biting her lip, Shmi shook her head sharply, waiting for the scalp-crawling sensation of the coil of hair slipping or the poke of a pin coming loose.

“Told you! If I can make sure Padmé’s hair stays up through a battle, I can show you how to make sure yours stays up when you’re running around who-knows-where.” Rabé pulled the pins and the plait fell down to Shmi’s shoulder. “Now, you mentioned a special type of hairstyle?”

“It doesn’t have a name, for good reason. It’s seven plaits, spaced around the outside of the hair. They can be any size and placement, but they need to be visible against the rest of the hairstyle.” She could see from Rabé’s look of dawning comprehension in the mirror that the handmaiden had recognized the significance; it was difficult to resist sharing more about the *tallm* -- the way slaves signaled their presence to each other and to the freerunners they might come across -- but Rabé was not of the culture. Since the Queen had secured her freedom, Shmi had taken to wearing a series of seven small plaits along from the front of her hairline and wrapped into a knot at the back of her head. The style kept her long hair -- warming to auburn at the roots now that it was no longer being baked daily by twin suns -- back from her face and allowed the rest to hang loose across her shoulders, proclaiming both her freed status and her lack of hard labour to any with the knowledge to recognize it.

“But you want it to be tied up as well?”

Shmi nodded. “It would be better hanging loose, but I worry that there may be situations where that would make me stand out too much, or where it might get caught.”

Rabé settled onto the stool behind her again and ran a damp comb through Shmi’s hair, deft fingers experimenting with braids and knots. It felt absurdly hypnotic to have someone else working with her hair, and Shmi caught herself almost dozing off at one point before Rabé declared a style that both suited Shmi’s needs and would be simple enough for her to assemble on her own. Seven plaits, smaller than the width of her finger, caged her head evenly and bound up a simple knot formed from the rest of her hair at the crown. The handmaiden guided her through the motions of pinning and coiling until Shmi could manage the style on her own.

Turning, Shmi bowed to the girl. “Thank you so much for your help. I don’t know why the Queen thought me worthy--”

Rabé smiled and clasped her hands. “Master Jinn felt there was no one else he could ask for
assistance in this matter, since he isn’t so familiar with hairdressers on Coruscant. If you ask me, he
could do with being introduced to a few! But don’t thank me just yet, because now we need to go
shopping.”

Certain her face reflected her horror at the idea, Shmi began to protest. She had been taking the
classes offered by the local repatriation group to succeed on her own, and helping at a small shop
near her apartment; her wages were enough to live comfortably, but not so grand that she could
afford to go shopping on a whim. Rabé laughed gently and squeezed her hand.

“It’s part of your mission stipend, or so Master Jinn told me. I’m to dress you as the sort of woman
who will be ignored. I am very good at this,” she added with a wink.

The resulting wardrobe felt shamefully extravagant: lovely simple fabrics in blues and greens with
touches of amber in subtle patterns, pieces that could be layered to create more than one style. The
only feature she insisted upon were the sleeves: three-quarter length or shorter, revealing the tattoos
marked on the insides of her wrists.

The tailor cooed over the markings in admiration. “So lovely! They look new?”

“They are.” Shmi spoke simply, concealing her pride. The tattoos had been inked on Naboo, as soon
as her freedom had truly sunk in. Tattoos reduced a slave’s value: ‘clean’ slaves sold better because a
slave bearing markings had either known freedom and would be more strong-willed, or was a prize
their owner had no wish to dispose of and was potentially stolen. Her right wrist bore a circle broken
seven times above a simplistic double-curved line describing an avian in flight; a short line
descending from the bird ended above three recurved horizontal lines like waves. On her left wrist
was an intricate rounded knot made of three interlaced crescent moons over the stylized triangle of a
krayt tooth.

She had purchased cuffs of soft material to conceal the tallm when necessary, as they were more of a
personal statement, a declaration that she and nobody else owned herself. But their visibility on this
mission, where she and Qui-Gon hoped she could draw the victims into opening up about their
circumstances, was vital.

Rebuilding the pod took another two weeks, most of which was spent waiting for parts to be
delivered -- Garen had managed to slip a couple of the more exotic replacements into a regular
hangar requisition under Mace’s nose. Anakin filled the time machining the hull plates down to two-
thirds their original mass -- a process he had wanted to do with the original build, but had lacked
access to the necessary equipment. With the hangar’s full complement of tools available, he went a
little nuts, and had to be bodily dragged away by Qui-Gon to eat, sleep, and attend classes.

Kitster had discovered he possessed an intense fear of heights. They hadn’t troubled him before, but
his previous experiences with falling had involved slipping off the narrow stairs of the slave quarters
and tumbling into the sand. In a city where the ground wasn’t even visible between the buildings, he
developed an overly healthy respect for walkway edges, and found relief in the fact that Shmi’s
apartment was mid-stack in a cosy, self-contained Tatooine-diaspora neighbourhood. Once their
mission was over, the owner of a local tapcafe had expressed an interest in hiring Kitster, and he was
eager to accept.

But first, they had a job to do.
Qui-Gon scowled at the dossier he’d put together. Myrkas Gondel, CEO of Gondel Circuit Cruises: full human, age fifty four, originally from Commenor. In addition to running the highly successful tourist trade following the podracing circuits, he’d had sponsorship deals with several well-known pod pilots over the past two decades, and drew more customers by offering signings and holo opportunities with the racers.

A few of the names on the list stood out: Ebe Endocott had been one of the racers Anakin had faced on Tatooine a year and a half previously, as had Sebulba. Sebulba’s sponsorship contract with Gondel had been cancelled after that particular loss. If they encountered the foul-tempered Dug on this run, they’d have to keep a watchful eye out for sabotage.

“What’s new?”

He glanced up at the soft-voiced question. “Lady Skywalker. What can I do for you?”

Shmi hovered at the door to the cockpit, her smile bringing a mischievous light to her careworn features. A year of freedom had been kind to her, and she glowed with health, her eyes bright. Her body language was still deferential – a lifetime of habit was difficult to shake off – but there was more confidence in her bearing, and she had grown more assertive.

“How many times must I remind you that I’m no grand Lady, Master Jedi?”

There was laughter in her tone; the playful exchange was almost rote for them now, and he smiled back. “Until you accept that nobility is more than birthright. I'm sorry I couldn't squeeze a larger ship out of the Temple’s hangar, but space for the pod was a priority.” Qui-Gon had already resolved to sleep in the pilot’s chair for the four-day flight to Malastare; of the two sets of crew quarters, the boys were sharing one whilst Shmi had the second to herself. She had insisted she didn't mind him taking the second bunk, but like most CEC ships the Rigger -class G9 freighter wasn't built to accommodate Qui-Gon’s height.

“I just wondered if you’d like some company for a bit?”

Qui-Gon motioned for Shmi to take the co-pilot's chair. “I’ve been meaning to ask what I might do to make your role in this easier.”

Shmi pursed her lips, frowning distantly. “I’ll be separate from you for most of it, since you're quite noticeable.”

“Am I?”

“The only thing taller than you, Master Jedi, is a Wookiee. You’ve almost enough hair to be mistaken for one, but your Shyriiwook is abominable.” Her deadpan delivery was marred by the teasing glint in her blue eyes.

He glared, mock-affronted. “Nobody's perfect.”

“Self-awareness is a virtue.” A startled laugh escaped Qui-Gon’s control, and Shmi favored him with an arch look for a moment before allowing herself to giggle. “But no, I’ll be more approachable on my own. Anakin’s set up a datapad so that Pip can communicate with me and transmit information. Nobody will notice just another messenger droid.”
The droid Anakin had assembled on Tatooine, C-3PO, had fussed horrifyingly about not being permitted to accompany them; however, they had debated the issue and decided that an admittedly loud and rather anxious protocol droid would be far too noticeable and potentially a liability. Once he had been reminded of the need for Shmi’s home to be protected in their absence, Threepio had valiantly offered himself for the task. To fill their needs, Anakin had modified a half-dozen small, hovering scout droids to serve as security and surveillance assistants. They had about the level of intelligence of an MSE unit and enough onboard memory for six hours of recording. Bing and Boing had been modified as pit helpers for Anakin and Kitster, Zip and Zap would remain at the ship as hangar security, while Pip and Whirr were Shmi and Qui-Gon’s respective assistants.

Garen had expressed both awe and horror at Anakin’s eagerness to simply build such things. He’d been even more awed and horrified when Anakin showed off Zip and Zap’s electric shock defense systems.

“Don't hesitate to comm me if—”

“Qui-Gon.” Shmi gave him a gentle, chiding look. “I’ve done this before. Perhaps not on such a scale, but certainly without support. And I’m good at going unnoticed. It’s you and Anakin I’m concerned for. If your IDs don’t hold up, or someone digs deeper…”

Qui-Gon reached over to touch her hand where it lay on the armrest. “Believe me, we know. I would not risk Anakin needlessly.”

Her fingers wrapped tightly around his. “The life of a slave is neither easy nor safe; often we have no one to rely upon but ourselves. It’s no simple task to learn to trust in others.”

There were times when it was so difficult not to listen, times when it was an invasion of privacy. Qui-Gon squeezed Shmi’s hand gently in return. “I hope you’re able to trust in me as much as I trust you. We didn’t have a very encouraging start—”

She chuckled, warm and forgiving. “Despite putting my son’s life in dreadful peril... it ended well and you kept your word. There’s no point now in stressing over the what ifs when the worst never happened.”

Releasing her hand, Qui-Gon smiled. “I follow a school of thought which encourages Jedi to focus on the moment, rather than dwelling on the past or worrying overmuch about the future. Obi-Wan and I—” his smile faltered but he carried on, “—used to have such heated discussions as to whether it was more beneficial to focus on the Force in the now or in the outcome. An argument held by Jedi scholars for centuries. I'm afraid we never settled it, ourselves.”

“He didn't believe the good in the now also meant well for the future?”

He shook his head, wincing as his hair caught on chair’s cracked leather upholstery. “Obi-Wan has more than once expressed concern that the Force’s will might not necessarily be to our benefit. It’s a viewpoint that betrays greater concern for the well-being of others than for the state of the Force itself.”

Shmi frowned in thought. “But if the Force is within all life, then wouldn't its...its state be influenced by the quality of the lives in the galaxy? Or do you believe it to work the opposite way?”

Qui-Gon felt his smile return in delight at having someone to discuss the subject with. “An excellent question, and yet another aspect of the Living versus Unified schools’ argument. I believe it's the other way around.”
A line formed between her brows. “But that would mean that if the Force became too dark or too light, there would be no way to change it through one’s actions. We would be stuck with whichever extreme the Force chose to manifest. How do you know that following the Force’s will is always for the light, if that’s true?”

“The Force’s natural state is to seek balance.”

Shmi laughed. “But that doesn’t answer the question. Balance between light and dark is not light, it’s half-light. Grey. If either extreme is unfavourable, why should you assume that following the Force will always lead to the light?”

Obi-Wan’s words -- nearly a year ago! -- about treading the boundary came back to Qui-Gon with a suddenness he hadn’t expected, throttling the instinctive answer he would have offered to any in the Temple. Shmi was not a Jedi -- she had some natural affinity, yes, and might have even been accepted for training had she not been enslaved on an Outer Rim world, but she had not been raised to accept the simple platitudes that contented the Council. Her question was genuine rather than rhetorical, and he would not do her the disservice of dismissing it. “There are many known groups which follow their own calling toward the dark. Their existence is not spread widely, of course, and for the most part they wish to be left alone by the galaxy. Their practices balance ours, even if the Council might not admit to such.”

Shmi cast him a chiding look as she rose, straightening the skirt of her long tunic. “That still isn’t much of an answer. Perhaps you need more time to think of one? I understand that tea is good for contemplation.”

“It is, indeed.”

“Come join me, then.”

Malastare was hot; not the baked-in heat of Tatooine but a thick, musty humidity that made breathing a chore. The air held a perpetual whiff of spoiled eggs -- Qui-Gon had identified it as methane, but not enough to poison most sentients. Anakin didn't find it comforting.

The starting arena echoed with the shriek and roar of engine tests, and the entire city seemed to be set to a dull rumble of excited noise. He did his best to ignore it, focusing on re-greasing the engines with a mineral oil blend he’d created himself after weeks of research and testing. It wouldn't do for any of the engines' parts to overheat from friction at the worst moment, and the fine red sandstone dust kicked up by millions of passing feet was terrible. He missed the feel of his Padawan braid bumping the back of his ear, but the risk of someone recognising its significance was too high. As soon as the mission had been handed to them, Qui-Gon had stopped trimming Anakin's hair down, and that morning Mom had carefully plaited the loose braidlock into the hair across the back of his head.

Kitster’s quick intake of breath was all the warning he needed.

<<I thought I recognised this pile of scrap. What are you doing here, desert scum?>>

He knew that voice well enough to not even look up from his work. <<This pile of scrap got you through three races until you crashed it. Too much partying the night before, Sebulba?>>
The Dug snarled and prodded him in the ribs with the business end of a hydrospanner; asshole though he was, he knew better than to switch the tool on. <<And you unearthed both it and your helper from Gardulla’s rubbish pit. Like seeks like, I see. You don’t have a place here, slave boy.>>

“How actually, he does.” Anakin’s Master appeared from his temporary office at the pit-side, looking very un-Masterly in flowing Inner-Rim finery and his hair coiled into a fashionable knot. He’d shaved most of his beard off by Rabé’s insistence, and looked very different from the Jedi Master who had turned up at Watto’s shop seeking ship repairs. He leaned against the door frame, radiating smugness. “Arle Hhshin found out I was managing for Skywalker now and invited him personally. After all, human racers are quite rare, and you know how she appreciates such things.”

Name-dropping Hhshin got Sebulba’s attention, all right. The Gran was one of the higher members on the Mid-Rim Invitational board, a Galactic champion in her own right decades previous; she happened to be an actual friend of Qui-Gon’s, but he wouldn’t say how.

<<Friends in high places won’t make up for a lack of talent!>> Sebulba hissed as he stalked off, a miserable-looking Rutian Twi-lek girl in a tight bodysuit trailing him out.

Anakin scowled disapprovingly after them. “Someone who earned their way out of slavery should be better than their former masters.”

Qui-Gon’s large, comforting hand squeezed his shoulder. “It says much about his character. Try not to antagonize him; if something happens and he points to you, all of us need to appear blameless.”

“I get it. It’s not easy to ignore him, though.”

“Just remember your training,” his Master murmured. “There’s more at stake than a little pride.”

Shmi frowned at her datapad, brushing sweat-damp hair back from her forehead. She was dressed blandly today, her hair hanging loose and tattoos covered, doing her best to look like one of the myriad holonews journalists thronging the docking concourse. Pip hovered at her shoulder, looking like yet another camera drone in standby mode.

Gondel Cruises had landed three full luxury shuttles, and parsing the unwilling from the passengers and the crew was going to be a chore. Using one of the false IDs she’d been supplied with, Shmi had pulled the full list of tour companies following the Invitational circuit, and it was...extensive. Gondel was only one among hundreds. Pip was chewing through the listed crew and passenger manifests, noting people in the crowd and sending matches to her datapad. They had already spotted a few wearing tallm woven into their hair, and one woman with strings of painted paper beads twining her lekku.

Among the crowds of reporters and hawkers at the quayside, another Twi’lek woman was handing out books of coupons for local businesses; beaded freerunner patterns glittered on her belt and the edging of her sarong. It warmed Shmi’s heart to see them active here, and gave her a twinge of regret that there wasn’t more she could do. Aiding individuals would bring satisfaction, but if they could get the business shut down entirely, more good would be done in the long run.

On the other hand, the local ‘runners might have action in progress that could disrupt their mission...or more information.
The next day, hair plaited properly, Shmi returned to her position at the hangar-side tapcaf with Pip. It wasn't even thirty minutes before Pip sent her a fast image of the freerunner heading in her direction, hand concealed in the canvas bag of booklets. She barely had time to switch her datapad display over to an in-progress text document before the sharp stub of a holdout blaster poked the small of her back.

“Who are you?”

Shmi winced as the targeting nub at the end of the barrel dug into her skin. “Is that necessary?” She kept her voice low, her hands flat on the table to either side of her datapad.

“Depends on your answer.” But the other woman did stop jabbing her with the weapon, sliding onto the chair beside her.

“Gondel Circuit Cruises. We’ve been given information on them. We need to get closer.”

The freerunner blew out a breath and relaxed; the blaster vanished into her bag. “You’re all they sent? We’ve been watching them for years, and Judicial sends one person.”

“I’m not alone, but as a former slave it was felt people would be more willing to approach me.” Shmi remained seated, pretending to a calm she didn’t feel. “The last thing we need is for your operation and ours to disrupt each other.”

“Agreed.” The Twi’lek glanced around, then pulled Shmi’s datapad over and tapped something in on the last line. “We’re not doing anything but noting faces right now, I assume you’re doing the same. Get to Mon Gazza as soon after the race as possible, contact this man.” She pasted a convincingly dazzling smile onto her face and pressed a coupon booklet into Shmi’s hand as she left.

Anakin frowned at the map, reviewing the previous day’s familiarization run of the course. It was marked, of course, but the odds of missing a turn at six hundred kliks was high. Now he understood where the oppressive humidity came from: half the course went through swamplands with pools reeking of spoiled eggs.

“Be careful, Ani.” Kitster handed his goggles and helmet over; Anakin accepted them absently, wishing he’d thought to buy a mask to clean the air a bit. Inhaling half the Dune Sea last time had been less than fun. At least he had a proper suit this time; the blue-and-yellow leatherette vest and gloves had underlying durasteel plates, and the brown jumpsuit beneath was treated with fire retardant. It would be useless if things went really wrong, but it would protect him from debris better than his old ragged clothes had. He’d been bruised and singed for weeks after his previous races.

“I’m always careful.”

The other boy snorted and reached over to ruffle his hair. “You are not.”

“Well, I’m careful when it matters, right?” They shared a grin and a hug before Kitster dashed off to grab Anakin’s banner for the procession. Bing and Boing were already hitched to the front of the engines, waiting for the signal to drag the pod to its position on the starting line.

Qui-Gon entered, speaking softly with an older Gran woman, Whirr trailing in their wake. Despite her fine clothing, she was heavily scarred and missing her left eye and arm; an elegant prosthetic
replaced the missing limb. Waving Qui-Gon off, she practically skipped over to Anakin, who hurriedly tucked his helmet under his arm to accept an enthusiastic handshake.

“Skywalker! I’m so sorry I didn’t have the time to meet with you earlier. Call me Arle.” She squeezed his hand between both of hers, the prosthetic’s padding gentle on his skin.

Her excitement was infectious and he found himself grinning back. “You can call me Anakin.”

“Your Boonta’s Eve win caused a massive stir among the traditionalists, let me tell you. It was the most fun I’ve had in years! So when Qui-Gon asked if I would put you forward for this, I just couldn’t say no. I was wondering if I could get a holo of us with your pod, before it gets all covered in circuit mud?”

Qui-Gon politely declined to pose with them, causing Arle to pout for a moment. He opted for holding the holorecorder instead and managed to capture a good angle.

The signal lit for the pod to be brought out, and Arle waved goodbye as she scampered out. “Best of luck, Anakin! We can talk more after the race!”

Anakin and Qui-Gon followed the droids out onto the field. The bowl of the arena had been sprayed down to keep the dust under control, and fine red mud caked the soles of their boots as they walked. An immense set of flat holo-screens faced the crowd from high above the track, and Anakin could just spot the camera drones whirring about beneath the colourful squares of fabric that stretched across the arena. The fabric wasn’t thick enough to prevent the sunlight glaring through, leaving a patchwork pattern of multihued shade and bright ovals across the bowl.

“Remember what I told you before. Focus on the moment. Listen to your instincts.” Qui-Gon chuckled softly. “And don’t use the Force otherwise.”

“I’ve got the jitters,” Anakin complained, trying to flick the jangling energy from his hands. “I didn’t used to get the jitters.”

“It’s just experience reminding you that you’ve done this before.”

“Yeah, and I crashed. Lots.”

“That’s why you have the jitters.” Qui-Gon’s laugh was lost among the growing cheers from the stands.

Anakin no longer needed help to climb into his pod; he’d had to move the foot peddals further back to account for his longer legs. Kitster was right about him growing: he wouldn’t have been able to do this in even another year. Not with his old pod, at least. He pulled up the pre-run status report on the main screen and pushed away the regret that Mom couldn’t come out to wish him luck; she’d hugged him tightly for a long time and kissed his forehead that morning, but in their cover identities, they couldn’t be seen together.

“Your mother asked me to give you this.” Qui-Gon took a length of golden yellow fabric -- one of Shmi’s scarves -- from the pouch on his belt. “To wrap over your face.” He helped Anakin cover his mouth and nose, making sure the boy could breathe easily and that the knot didn't interfere with his helmet.

“It’ll get dirty,” Anakin apologized, and Qui-Gon smiled.

“That's the point.” They hugged awkwardly around the controls, and then Qui-Gon left to join Arle in the Sponsors’ box.
Both engines read green, although they had that day on Tatooine, as well. There was no evidence someone had tampered with the fuel line cap, but he was sure it had happened. Qui-Gon had said not to be obvious about using the Force, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t use it. Just a little. He ran his mind over the outsides of the engines, tracing the lines of the electrical systems and pneumatics. Nothing flickered with danger, although the hostility from some of the other racers prickled at the edge of his senses. It wasn’t worth worrying over: he never went into any race assuming the other pilots would play fair.

“--Anakin Skywalker, the human from Tatooine!”

He opened his eyes and waved at the crowd as the announcer described his previous experience. Not everyone was a fan of having humans in the races, and the negative hollering that could be heard didn’t upset him. It wasn’t about proving that humans could race, anyway. Not this time.

Grinning under the mask, he plugged the starter in and locked it in place. The energy binders snapped to life between the nacelles, sending a vivid thrum through the machine that ran up his spine. Stars, but he loved that feeling!

The light turned blue and the roar of fifteen paired engines briefly overpowered the noise of the crowd. Inertia shoved Anakin back into his seat and he grinned fiercely. No stalling out this time!

The circuit was only thirty kilometers, shorter than the Boonta, but it made up for that in complexity. The first turn was a hairpin in tight quarters, forcing the racers into single-file and partially up the canyon wall to avoid the tall rock pillars jutting into the course. Blackened marks and rubble marked where previous pilots had lost control. The course looped back on itself as they came out onto the rise, forcing a double jump over the earlier track.

Someone in the cluster behind Anakin failed to clear the second jump; a resounding explosion and the high-pitched whistling of debris faded behind them as they hit the treeline, their first opportunity to spread out hindered by the massive indigo trunks and crabbed underbrush.

Two of the pods ahead jockeyed for space; one succeeded in shoving the other too far left. The port-side engine snagged on one of the tough, woody shrubs, whipping the pod around and wrapping its cables around the bole of a tree. Nothing exploded this time, and Anakin hoped the pilot was alright. That was Sebulba’s work. The Dug’s favoured tactic was running his opponents into the scenery. Clenching his teeth, Anakin boosted his speed a bit, enough to put him in the open space between the front and rear clusters.

The course took them out over one of the disgusting lakes. A lurking something with jaws longer than one of his pod’s engines breached the surface, snapping at the annoyances that had disturbed it. Anakin yelled in genuine fear and slewed his pod around the beast as it splashed down beside him; the impact raised a wall of stinking water that sloshed into his pod and knocked it sideways. He spared a moment to flick open the drains; their original purpose had been in case he caught sand, but the same principle applied.

The double-hairpin running uphill nearly caught the pilot ahead of him off-guard; the burnt-red pod rode up the retaining wall almost high enough to hop over the returning track. Anakin seized the chance and slipped by underneath them to a torrent of Huttese cursing. He nearly paid for his recklessness a moment later when the second turn snapped him around; the hoverjets on his pod weren’t enough to stop the curve of its hull gouging a furrow into the soft sandstone and showering him with grit.

He sent a silent thanks to his mom and Qui-Gon for the scarf as he followed the leading pack into
another jump over the track. They descended into a reeking bog, this one too shallow for irritable monsters to hide in. The tufted pads of yellow marsh-grass flattened under the racers’ slipstreams, sprays of murky sludge flaring up. Anakin juked left in time to avoid crashing into a racer whose engines had drowned themselves in someone else’s backwash; the huge turbines chugged miserably as the pilot eased to the side of the course.

The course looped again into the shallow canyon they had only just crossed, and he tried not to flinch at the later racers sailing so close over his head. There was only the final open field before the stadium, another chance for the remaining racers to shift positions and spread out. Another pod towards the front wobbled and ploughed its engines into the sod; something shiny winged past Anakin’s head.

Six pods were ahead of him as they whipped through the arena’s curve at full burn, the screaming of the crowds barely audible over the thunder of the engines, and he bared his teeth in a grin behind the scarf over his face.

Two laps to go.

Shmi wished she could cover her eyes; at the same time she was afraid to blink, as if only her vigilance on the big overhead screens was keeping her son alive. Not being registered as Anakin’s support crew this time, she wasn’t important enough to rate a personal viewscreen of his pod, and she couldn’t say which situation was worse.

There was some relief that they didn’t have such high stakes this time. Anakin and his Master had settled on him finishing fourth -- not so high as to make him an early target, but still strong enough to gain attention. Her son had jokingly called this race a test run, prompting Qui-Gon to chide him to not fall into the trap of overconfidence.

She still wasn’t certain what to make of the way Jedi handled their training. Normal apprenticeships had the youths still living with their families or in doss-houses, but the Jedi trainers put themselves in a parental role, living with and disciplining their apprentices -- Padawans, she reminded herself -- as if they were related by blood. What concerned her was that none of their training seemed to involve actually learning how to raise a child. True, many parents could be accused of being unqualified for such a responsibility-- Shmi had feared herself incapable of rising to the task. But bonds of love frequently encouraged expecting and new parents to look up information and lean on the traditions learned from their parents, as she had. How could the Jedi simply trust that a new Master was capable of raising a child, when they were so adamant about avoiding bonds of attachment?

If she asked any other Jedi, they would likely say something about trusting the Force to make a good match between Master and Padawan. Qui-Gon, however, might provide her a more honest answer. He had certainly seemed willing to at least engage with her earlier questions.

Shmi had so very many questions.

A cheer went up, and she realised her attention had drifted. The first racer had crossed the line, barely ahead of the second; Sebulba was livid, clearly screaming Huttese in the other pilot’s direction as they coasted to the pit-side. The third racer came through, trailing black smoke from an overheated turbine; pit droids rushed out to spray the engine with heatsink foam before towing it out of the way.
Thirty seconds later, comfortably in fourth place, was Anakin, her now not-so-yellow scarf pulled down under his chin to reveal his massive smile. It was all Shmi could do to resist lunging from the stands to embrace him. Her fingernails bit into her palms in frustration. Later, she reminded herself. *He’s safe, you know it, and that’s what matters.*

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Arle met them at the hangar while they were loading the pod into the G9’s cargo hold. The first thing she did, without hesitation, was go to Shmi and offer the sort of massive hug Grans were known for. “You are so strong, dear. I remember when I first started racing, my mother couldn’t bear to come watch me.”

Qui-Gon smiled as he watched the older woman clasping Shmi’s hands. That was a friendship that needed to happen.

Kitster prodded at a warped spot on the pod’s hull, the result of Anakin’s sideswipe against the cliff face. “Is there a reason we’re not fixing this first?”

“We need to reach Mon Gazza before the crowds get there,” Qui-Gon answered, mentally going over the flight time. With the G9’s slightly slower hyperdrive, it would take forty hours, but most of the tour lines would be at Malastare for another ninety. They should have plenty of time for Shmi to make contact with the freerunners.

“And anyway, all my tools are here, we can start working on the way.” Anakin rolled the coiled control cable up the ramp and tipped it on its side with a resounding *thud.* “Hyperspace won’t affect that.”

“Yeah, but they’ll cover the repairs costs here.”

Anakin shrugged. “Nothing broke or needs to be replaced that we can’t cover ourselves. That’s why we raided the hangar stores for multiple spares. We’re fine for now.”

Kitster shrugged. “We could also save those for an emergency…”

“This is more important, though.” Anakin pointed over to where Shmi and Arle were engaged in an animated and apparently amusing conversation. “Mom needs to find someone before the big crowds get there. The biggest problem is that someone might recognize me and make a fuss.”

That was a real risk: Qui-Gon had done his research and racers preferred to reach a location about the same time so that they wouldn’t be mobbed by fans. With twenty days between races to account for travel and repairs, it was a legitimate concern. “We’ll handle that when it becomes an issue. Anakin's right that our mission comes first.”

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Anakin’s words were prophetic. They were fortunate that the hangar manager who recognized him was the conscientious sort; she warned them that the racer-spotters were already on alert. Anakin remained in the hangar for the first week, working on the pod, until the crowds picked up and he was able to hide.
It took sitting in a Miner’s Town cantina for three days wearing tallm before the bartender took Shmi seriously -- the freerunners weren’t suspicious without cause. It earned her interviews with employees from four different hotels, and during the race itself Shmi was able to speak with a freerunner who had worked his way into Gondel Cruises’ staff.

“You’re not going to find any of the slaves off the ships, ma’am, oh no.” The Bimm scratched the fine fur on his chin, his fluting voice making his heavily-accented Basic sound more like a song. Shmi wasn’t terribly familiar with the short creatures’ expressions, but she would have said he seemed distressed. His long ears drooped, the fur on the ends faded with age. “They’re very, very careful, oh yes, they don’t let any of that sort of thing be seen. And the customers, the customers are only the most exclusive, the most privileged. They know what is happening, oh yes, but they will never tell. Their own reputations would be ruined, oh yes, and for that they pay, they pay Gondel most highly.”

She thanked him for the information, and before he left the Bimm gave her a comm code. “If you need to speak again, only call when we are planet-side. Never in space, never, never, please.”

Anakin finished fourth again, chasing the heels of Endocott in third. It took hours for him and Qui-Gon to extricate themselves from the crowd of fans demanding holos and autographs. Qui-Gon took the information in stride.

“It’s not as if we expected this to be easy.”

Anakin scowled. “If the slaves can’t leave, then you’ll need to go onboard to talk to them.” He drowned out the chorus of flat denials by slapping his hand on the table. “No, we need that information, right? We need testimony, we need files, and we need to see how it’s run from the inside. We can do that all at once.”

Kitster’s dark eyes were large, but he chimed in, “If Anakin gets an invitation from the head guy, Shmi and I can go in at the same time. That was part of the point, right? Get invited to a--a party or something?”

Qui-Gon studied the boys, both of whom looked scared but determined. Shmi’s mouth was pinched unhappily. It was one thing for himself and Anakin to take such risks, but for Shmi and Kitster -- two people who were not only not Jedi and not covered by the Temple’s sanction in this venture, but completely untrained -- to engage in infiltration was far beyond even his comfort. “I cannot condone this--”

“No, he’s right.” Shmi’s voice was quiet, resigned. “Kitster and I will have an easier time getting access to the service parts of the cruise ships, if we go in with the freerunner’s help. Nobody pays attention to the servants. That was our lives, Qui-Gon. We can do it.” She quirked a smile and added, “It’s your role that’s the hard part.”

Anakin grinned, fierce and determined. “Looks like it’s time to start winning.”

Chapter End Notes

Slave culture references very strongly inspired by Fialleril. Many thanks to them for letting me borrow from it, go check their stuff out!
Chapter Summary

It's never just about racing: it's also about the crashes!

Chapter Notes

Pretty much goes without saying, this chapter has a TW for implied human trafficking and a brief depiction of slavery. Nothing like as explicit as chapter 11, but it's still there.

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

Reformation year 977.12.11
Torol, Manda

The cantina was jammed beyond capacity. Obi-Wan followed Jinkins through the crowd to the table their friends had claimed before the rush started, sliding a fresh round of drinks in front of the others. It was going to be a tight fit; even with only two of Nym’s ships on site, he’d called in a couple of their regular moonlighters like Obi-Wan. He squeezed onto the other side of a single chair as Phel moved over for him.

“Where the hells is he? I’m going to skin him for making us meet in a city with a podrace going.”

Phel accepted xir drink with a grin. “Maybe he wanted to watch.”

“The HoloNet is a thing that exists,” Obi-Wan grumbled. Phel snickered and tucked xir arm around his back to help them both maintain their perch.

The Feeorin pirate showed up a few minutes later and dropped without preamble into the remaining chair someone had held. “Alright ladies, gentlemen, and otherwise-gendered beings, here’s the deal.” His voice, low and intense, grabbed everyone’s attention immediately. “Our Neimoidian friends are making a deal for some mining ‘personnel’ under cover of the races -- there’s so many people, nobody’s going to notice a few hundred slaves being traded around. Just got confirm on the intel and it’s both solid and not a trap, so we’re going to crash the party and wreck it. Sound like fun?” His grin widened as one by one captains glanced at their crews and received nods. Obi-Wan didn’t even have to look at Phel; xir arm tightened around him and he dropped his chin in acknowledgement.

“Awesome. I’ll send you the details in a bit. Try not to relax too much, I want you all at my hangar by first light, whenever dawn happens here.” Nym punctuated the end of his speech by draining off half of his drink in one go, and the meeting broke up.

Obi-Wan shifted over into a vacated chair. “Short notice, isn’t it?”

“Nah, hit and run doesn't need a lot of planning. We do this right, we can make some toad’s week
miserable and free a bunch of people at the same time.” Nym looked thoroughly satisfied. “We can fade right into the same crowds they're using right before the race, when security is focused on the arena.” He pointed up at one of the flat holoscreens over the bar, where recaps from the earlier races and brief bios of the pilots were playing on a loop. “Wouldn't be the first time we've done this.”

Phel gave a surprised laugh. “There's a human kid racing?”

“Really?” Obi-Wan twisted to see the screen more clearly and felt his jaw drop as Anakin's name scrolled past. The name listed for his manager was unfamiliar, but that was definitely Qui-Gon Jinn. Torn between horror and hysterics, he settled on a knowing chuckle. “I wondered where he disappeared to; it’s good to see he’s still in the game.”

“You know him?”

“Not personally, but I was on Tatooine the year he won the Boonta.” He took a drink while he recovered his composure. Whatever they were doing here on Manda -- racing again, Jinn? -- it was likely for the Order. Hopefully Nym’s plans wouldn't upset anything Qui-Gon was embroiled in.

A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth, impish and amused. *Well, why not?* He prodded the panel in the center of the table and pulled up the race listing for the next day.

Phel leaned in, crowding his shoulder. “Are you seriously…? I thought you guys said the Force shouldn’t be used for petty things.”

“Petty things like playing pranks. What I’m doing here is taking information about the racers and their previous performance... and using the Force to extrapolate the most likely outcome.”

“But the Force can’t predict the future?”

“In ninety-nine point nine percent of instances, the Force will never show you the *future*, just the most likely possibility.” He smiled grimly. “Usually in those situations, it’s an undesirable possibility that we have the power to change. But this is different from that, it’s just data processing. And if we happen to earn a few credits from that insight, there’s no harm done.”

Nym cleared his throat, reminding them he was still sitting there. The Feeorin had shown incredible tolerance toward Obi-Wan’s use of the Force and teaching Phel. He gave them a bland look.

“Shameless. You really think he’ll finish third?”

Obi-Wan simply gave Nym his best innocent smile and placed the bet.

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The circuit on Nanth’ri took advantage of a long archipelago through tropical waters, surrounded by resorts where guests could rent skimmers and run the course at a much slower, safer speed during the off-season.

The pods rocketed through a water-carved half-tunnel of natural stone, acoustics turning the roar of engines into a prolonged howl that sent nesting birds fleeing into the lavender sky. Anakin spared a moment to double-check the readout from the starboard fuel injector. He’d scrubbed the part as well as the entire fuel system after a clog during the race on Manda had nearly cost him his position in third place, but a little healthy caution never hurt.
Manda’s uban run had also knocked two racers out of the running entirely: Latts Dano to Sebulba’s wiles and Doolie Chuwana to what post-race analysis suggested was a local rodent that had been jarred from an upper level and fallen into her pod’s right engine, destroying it beyond repair.

A spray of backwash from Endocott’s pod nearly caught him, and Anakin juked aside. Focus, damn it! They’d got the attention they wanted after the last race, now it was time to maintain that streak.

That meant figuring out how to get past Endocott. The Triffian pilot was uncommonly nice and easygoing in person, but that politeness didn’t extend into the race itself. He was currently in third place and weaving across the narrow part of the course to keep Anakin from passing.

Stubborn! He could try for second again, but nooOOoo… Behind the scarf over his mouth, Anakin’s lips pressed into a thin, frustrated line. They were coming up on another tide-carved half-tunnel, its roof open to the sky; the last such obstacle before the finish line. He dropped back for maneuvering room.

Ahead, Endocott hit the tunnel, banking into the curve. As soon as he heard the tone of his own engines change, Anakin wrenched the throttle levers forward and twisted, throwing his pod up the wall.

Timing… timing… now! He hit the top of the curve on Endocott’s flank and sailed over and past; the Triffian let out a shrill warble of alarm. For a moment gravity warred with inertia and the restraints dug into his shoulders; then he was dropping down the inside wall and shooting out into the clear bay. Anakin couldn’t restrain a whoop as he gunned it forward, following Sebulba and Perchotti into the arena.

He’d buy Ebe a drink later to show he’d appreciated the challenge. Right now, he was whipping through the deceleration loop with the crowds screaming in his ears.

Every world we’ve been to so far is the same. Shmi narrowed her eyes against the glare of a ship approaching the multi-level docks. It wasn’t that they were all the miserable urban hellscape that Lantillies presented -- Lantillies had more in common with Coruscant than Malastare. It was the unabashed materialism and waste they represented.

She had so few memories of life before her family’s trade caravan had been overrun by pirates, what she did recall had made other worlds seem like beautiful utopias. How much of that memory was merely youthful innocence, ignorant of the shadows hidden beneath the beauty?

Lantillies was a corporate fantasy; modular racktower structures dotted heavily with advertising formed the majority of Wrights’ Landing’s municipal sprawl. The glare of the signs was thick enough to obscure the stars at night. A number of shipping and trade guilds held offices if not headquarters somewhere in the precisely-planned grid, along with a number of shipbuilding companies.

It was those companies that played host to the Invitational’s fifth race, and the entire course was a part of one of the local testing tracks. Anakin had muttered about feeling like he’d been caught in a garbage chute after the familiarization run the day before; Qui-Gon had smiled and said, “Clearly a career in aeronautics testing is not in your future.”

Her lips twitched in a smile at the memory. Anakin had never really had a father figure before. The
loss of Jinn’s previous apprentice -- the young man was still very much alive, but Shmi felt privately
that even if offered the chance to return, he would never accept -- seemed to have made the Jedi
Master more conscientious, more aware that his students had needs that sometimes claimed priority.
At times when he thought no one might be looking, Qui-Gon’s gaze seemed lost in some other world
beyond sight, or perhaps memory. He had ensured that Anakin received the care he needed in order
to adapt to his new life, but Qui-Gon seemed to have forgotten about himself.

Yet another question to ask him later. The man would avoid uncomfortable matters forever unless
someone pushed him into it.

“L’acheysee?”

Shmi turned to take in the Bimm freerunner with relief. The freerunners had been scarce during the
race on Nanth’ri, and Shmi had seen nobody else bearing tallm since the Manda race. “My friend.
It’s good to see you again.”

The little alien hopped up to perch on the poured-stone guardwall she had been leaning against.
“You’re very determined, ma’am, yes indeed. Security is much higher, and we were unable to have
such freedom on Nanth’ri.” His greying ears twitched and he pressed a delicate fingertip to the end
of his nose. “Another Depur lost his property to pirates on Manda. So tragic!” His wide mouth split
into a grin at the slave owner’s misfortune. “What’s more, it was a Trade Federation deal in progress,
and they cannot even report their losses, because it would raise many, many questions, oh yes.”

The Bimm’s giggles were infectious, but Shmi sobered quickly. “That’s wonderful news, but I still
need to gain access and record testimony. This has set us back quite a bit.”

The Bimm was bobbing his head agreeably. “Oh yes, indeed. Will you be alone?”

“No, I have a friend joining me. He knows the culture as well.”

The freerunner tilted his head in thought. “After the race tomorrow, meet me on the street behind the
dockside cantina with the alarming yellow sign. You know it?” At her nod, he hopped off the wall.
“Bring your friend, we will get you in while security is more distracted than usual.”

The crowd fairly exploded as Anakin passed Perchotti into second place just instants ahead of
crossing the finish line. It had been a hard-fought run: the Chadra-Fan pilot had used the track’s
regularity to cut Anakin off at each opportunity. If he was forced to admit it, only the other pilot’s
distraction in the last half-kilometer had allowed Anakin the chance to edge by.

He pulled off to the pit-side. Up ahead of him, Sebulba was standing on the bonnet of his own pod to
watch the board as the other racers followed them in; the moment the Dug spotted Anakin’s name
below his, his head whipped around to snarl at the boy. Anakin grinned back and gave his best
sardonic nod, more of a snide chin gesture, before Qui-Gon and Kitster reached him.

Kitster hooked Bing and Boing to the engines to move the pod. “I can’t stay. How much work does
it need?”

“Just the usual post-race tune-up, we can take care of that later.” Anakin caught Kitster as the other
boy threw himself in for a hug. “Take care of Mom, alright?”
“Promise!”

Qui-Gon clapped Anakin on the shoulder like a good manager and gave him a chiding look, but it was gentled with a smile. “What did I say about goading Sebulba?”

Shaking his head, Anakin nudged the droids into following them back to the hangar. “If someone wants to be antagonized, is it really goading?”

“Yes, Padawan.” Qui-Gon ruffled his hair. “Ah. We have a visitor. That didn’t take long.” A silvery protocol droid was waiting impatiently at the hangar bay door beside Arl, who was bouncing on her toes with excitement.

“Ani! Oh, well done!” The Gran woman swooped him up in a hug. “Did you intend to steal second in front of everyone like that?”

“No, but it made a good show, didn’t it?” Anakin's grin was so wide his face ached as she set him back on his feet.

“That's going to be the replay holo of the year, and we're still only in the first month!”

The droid was rocking from one foot to the other in agitation. “I beg your pardon, but I have an important message for Manager Sal Do-Kachin.”

“That would be me,” Qui-Gon said with a polite bow. Mollified by the respect, the droid straightened.

“My Master, Myrkas Gondel, wishes to invite Pilot Skywalker and yourself to a private gathering aboard Gondel Circuit Cruises’ flagship, the Aetherial Dream. It is to be a celebration of certain pilots’ skills, as well as an opportunity to discuss potential business ventures.” The droid paused for effect, then added, “If you wish to accept this invitation, I am to wait until you are ready and then escort you.”

Anakin and Qui-Gon exchanged a glance. “We’d be delighted,” Qui-Gon said. “Would you mind waiting here until we’ve finished shutdown for the pod?”

“No, all, sir!” The protocol droid toddled over to the hangar entrance and planted itself like a sentry by the door.

Anakin resisted the urge to shake his head at the droid as he hit the switch to close the bay door. Qui-Gon already had the pod’s fuel lines hooked up to drain and was setting the commands for Bing and Boing to start the cleaning cycle once the drain finished. Arle beckoned them over to the office. “Just a quick word before you go!”

As soon as they were out of sight from the droid, Arle pulled out a pocket-sized jammer and switched it on, her expression serious. “You’ve never dealt on the competitive end of the circuits before, so listen carefully. Gondel is a big name, but not for good reasons. He’s a senior sponsor and tried to buy his way onto the board several times. We keep telling him no -- only retired racers get invited -- but he keeps trying. The man’s Hutt-spawn. He’ll act like your best friend in the world, but all he cares about is how much money and influence you can earn him.” She knelt and rested her hands on Anakin’s shoulders, her remaining two eyes narrowed with concern. “I know you have a job to do, but please, please be careful. Don’t accept any deals from him immediately, and don’t make him any promises, even verbally. He records everything.”

Nodding solemnly, Anakin gripped her hand. “We know what we're doing.”
Breath burning in his chest, Kitster raced along the moving walkways, weaving through the crowds toward the dockside. He wished they’d chosen a meeting place closer to the arena, but it made more sense to connect close to the ship.

Shmi was already there, along with her contact, a short furred alien not much taller than Kitster. The Bimm sized Kitster up as the boy leaned against a wall and struggled to catch his breath.

“Well, he’s a bit young, but once we get a uniform on him nobody will notice.”

Kitster glanced up and found the freerunner smiling at him. “Busy day, yes?” He handed each of them a thin metallic cuff to wear on their wrists. “These are your passes on and off the ship. Don’t lose them!”

“But won’t these also track our movements on the ship?” Shmi asked.

The Bimm’s smile turned secretive. “These are specially made by the ‘runners. You will pass unnoticed by the internal systems. Come.”

Their approach to the ship went unchallenged by the security at the hangar entrance; inside the Aetherial Dream’s staff entrance was a locker room. They found uniforms that fit and secreted their street clothes in the Bimm’s personal storage. Shmi used her datapad to summon Pip and Whirr to keep watch the dockside, which the freerunner hummed over in approval and then requested the droids’ specs.

Their guide accessed a terminal by the door and nodded in satisfaction. “There is a sudden request for maintenance in the main server room. How fortuitous! Follow me and look tired. It has been a long day, after all.”

Gondel’s “private party” was more of a business social. Qui-Gon sipped at his drink and filtered the ethanol from his system before it could hit. He’d insisted on alcohol-free drinks for Anakin, who had put on an admirable show of pouting but accepted the restriction. Ebe Endocott was there, along with a few other racers and a number of corporate sponsors; the Triffian immediately pulled Anakin into a jargon-loaded discussion on what sounded like pod maintenance and modification.

“I’m surprised we’ve never met before, Mister Do-Kachin -- ah, may I call you Sal?” Gondel had the well-built physique of the wealthy with expensive personal trainers and medical access, his sandy hair waxed back into a style reminiscent of a bird’s crest. He’d looped his arm companionably through Qui-Gon’s and was happily talking the Jedi Master’s ear off about his fortunes and those who benefited from them.

“If I may call you Myrkas?”

“Of course!” The smile Gondel aimed his way was only friendly on the surface; it didn’t reach his eyes, which had narrowed in calculation. “You have a solid reputation, Sal, I’m just surprised our paths haven’t crossed until now.”
“Well, I like to take my chances on the underdog pilots. Getting started is an intimidating proposition, after all,” he dissembled.

“Indeed, indeed! But where do they go once they’ve had that start? The Outer Rim circuits are limited in how much success one can earn--”

_Translation: The Hutts have all the control and won’t share it with him_, Qui-Gon thought sourly. On the other side of the room, Anakin picked up the thought and sent back the impression of a giggle.

“--This is your first foray into the Mid-Rim in a long time. Underdogs are one matter, but you’ve found a rare talent in Skywalker and I can’t blame you for trying to make the most of it. It would be remiss of me not to offer a fellow entrepreneur some much-needed assistance.”

Minding his words carefully, Qui-Gon admitted that Anakin would indeed benefit from better connections and that he had no desire to hold the young man back. He had met politicians across the galaxy, negotiated peace treaties and cooperative agreements with the most intransigent people in the galaxy _not always successfully_, his mind whispered; it always picked the worst times to remind him of Melida/Daan, and still being in the same room as Gondel was turning out to be one of the greatest challenges of his career.

It didn’t take Anakin long to figure out that the other racers who had surrounded him were actively keeping the corporate types in the room away. Whenever one of them tried to insert themself into the group, a pilot would distract them with questions about contracts or demand introduction to someone else in the room. At one point, Perchotti instigated an outright argument -- simultaneously the most polite and venomous Anakin had ever witnessed -- by suggesting that one contractor was poaching from another.

He leaned in close with Ebe. “I’m not stupid, you know. What’s going on here?”

The Triffian continued grooming Anakin’s short hair without a flicker of surprise. “These sentients will try to take everything that isn’t nailed down. They think you’re an easy mark because you’re still a minor by human standards.” The tips of his thermoflaps waggled in an approximation of a grin. “It’s a group agreement, they don’t get to lay a word in your ear without your manager being there to hear it.”

“Not even Mister Gondel?”

Perchotti gave a high-pitched grumble. “Especially not him. The rest of us are legal adults and have certain rights his contracts can’t overrun, but you’re a youngling. _And_ a former slave; everyone knows it, and they think maybe you won’t know better.”

“Joke’s on them, I’ve been in therapy,” he muttered. The closest racers laughed, and Ebe paused his grooming to pat Anakin’s head in approval.

“Good! We all know you have a limited time to enjoy a racing career -- humans grow so fast at your age -- but don’t take a contract from Gondel. He’s no better than the rest.”
The humans had been away for hours when Zip detected unauthorized access at the hangar door. It ran a check of its internal memory -- no, Master Jinn hadn’t yet sent the signal indicating they were even on their return route, much less the signal indicating they were back. From its position at the hangar door, Zip floated over and plugged into the lock system, scrambling the code just as the initial entry was accepted.

For a few moments a silent war raged, fought on a battlefield of code between droid and slicer, until the sentient outside the hangar lost patience and shorted the lock out completely. Zip beeped to itself in satisfaction: that would leave a noticeable sign of forced entry. The door popped and a sentient’s hand slipped through to force the hatch the rest of the way; Zip snapped a quick burst of electricity that made the sentient jerk their arm back, swearing.

The droid didn’t stick around for retaliation. It drifted up into the shadows of the hangar’s upper reaches, above the floodlights, and circled around.

A smattering of blaster-fire sprayed through the opening while another sentient hooked a bare metal prosthetic on the edge of the door and hauled it open. Zip counted four, a number corroborated by Zap, who was hiding in the darkness beneath the ship. Two humans, a horned humanoid, and a short insectoid entered cautiously, weapons panning across the hangar.

“The kark was that?” one of the humans grumbled. He was shaking his left hand, which had gone limp from overloaded nerves.

Zip chittered a laugh in Binary, which Zap echoed when the sentients twitched and looked around in panic.

The insectoid clicked in annoyance. “Security droids? Wasn’t told about that.”

“We got a job to do, droids or no droids. Come on,” the humanoid grumbled, and pushed away from the wall and moved into the open. He made it as far as the foot of the ship’s ramp when his body went rigid and then collapsed, twitching.

Zap warbled in satisfaction and shot another jolt into the grid of conductive wire mesh Master Jinn and Mistress Shmi had spread beneath the ship; the Gotal’s blaster clattered off into the shadows, flung from spasming fingers.

“I see it!” The second human took a shot at Zap, who flitted in chaotic spirals like a stinging pest beneath the ship. Zip circled around above the human and dropped a scattering of spare bolts and wires from its cargo onto his head. A stray shot pinged off the hangar ceiling as the human yelped and flailed in surprise, taking out one of the floodlight bulbs in a shower of glass.

The other human was cursing. “Stop shooting the damn things, do you want Security to pay us a visit?”

“How do you propose we get Byne out from under there, then?”

The Gotal was groaning, struggling to roll over. “C’n move my damn self, leave it. Not being paid enough for this.” Zap blatted a threat and the man raised his hands in protest. “Yeah, we get it, we get it! Kark!”

The droids let the four intruders recover themselves and retreat, although not without Zip dropping the scrap metal bits in its secondary cargo on the insectoid’s head when he appeared to hesitate. Between the two of them, they restored the hangar door’s function and settled in to wait for Master
Their freerunner guide had let Shmi into the cabin section where Gondel’s slaves were kept while Kitster did an admirable job pretending to fix things in the primary server room. The special high-yield datadisk he’d plugged into the memory banks was doing its job searching and copying anything and everything that might be remotely relevant.

The slave quarters weren’t nearly as dire as Shmi had feared -- they were crammed in close quarters, but everything was clean and well maintained.

“Of course,” a Twi’lek boy told her sourly. “His guests are high-class and he wants us to meet their high-class expectations.”

She took holorecords of the conditions and of the slaves’ faces if they agreed, noted the dates and locations they had been bought. Names, citizen ID numbers if they remembered them, homeworlds. There were well over a hundred of varying ages, genders, and races, and the scale of the operation was sickening.

Security patrols passed, but Shmi had her maintenance cart and an assistant droid cleaning the floor.

The Bimm returned some time later. “Your friend has what you need. Do you?”

Only years of experience kept her expression from wavering. “It would take hours to document everyone. I wish we had that time.”

The little alien smiled sadly and patted her hand. “Let us get you out of here, so you can do good work for these people.”

“Sitting. Sitting is good. This chair is my favourite chair in the whole galaxy, I’m never moving. I live here now.” Anakin sagged into the lounge bench seat along the wall, wishing he’d learned enough of the Force to do something about his aching feet, legs, spine...really, everything hurt. That party on Gondel’s ship hadn’t had very many chairs beyond the CEO’s cushy conversation nook. Even the thirty minutes spent pretending to be interested his sales pitch hadn’t made up for several hours of increasingly uncomfortable standing around.

Qui-Gon chuckled. He looked about as tired as Anakin felt. “I have it on good authority that your bunk is more comfortable.”

“You’d hafta carry me.” He let gravity take over and flopped onto his back before pulling at the straps on his boots and kicking them off onto the floor. “I’m surprised my feet don’t look like balloons. Is that normal for those sorts of parties?”

“Unfortunately.” His Master was reading a datapad, probably the incident report filed by Zip and Zap. The two droids had transmitted a running commentary, complete with still holos of the four intruders. “The lack of seating is designed to keep people moving around, it facilitates mingling. Was
"Endocott actually combing your hair?"

"Grooming. It's a Triffian thing, they really like younglings." He snickered. "Also, Ebe learned a while ago that looking fond of kids made the ladies like him even more."

Qui-Gon stared at him for a moment, eyebrows arched in astonishment. "And you don't mind him using you like that?"

Anakin raised his head, puzzled by his teacher's reaction. "Well, no? A lot of people do things just for looks. Ebe might have a massive ego, but at least he's still really nice. Unlike that sleemo Sebulba."

"Whom I note was not there, despite his wins these past few months."

"Yeah." He frowned up at the ceiling. "I have a bad feeling about that."

His mom and Kitster returned a short time later, looking hollow-eyed and grim. Kitster handed Qui-Gon the datadisk and datapads they'd used and sat down next to Anakin, hugging him tightly. His mom's face was in that fixed, flat expression that indicated she was deeply upset. She said nothing as she went into the tiny galley; a few minutes later Anakin smelled the richly spiced aroma of tea being brewed. Pip and Whirr had trailed them in and sat beside the charge ports, booping to each other softly at their humans' distress. Even Qui-Gon remained silent until everyone had been served a cup of tea and the atmosphere had lost some tension.

"Was it that bad?"

Shmi shook her head. "Comparatively...no. I had expected worse. That doesn't mean it isn't horrible."

Kitster had released Anakin finally and was resting his chin on his fist, staring into the steam. "I thought...I thought I was ready." He glanced up; Anakin already had a hand on his friend's shoulder, rubbing soothing circles on his back, while Shmi nodded wordlessly. "It wasn't that long ago I was a slave to Gardulla. I thought...having been there...I'd be fine. But it all came right back." Tears ran silently down his cheeks; Kitster's hands were shaking when he finally lifted his cup to drink.

From Qui-Gon's expression, it was clear the Jedi Master was lost in how to respond. Eventually he asked, "What do you need?"

The boy shrugged, but Shmi had an answer. "Hot showers. With water, not sonics. I think the three of us will be sleeping in the same room tonight." They'd probably be sleeping in the same bed; it wouldn't be the first time, but being crowded was preferable to being alone.

Qui-Gon's datapad pinged with a message. He read it and stood. "I have to go talk to the dockmaster; they're here to see about fixing the lock the intruders damaged. Will you be alright?"

Anakin's mother nodded without looking up at him. "Thank you, Qui-Gon." As soon as he'd left, she reached over and turned on the audio receiver, switching through until she found a station playing music they didn't recognise.

He waited until the next day to look over the information Kitster had copied off the ship's computer. Thousands of messages and memos, some formal, others not, concerning "acquisitions" and "staffing support" that happened to have connections to operations in Hutt space and the Outer Rim slave markets. A lot of the slaves his mother had interviewed had memories of freedom prior to raids and pirate attacks.
A lot of the higher-level communications were addressed to or from someone who signed off with “A. Troon.” Anakin pulled up the HoloNet and did some searching.

Then he stormed into the cockpit where Qui-Gon was just waking up. “Gondel is the son of Senator Troon from Commenor. Guess who has equal shares in GCC?”

Blinking the haze from his eyes, Qui-Gon accepted the datapad Anakin thrust angrily in his direction. “Athilis Troon? He’s the one who supported Commenor’s sending support to Ranulf Tarkin’s security force right before the Stark War. Are you certain?”

“Positive.” Anakin dropped into the co-pilot’s chair, glaring at nothing in particular while his master parsed through the information.

“Commenor is patronymic; why the-- oh. Separation between Troon and his first wife, she reclaimed her family name. Gondel reached out to Troon for startup assistance twenty-four years ago, that’s why Troon has equal shares with Gondel. Still, no major operations can be done without Troon’s approval.” He grumbled under his breath. “Although whether he has personal knowledge or just votes in favour without looking remains to be seen. That information generally doesn’t reach the public domain. We’ll need to issue a formal request once we return to Coruscant.”

“But if those things need his votes to pass--”

“Not necessarily, there are other shares in the hands of others.” Qui-Gon gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Calm yourself, Padawan.”

“But-!”

“Anakin.”

Drawing a deep breath through his nose, Anakin clenched his teeth, then sighed. Qui-Gon was right -- although Anakin hated admitting to it. While the information was there, he had jumped to a conclusion with it that might not be entirely accurate. Separating involvement from responsibility was just unsatisfying.

“Okay.” He sighed. “So what do we do with this information?”

“We don’t do anything with it,” Qui-Gon said reluctantly. He turned the pilot’s chair to face Anakin, resting his elbows on his knees. “Everything we find here is being handed over to Judicial. They’re the ones who run the analysis and make the final call.”

“But... if we’re right here--”

“It’s not our place to pass judgment or mete out justice, Anakin.” He sighed and his forehead creased in that way it always did when he was trying to remember instructions Anakin’s therapist had given him. “Remember Naboo?”

_Great, lesson time._ He scowled. “What about it?”

“When we accompanied the Queen back to Naboo, my purpose and Obi-Wan’s was not to oversee the breaking of the blockade and invasion. We were there only to protect the Queen from the Sith and to deal with him, while the Queen and her people handled everything else. Matters involving the Sith are the only time at which the Jedi have ultimate authority.” His smile was reluctant and didn’t quite reach his eyes. “The rest of the time, our actions are subject to the Senate’s will.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Anakin protested. “I thought we were supposed to be guided by the
“And we are, but we are also bound by the laws of the Republic.” Qui-Gon patted the datapad. “There is enough information already to shut Gondel’s operation down quickly once Judicial sees this -- and they will move quickly. Any further punishment for Gondel -- and whether Troon is to be held accountable or not -- is out of our hands.”

He passed the datapad back and stood, stretching. Several joints let out loud clicks and Anakin winced at the sound.

“Qui-Gon, how do you just...accept that? If the Senate is full of people who care more about themselves, how can the Jedi get anything done?”

His master smiled. “And now you sound like Obi-Wan. Let’s get some breakfast, and we can discuss it.”

The city of Worlport hadn’t changed much since Qui-Gon’s previous visit to Ord Mantell with Obi-Wan five years earlier. It certainly didn’t smell any better, despite the ocean breeze blowing the smog further inland.

Anakin was grumbling as he fussed with the breath mask he’d been issued. “I think they sized it wrong.”

“Here, let me.” Qui-Gon knelt and helped his Padawan figure out how the straps secured around his head. The final race circuit went out into the Scraplands north of the city; the name was unimaginatively accurate. The smog from Worlport mingled there with toxic gas leaking from abandoned ships and structures, making the Scraplands uninhabitable to all but the most desperate junkers.

“It's going to suck wearing this thing while racing.” Anakin cupped his hands around the mask’s weight, mouth twisted in discomfort.

Qui-Gon scowled. “I wish Garen hadn’t taught you that word.” His comm pinged for attention, and a grim smile crossed his face as he checked the message. “It seems our friend Gondel wishes another word with us. Feel like taking a walk?”

They were escorted to Gondel’s office onboard the Aetherial Dream. The instant they entered, Qui-Gon knew something had changed. The businessman regarded both of them with an air that bordered on predatory and a smile that suggested he had caught them doing something illicit.

“So good of you to meet with me, Mister Do-Kachin, Pilot Skywalker. I’ve learned something interesting, and I was wondering if you would care to give me your impressions of this.” He activated the projector in his desk to show Anakin’s personal file -- the file that was only accessible by law enforcement agencies. Halfway down the page was highlighted the line, ‘Accepted into the Jedi Temple on Coruscant on 15.05, year 976, for training’.

Qui-Gon spared a glance at Anakin, who had gone pale under his tan. “How did you get that? That’s not a public file.”

Gondel’s smile was unfriendly. “I have my ways. The question right now is, how did you manage to
evade your masters for one last joyride around the galaxy?” His pale eyes slid over to Qui-Gon. “I see your manager knew about this, or at least he’s not surprised. Are you a co-conspirator in this, Mister Do-Kachin?”

_He knows about you, but he doesn’t know about me. We can still play this game_, Qui-Gon sent to Anakin. He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. “It was part of our agreement for my funding his entry into the Boonta Eve race that year.”

“Sal-!” Anakin hissed.

“It’s fine, Anakin. What do you want, Myrkas?”

The holographic display shifted to show the contract Gondel had offered during the gathering. “I was thinking about the contract we discussed last week. I think it could bear a few adjustments, don’t you?”

The alterations in the contract language, when Qui-Gon found them, were outrageous and veered dangerously close to indentured servitude. He let anger show in his eyes as he glanced back at Gondel. Gondel’s smile had widened, showing teeth without humour. “Of course, if you refuse the terms of this contract, someone might let slip that the star human pilot is a Jedi. You know how the fans feel about cheating in the races, I’m sure, much less the other pilots.”

Being Force-sensitive was not considered cheating -- certain races had a natural affinity or extrasensory organs, and were not prohibited from utilizing them. But what made Anakin seem special was that humans lacked both extrasensory organs and the heightened reflexes of the more commonly seen races. If he was discovered to be Force-sensitive, much less a Jedi in training, the public backlash would have potentially fatal consequences for him, as well as making it that much harder for humans to find acceptance in the racing circuits in the future.

Anakin’s features had gone from pale to flushed with outrage. “I’m not signing that!” He twisted out from under Qui-Gon’s quelling hand on his shoulder. “Sal, you can’t seriously be considering this!”

“He has, unfortunately, a very good point.” He caught Anakin’s eye and arched an eyebrow; the boy’s eyes went wide. Turning back to Gondel, Qui-Gon said, “I propose a wager. If Anakin loses this final race, we’ll sign your bloody contract. If he wins, we keep the prize, and you drop the matter entirely.”

Gondel’s eyes narrowed. “Those are very long odds in my favour, Do-Kachin. Why make a bet like that?”

“Because it’s possibly the last year Anakin will be able to race, given his recent growth cycles. And because I have faith that his determination to retire on a high note will far outweigh your determination to keep him.” They matched glares for a moment, but Qui-Gon could tell he had Gondel’s interest.

“Sal, what are you doing?” Anakin hissed.

Qui-Gon gave him a tight smile. “Is your pod not the ‘fastest ever,’ or were you exaggerating for my benefit?”

Gazing daggers, Anakin slumped back in his chair. Qui-Gon turned back to Gondel with that same smile. “How about it, Myrkas?”

Gondel’s eyes glittered in the light from the hologram. “I’m getting that in writing, Do-Kachin.”
“Of course.”

“You did what?” Shmi stared at Qui-Gon, horrified. This was almost worse than the Boonta race -- how could Qui-Gon be so irresponsible?

“We knew that, once he gained interest in Anakin, Gondel would look him up. We were counting on it.”

“Anakin?”

Mouth full of savoury pastry bought from one of the street vendors, Anakin nodded. “It's enter- um. What was it called?”

“Entrapment. We now have physical evidence, signed by Gondel’s own hand, that he’s willing to indenture a minor. If he'd been any sort of upright, conscientious businessman, he would have reported Anakin to the Board and let them deal with things on an official level.” Qui-Gon had a satisfied look on his face that made her want to slap him.

“Was this really necessary?!”

He sighed. “We couldn't have hidden Anakin under a false ID, too many people in the circuits are aware of him. It was going to happen anyway, we may as well make use of it.”

“When we return to Coruscant, Qui-Gon Jinn, we will be having a discussion about acceptable risks during assignments.” She caught not only Qui-Gon’s wince but Anakin and Kitster’s twin flinches and tried not to feel just a little smug about it. “As it is, he’ll probably hire someone to sabotage the pod, the race, or both just to ensure Anakin loses.”

Anakin and Kitster exchanged a look. “Not that it would make it any more dangerous than it already is--” Shmi glared at her son and he had the sense to look abashed. “We came prepared for that. It’ll be fine.”

Droids didn’t get bored. In theory, anyway, but in practice, droids often disliked having little to do, and even the simplest would invent tasks to occupy their time. Zap found the pod hangars in the arena to be much less interesting than the ship hangars -- there were fewer external sounds to analyze. Zip and Zap had played guessing games regarding the species of various passing sentients, and would whistle insults at droids passing outside.

The arena, however, was silent after hours. They had already counted three sentients on night security patrols in their region of the building, and four cleaning droids. The cleaning droids were boring and unaffected by their whistled jokes as they passed.

That wasn’t the sound of the security patrol. Zap whisked over to the door just as it whooshed open without fanfare. A moment later the little droid was suffering the mechanical equivalent of a seizure as a weighted, electrified net wrapped around its chassis and dragged it to the hangar floor. A second
net shot past overhead, snaring Zip in a crackle of sparks.

Four sentients dashed into the hangar, closing the door behind them. Several minutes passed, during which the charge in the netting faded enough for Zap initiate a fast reset. It had nearly recovered functionality when one of the sentients seized the little droid and--

Zap warbled in confusion and picked itself up off the floor. An indignant whistle from Zip denied knocking into it, and the two droids squabbled for a moment before agreeing that sentry work was boring.

For a change, the day of the race was cool and damp; Anakin couldn’t tell whether it was a heavy mist or the lightest rain he’d ever experienced as they brought the pod out onto the field. Visibility was going to be an issue, and he said as much to Qui-Gon as they got the craft into position.

“Remember what you’ve learned so far, Anakin. Your eyes can deceive you, and make you see limits where none exist.”

“Should I just…what, close my eyes?”

Qui-Gon gave him a small, secretive little smile. “Sometimes that may indeed be the answer. Trust your instincts, don’t over-think things. You’ve been doing this for years, your first reaction will usually be the correct one. The Force will guide you if you let it; you’ve already been listening to it without knowing even before you came to the Temple.”

Their eyes met, solemn and trusting. Qui-Gon gripped his shoulder then left to join the other managers -- and Gondel, he realized -- in the VIP box. It occurred to Anakin that Qui-Gon’s safety could easily be in as much danger as Anakin’s. Gondel was precisely as avaricious as they had guessed, and that could be bad.

Someone knocked into him and he turned to see Sebulba’s sneering face inches away. <<Don’t think I haven’t noticed you crawling up the rankings, slave boy.>>

<<What’s the matter, Sebulba? Intimidated by a human?>> Anakin laughed.

The Dug snarled. <<Once I win the Invitational, I’ll have my sponsorship back, and you’ll be back in the gutter where you belong. Good luck, slave boy. Try not to crash.>>

He sauntered away, cursing at Endocott for daring to be vaguely in his way, and Anakin’s eyes narrowed. Of course Gondel had sweetened the deal with Sebulba by offering his contract back. He fastened the breath mask over his mouth and nose, making sure it didn’t interfere with his helmet and goggles. This was going to be ugly, in more ways than one.

The Scraplands course was a hellish run through the vast junkyard: the race organizers hadn’t done much beyond dropping course markers at regular intervals. Unlike the previous races, Anakin wasted no time pushing into the front cluster along with Sebulba, Endocott, and a Rodian named Kabuse. Sebulba and Kabuse spent most of the first lap attempting to batter each other out of the lead and into the various decaying ships and structures that lined the course.

Anakin took advantage of a track split over one of the pools of toxic runoff to surge ahead of Endocott, only for his goggles to fog from the fumes. Cursing, he spared a moment to take his hand
off the controls to wipe the scum off, and narrowly missed bashing his starboard engine into the rotted hulk of a cruiser. An explosion from behind briefly painted the junkyard in shades of yellow and red before it was lost in the distance.

They roared through the arena, Sebulba and Kabuse side by side and Anakin only a moment behind. His rear holoscreen showed that Endocott had pulled off to the trackside, one of his engines smoking ominously, while Perchotti and another pod gained ground.

He wrenched the controls to the side without thinking and dodged a sizeable chunk of corroded durasteel plating as it fell from a taller structure and buried itself point-down in the oxide-stained dirt. Another flare from behind indicated another pilot hadn’t been as lucky, but Anakin couldn’t spare the time to check.

He chased Kabuse into a long tunnel formed by a grounded freighter, weaving around rusted spars and collapsed decks. The Rodian swerved into his path, forcing Anakin into a narrower corridor that struck sparks from his pod’s extended air scoops. They shot out into the air at the same moment, and Anakin threw in a burst of speed that put Kabuse in his dust as they took the next curve.

They were out over one of the toxic lakes in the third lap when the resistance in Anakin’s left foot pedal slackened; without the guidance from one side, the pod slewed into a flat spin which nearly wiped out Kabuse. Anakin pulled his right foot off the other pedal as the spin brought him about; at least he was moving in the right direction, but without directional control the next canyon was going to kill him.

The control panel bleeped unhappily, showing a severed pressure line; it looked like it had been sheared through cleanly, and hydraulic fluid was spraying across the steaming liquid below him.

Anakin allowed a smug grin as he toggled the control to activate the new secondary pressure cable -- installed by Kitster in the wee hours of the morning after the saboteurs had left. His friend had hated hiding alone in the hangar office overnight, but it had been worth the extra stress. A couple pumps from his heel equalized the pressure, and Anakin fell back into the race just ahead of Perchotti.

Sebulba had stopped watching the rear and was devoting a lot of effort to knocking Kabuse out of the running entirely. Sparks flew as their engines clashed hard enough to swing the pods into each other, heedless of the walls of corroded metal whipping past at six hundred kliks.

The pod Anakin had built with his own two hands (and the help of Kitster and Wald) was rated for over nine hundred kliks; it was the fastest ever.

He used the wall of the course to bounce the pod up onto a roof formed by the vast wing of something ancient over the main course, using it as a ramp. Anakin eyed the gauges carefully: accelerating too soon would shoot him up too high in the air to regain any ground, too late and he wouldn’t be able to take advantage of the clearance.

Three...two... Gritting his teeth, Anakin opened both thrusters to full, rocketing off the wing and out over the track. The pod sailed cleanly over the heads of Sebulba and Kabuse, hitting hover-level just in time to ride the next curve around, using inertia to his advantage.

A glance at the rear screen showed Sebulba shaking something palm-sized violently before flinging it in frustration at Kabuse. The Rodian pilot dodged the object and rammed his pod sideways again. Sebulba’s engines flipped, the control cables tangling, and his pod veered to the side, ploughing into a mountain of scrap metal beside the course.

Anakin didn’t catch what happened to Sebulba after that, however, because the arena was just ahead,
Arle glared narrowly at the device Qui-Gon had handed her. They’d extracted it from Anakin’s pod after the race and cleaned most of the hydraulic fluid from it, but it was clearly a remote-controlled cutter that had been planted on the pedal lines.

“Any sign of the controller?”

Anakin shrugged. “Pretty sure I saw Sebulba throw it at Kabuse once he figured out it wasn’t working.”

She made a huffy sound of disgust and handed it over to her assistant droid. “Of course he did. That man has the worst anger issues.”

“We have footage of the break-in, as well,” Qui-Gon added. Bing and Boing had been well-placed to surveil the hangar; Kitster and Anakin had reviewed the footage carefully before the race to make certain no additional tricks had been played. He was surprised there hadn’t been anything more deadly lying in wait, but when he said as much, Anakin had reminded Qui-Gon that he was useless to Gondel dead.

There was no direct evidence that Gondel had been behind the break-in or Sebulba possibly being in possession of the controller. However the man had stormed out of the VIP box in silent fury as soon as Anakin had been declared the winner.

“Good. The Board wants copies. Can they be identified?” At Qui-Gon’s nod, she bared her large flat teeth in an unfriendly smile. “Then let us take care of things. And don’t worry about Gondel trying to sully Anakin’s win. The MRIB discussed the presence of Force-using racers a long time ago. We’ll deal with that, too.”

“I wasn’t aware of that.”

“Well.” She shrugged. “It’s in the rules. We don’t make a big fuss about it for obvious reasons, but the Force is classed as an innate talent. We’re here to celebrate great pilots, after all, and it’s not like, for example, putting an illegal module on a pilot’s craft. Sebulba will likely be barred from the Invitational once he recovers from his injuries.”

When they presented their report before the Council and Judicial, Qui-Gon and Anakin were careful to avoid any mention of Shmi’s assistance. Kitster was a known quantity, and was happy to provide his own report on what he had seen on the Aetherial Dream.

The results, however, were less than satisfying.

“A fine? After everything Gondel’s done, his punishment is a fine?”

“Anakin, please—”
“That’s not right, Qui-Gon, and you know it!”

Qui-Gon pressed his mouth into a thin line and pinned Anakin with a look that wasn’t quite a glare. “No, it’s not right. But his business and reputation are also in ruins. The slaves are in the hands of a repatriation organisation, and the media has been all over the scandal of his side business.”

Anakin was on his feet, pacing across their small lounge in agitation. “And Troon clearly signed off on some of Gondel’s decisions, but he doesn’t suffer at all?”

“Do you want him to suffer, Anakin?”

Qui-Gon’s tone of voice brought him up short. “Well...no? I mean, he’s partly responsible, so shouldn’t he be at least fined as well?”

“There are loopholes, a great many of them, which provide plausible deniability to Senator Troon. He also made a very moving speech about being shocked and appalled at his son’s behaviour—”

“That’s wonderful, but people will say anything if it gets them off the hook. That doesn’t mean it’s true.”

“Anakin—”

His Padawan turned and glared at him. “I don’t understand how you can be so...so accepting about this! Doesn’t this make you angry at all?”

The words of Anakin's Mind Healer came back to him. "Anakin comes from a culture where might makes right. The way he sees things, if one has the power to do something, then they should be able to do it. It might be the hardest lesson you'll ever teach him.” Sighing, Qui-Gon moved to settle on the floor and held out his hand. “Come here, Padawan.”

After a moment, Anakin’s shoulders slumped and he joined Qui-Gon in an easy half-lotus. Qui-Gon took Anakin’s small hand -- knuckles scraped and raw from three months spent maintaining his racing pod -- and settled into a light meditation. Once he felt Anakin reluctantly join him, he dropped the shield he maintained across their training bond; it was a light little thing, intended to keep emotions from bleeding across and becoming distractions.

He heard Anakin’s soft gasp and smiled sadly. It does make me angry, Padawan. Furious, if I’m honest with myself. The key is to not let it control my actions and judgment. I don’t like this outcome. I don’t have to like it. But I do have to comprehend why Judicial made the decision they did.

He felt Anakin struggling to understand the deep undercurrent of outrage that had slowly built in Qui-Gon’s heart over the course of their mission. Aren’t you supposed to release that into the Force?

I will. The process of examining one’s emotions is not always a one-step thing, Anakin. I imagine it will take me quite a few meditation sessions to be able to let this go. In the meantime, I keep it under control, so that it doesn’t temper my interactions with others and spread disquiet unnecessarily.

Anakin mulled that over for a moment before asking, Will you teach me how to do that?

“Of course, Padawan,” he said, opening his eyes. “But it will require more meditation for both of us.” Anakin groaned dramatically and fell over backwards onto the floor, which brought a smile to Qui-Gon’s face. “For now, you need a distraction. Bant and Etain both left messages for you; I imagine your friends are eager to see you again.”

“Hey, yeah!” Anakin bounced up to his feet and ran over to the computer terminal. “They want to
meet for lunch in our garden. May I?”

“Absolutely. Don’t forget you have to return to your classes tomorrow morning.”

Qui-Gon had just settled down with a cup of tea and a holonovel Shmi had recommended when a call came through. It had the urgent tone used only for high-priority communiqués, and he frowned.

“This is Master Jinn.”

“Ah! Master Jinn. It’s so good to see you.” Chancellor Palpatine smiled at him through the holo, and Qui-Gon fought to keep his eyebrows from showing his surprise.


“I heard that you and Padwan Skywalker have recently returned from an exciting mission. I was hoping that the two of you might join me for a late lunch and tell me all about it.” The man seemed genuinely interested, but he could get all the details from their reports and the transcript of their presentation before Judicial if he was truly interested. Qui-Gon offered a regretful smile.

“I’m sure Anakin would love to, but at the moment he has a rather pressing matter to attend to and is not available.”

“Ah. Catching back up with his classwork?”

“Indeed.” He gave a soft laugh. “It is somewhat imperative that he catch up with his agemates right now, mission or no mission. I’ll pass on the invitation, and we can arrange something at a more opportune time?”

Palpatine’s smile had a peculiar fixed quality. “Of course, of course. Please do give young Skywalker my regards, Master Jinn.”

“Of course. Have a good afternoon, Chancellor.” Qui-Gon ended the comm with just a touch of irritation. Chancellor or not, it was rather presumptuous to impose upon them so soon after returning. For all Palpatine proclaimed friendship, it seemed a rather one-sided effort when Anakin had people his own age who actually had an interest in pod-racing to talk to. He’d have a word about this later with Mace.
Solace

Chapter Summary

Two years after the events of The Phantom Menace, Obi-Wan has found himself with a comfortable career as a mercenary. Seems about the right time for the Force to toss a new challenge his direction.

Chapter Notes

TW: surgery, slavery, implied abuse, implied assault

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 978.04.23
The Middle of Sodding Nowhere, Wrea

It was supposed to be a simple in-and-out rescue operation. It was supposed to be a small, insignificant backwater at the end of the Corellian Run full of nothing but trees and a Trade Federation outpost. They were supposed to meet Dee for extraction at 1730 hours.

Obi-Wan signed off after telling the droid to hold for further instructions, and aimed a glare across the corridor at Nym. Blaster fire struck fractured chunks of duracrete from the corner he was hiding around and split the air between them.

“What? I said I was karkin’ sorry, kid. You want a bouquet and a sympathy card to go with it?” the Feeorin grumbled as he returned fire.

“If we don't get out of here soon, I’ll be charging you interest for every additional ten minutes we spend in this damned labyrinth,” Obi-Wan gritted. He took a chance and snapped a trio of shots back at the battle droids that were camped down at the end of the hall in front of the lifts.

“Bitch, bitch. Hey, Spike, how's your slicing going?”

Phel pulled a face at the nickname but didn't take xir eyes off the screen. “Whoever designed their menu system ought to be shot. Those lifts are the most direct route, but if we want to actually get anywhere, there's a service shaft thataway.” Xe pointed down the cross-corridor Nym, Jinkins, Kole, and the other two members of their team were using for cover.

Nym grunted in annoyance. “That’ll be a tight fit but if more than one of us crosses this hall they might get ideas.”

Obi-Wan and Phel exchanged a look; Phel shook xir head. “I’m not wearing enough armour to risk that.”
His snort muffled by his helmet, Obi-Wan held a hand out for the datapad. “Download the map. I keep telling you to remedy that.”

“And I keep telling you, hats cramp my style.”

“Go ask one of the B1s for their opinion on it and see what they think.” Obi-Wan tugged on the Force for a bit of extra speed and threw himself across the hallway, nearly bowling over Kole on landing.

“You two,” Nym pointed at Githa, a Devaronian woman, and a Togorian man named Horis. “Stay here with the slicer and keep ‘em busy. I’m sending Bastra back once he helps chop a hole in the wall.”

Obi-Wan cursed when his fusion cutter revealed the duracrete wall contained a reinforcement layer of more resistant metal mesh. “Of fucking course they would.” He sighed. “Stand back, I’m not sure if this will spark.”

For the first time in over a year, he reached into his jacket for the lightsaber hidden there. Someone gave a low whistle as he ignited the blue blade, but the others kept their comments to themselves. The metal did spray sparks horribly, and even the lightsaber took its time carving a gap.

“Something wrong with your cutter, kid?”

A quick glance revealed an expression of genuine concern on Nym’s face. Obi-Wan shook his head and leaned into his work. “It's not a Knight’s saber. Padawan blades have their uses, but don't really have the strength to go through walls.” The metal mesh finally melted through and he and Nym dragged the panel out of the way. Obi-Wan handed the datapad with its stolen structure plan over. “Try not to get lost.”

The Feeorin pirate smirked and clapped him on the shoulder before slipping through into the darkened service shaft. The walls brushed the sides of his broad shoulders. “At least there’s a ladder this time.”

Among the four of them, they managed to keep the droids’ attention for another ten minutes before the Devaronian’s comm went off.

Obi-Wan could barely make out Jinkins’ voice over the screech of laser fire. “Githa, what's your range from the lifts?”

“About--kriff! About twenty-five meters?”

“Okay, that should be good. Hang onto your panties!”

“You know I don’t wear panties!”

“I meant everyone else.”

Behind the droids, one of the lift doors opened with a chime. A moment later something detonated with a crackle of electricity; the lights in that stretch of the corridor went out and sparks raced along the walls and floor. Githa yelped as her left leg collapsed under her. Obi-Wan’s HUD blanked, leaving him with just the transparisteel visor to see through, and half the world went dark as his left eye shut down.

“JINKINS!” the woman hollered. “Kriff, comm’s down, too.”
“On the plus side, so are the droids,” Horis noted. He bent to help her up.

“I really hope those lifts still function, or they're going to have to take the long way back,” Phel grumbled. Xe disconnected xir toolset from the now-useless datapoint.

Obi-Wan stalked up the hall and double-tapped the downed droids on the off chance they could recover from the EMP grenade’s effects. “Looks like the lifts’ power source was out of range.” A second lift door opened to reveal Nym, the rest of his team, and a Mirialan in a ragged coat whom Obi-Wan assumed to be their abducted contact. The man looked rather the worse for wear, but was moving under his own power.

Nym was cradling a cybernetic left hand gone limp and glowering at Jinkins. “Some karkin’ genius here grabbed the forty-meter package by mistake.”

The Bith shrugged. “Oops?”

“‘Oops,’ he says,” Githa muttered. She leaned on Horis’ shoulder, left leg dragging and useless. “You better hope this thing has a recovery mode, chizk-kloonkee.”

Obi-Wan hit the reset button for his armour and was rewarded with an emergency restart menu in the corner of his HUD. Setting it to accommodate for the loss of vision on the left, he let it run. “We can take turns strangling him once we’re out of here.”

Nym was flexing his fingers as power in his hand returned. “Need someone to watch your left?”

“No.” He drew his lightsaber again, holding it in reverse grip in his left hand. “In fact, nobody stand on my left. Let's go.”

They made it out more or less intact, and Bastra’s droid didn’t keep them waiting too long in retaliation. Once they’d got the injured tended to and Yurishono bunked down in Bastra’s cabin with painkillers for company, Nym expressed appreciation for a plasma beam that could block blaster bolts. “Too bad they're not available to the general public.”

“I challenge you to run through one of my training setups without getting zapped,” Bastra replied with a bright grin, ignoring the fact that his younger crewmate Phel had the access plate on his prosthetic eye open, biting xir lip as xe swapped out the EMP-fried power cell.

Obviously there was more to it than just waving a lightsaber around. Nym glanced up from his work at the androgynous human, who shook xir head. “It's a miracle I don't glow in the dark from the amount of charge I've caught.”

“You're getting better, Phel. Remember I have a literal lifetime of training behind me; holding yourself to that standard is unfair.” Bastra blinked as Phel snapped the access port closed and poked a tool at the hidden reset button. Nym wasn't quite sure if the man was an exile, a reject, or a runaway, but Bastra had been locked in the Temple long enough to pick up that infamous unflappable quality.

“Anything?”

He sighed. “Nope. Looks like it's a loss.” Phel made a noise that sounded like a cat gargling and
threw xirself onto the bench seat behind the table.

Nym grunted and gave his rifle a final swipe with the vizzy cloth. “Once we get back, I’ll put you in touch with a friend of mine at Arcanian Micro on Vohai. They might cut you a deal on a replacement.” Bonus: Vohai was less than a day from Lok.

The human frowned, the corners of his mouth turning down into the hair that framed his jaw. “That's a biomed facility, Nym.”

Organ cloning was common, but replacements for body parts which could be replaced mechanically were on the private market; such things were vanity products and generally reserved for the wealthy. But if Jinkins was gonna play it fast and loose with the shock bombs…. “Yeah.” He grinned sharply. “With that implant, your optic nerves won't have deteriorated. They can probably fix you up.”

Humming thoughtfully, the human shrugged. “Depends what they offer.”

“Of course. But it's the least we can do to make up for Jinkins’ fuck-up.” There would actually be more to it than that, but at least Githa’s leg had only needed a new power cell series. She was curled up against the wall on a cushion in the corner, text-comming sourly with a friend, and ignoring them all with an audio set covering her ears.

The Bith’s voice floated in from the cockpit. “I can hear you, you know.”

He snorted and pulled his pistol out to check the charge and scrub the carbon-scoring off. “Kinda the point.”

Bastra hauled himself up to the front, leaning in the doorframe because the uninjured had claimed all the seats. “What’s our time, Dee?”

“So thoughtful of you to not just yell at me from the other cabin,” the droid said dryly. Wherever it had served before Bastra got his hands on it had made Deesix’s personality grating. Nym would have shot the thing in the processor if he’d had to live around it. “Thirty minutes to rendezvous with the Havoc.”

Kole’s high-pitched voice carried easily. “Your navicomp has the worst attitude problem.”

“It’s a dominance thing. Just be firm with it.”

There was more teasing, but Nym’s attention was caught by some nasty blackened marks across the human’s back. Bastra turned back around, caught Nym staring, and tilted his head.

“What now?”

“You’re gonna need a new jacket, too, kid. Looks like you caught heat.”

“Oh, wonderful.” The human reclaimed his seat and shrugged the garment off. The leatherette across the back was charred and in one place scorched through; all the energy had been diffused by the armour underneath, at least. Useful stuff, beskar-weave. Bastra poked his hand through the blackened gap and waved it across the table at Phel. “This. See this? This is why we’re getting you some proper fucking armour. We’ll colour match it to your coat if we have to—”

“Ugh.” The younger human batted at his hand. “Alright! I thought you were saving for a freighter.”

“The New Ship fund is separate from the Keeping My Crew Alive fund.” He set about clearing the jacket’s contents, to Nym’s increasing amusement at the pile of vibro-shivs, tools, and tech that grew
on the table.

“Where the hells does that jacket have the space to fit all that?”

Straight-faced, the human looked at him and said, “Pocket dimensions.”

“Riiiiight.”

From the corner, Githa sniggered -- not ignoring them as thoroughly as he’d thought. There was a noticeable twitch in Bastra's cheek as his eye drifted to a blank spot on the wall.

Nym was never sure what he was doing when he did that. “You got that Force look again, kid.”

Bastra nodded. “It happens sometimes.” He grinned, arching an eyebrow Nym’s direction. “I appreciate you and your crew keeping quiet about that.”

Nym’s head-tendrils twitched a sarcastic as long as you’re useful, which the humans couldn't possibly interpret. “Well, who’d believe us anyway?”

“Too many people,” Phel muttered. Xe was laboriously fitting xir datapad back together. “Well, the shielding worked. Thanks for the idea of installing a durasteel mesh inside the casing, Nym, it would’ve sucked to have to replace any of this.”

He leaned over and nudged his elbow against Phel’s. “We look out for our own, Spike. Anyway, having Force users working with us is better than any amount of money we might get for selling ya out.”

Bastra somehow managed a sarcastic glare with only one eye. “Of course. Wouldn’t want to give the impression you might actually care. It’s just about business.”

“Exactly,” Nym returned with a bland expression. The human smugglers were a pair of total weirdos, but they were alright. Dependable. And maybe he did care. Just a little.

Obi-Wan did his research before taking Nym up on the offer of an introduction. It wouldn't hurt to at least see what Arcanian Microtechnologies would offer.

In the meantime, Ulic amused himself by lurking in Obi-Wan’s massive blind spot to surprise him. It was clearly the spirit's attempt to help Obi-Wan stay sharp, and he learned after the first time Ulic made him jump out of his skin to look for that telltale crackle in the Force that indicated the Sith lord’s concealed presence.

“If I didn't know better, Ulic, I’d think you were getting bored.”

Ulic huffed and claimed one of the lounge chairs. “No. I’ve been bored, I’ve spent hundreds of years lost and neglected in various boxes and collections. Boredom, I can manage. This is just...restless.”

“Getting twitchy, hmm?” Obi-Wan frowned, thinking. “What's bothering you?”

The spirit sighed. “This antagonizing Sidious’ support network is fun, but can you tell if it's having any effect?”
Shaking his head, Obi-Wan set his mug down and sighed. “No. Well, not on an immediate basis. All I have access to is the public records for official policy-making. They're still getting paid through long strings of interconnected bank accounts; if I didn't know better, I’d suggest the IBC set it up.”

“What makes you think they didn't?”

“Because…” Obi-Wan trailed off. Ulic was giving him that keen-eyed look that meant he needed to consider it closer. What did make him think that? “I...I don’t know? It just seems...unlikely.”

“But the Intergalactic Banking Clan is one of his supporters.”

They stared at each other for a minute, Ulic implacable and Obi-Wan increasingly irritated -- with himself. “Of course it seems silly to look further. There's some sort of Sith magic in play, isn’t there?”

“Misdirection. Why bother hiding something obvious when you can make people think it's insignificant?” Ulic’s expression turned deeply amused as Obi-Wan let loose a string of curses. “Pretty sure that last one is physically impossible.”

“Come over here, we can test it. Ugh.” Obi-Wan dragged his datapad from where it was sitting toward the end of the table and sent off a quick message to a particular Muun. “If we’re unlucky, Lo will keep ‘forgetting’ to look up the actuator ID for those bank accounts, but I doubt it. Muun are pretty tenacious.”

“And strong-willed. It's nearly impossible to mind trick one.”

“You could tell there was something affecting that line of thought.”

The Sith glowered at nothing. “No. That’s the reason misdirection is so effective. It was only because you didn’t bother to question.”

“But it doesn’t affect you.”

“Anymore.” Ulic gave him a sour look. “Technically I don’t have a brain in any level of reality that could be affected by that trickery.”

“Well, it’s all just energy, though, isn’t it?” They looked up to see Phel leaning in the doorway.

“Yes, but energy can be active and inactive simultaneously, depending on how it’s perceived. For Force tricks to affect something, the Force has to interpret that thing as something that can be affected.” He sounded as if he were describing the weather. Obi-Wan and Phel stared at him.

“You put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you, Spooky?”

“Oh, not you, too, ‘Spike’. I’ve had four thousand years to ponder why things work the way they do -- or do not, as the case may be.”

Looking dazed, Phel blinked at him a moment longer before glancing at Obi-Wan. “We’re nearly at Vohai.”

“Thank you.” He glanced at Ulic as he stood. “Keep pestering me about that, please.”

“Careful what you wish for, kid.”

The place they were directed to was a low-lying building mostly obscured by trees on a plateau that had undergone significant aesthetic sculpturing. On the approach, it was clear most of the facility was
underground: a glass wall structured to emulate a crystalline surface graced the most vertical of the plateau’s sides. It overlooked the landing pads below, leaving the parkland around the upper levels undisturbed.

Obi-Wan had chosen to go alone, and although Ulic had suggested that he might lurk as backup, there was no sense of the Sith spirit’s presence. An Arkanian woman, fair-skinned and barely shorter than him, dressed in a pale red robe with her white hair piled in an improbable coiffure, met him at the platform.

“You are Captain Bastra?”

He bowed precisely as much as necessary to be respectful. “I am. Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

Her expression didn’t change, but Obi-Wan still had the impression of being examined and found unimpressive. “Doctor Faara insisted that your references were good. If it wasn’t for that, you would not be here. Follow me, and do not touch anything.”

It took all of his experience working with Qui-Gon to restrain the urge to ask questions; he guessed that the woman would either ignore him or provide non-answers, anyway. He missed having a robe with sleeves long enough to hide his hands in; he settled for clasping them behind his back instead.

The lift let them out on an airy, dimly-lit level about halfway up the facility; the wide expanse of crystal window spilled muted light through filtered panes across the balconies to their right. The woman turned left and led him past long stretches of glass allowing the activity within various laboratories to be viewed. Some of the windows had their filters at maximum, blanking the panes to a soft silvery grey.

The office she led him to was equally dim, lights inset in the ceiling along the walls offering a comforting diffuse light. “Captain Bastra to see you, Doctor.”

“Thank you, Amira. Captain, please, have a seat.” Compared to her assistant, Doctor Faara was almost disheveled. Her hair was clipped short at jaw length, and she wore only the comfortable-looking undertunic and loose trousers common on Arcania.

He bowed again before taking the opposite chair. The low-lying glass table between them bore a drink service with hand-crafted pottery cups of something deep purple already waiting. There was an air of ritual about it, and the impression he got from the Force was to wait for the Doctor to make the first move.

She studied him with white, pupilless eyes for a moment before smiling tightly and taking a drink from her cup. “We do not usually work directly with humans, Captain. It’s unusual to have one of your kind here.”

Obi-Wan took the barest sip from his drink; it was warmed and wine-like with a distinct leafy flavour; not tea, but something close to it. “I greatly appreciate your willingness to talk, Doctor. I will be honest: this is not an option I would normally have considered.”

“Mutual acquaintances do sometimes lead to unusual choices. Your Feeorin friend did us -- and myself in particular -- a great service some years ago.” Her nostrils flared. “It...rankles, to be beholden to one of his type, and if providing a minor service negates the debt, then we shall see it done.” It was unclear whether by his type she meant Nym’s species, personality, or career; possibly all three.
“Politics, politics. Obi-Wan had to let the comment slide past. “I’m not sure what he’s told you of my particular needs.”

“Youre prosthetic has suffered a fatal malfunction.” Faara gestured to Obi-Wan’s face with a four-fingered hand. “Provided we can retrieve a viable genetic sample, we may be able to provide a replacement eye identical to the one which was destroyed, as well as surrounding tissue and musculature for total physical repair.”

“That...sums it up, yes.” He hadn’t considered how much else would need to be replaced.

“In payment for our... debt to Nym, we will provide all genetic investigation and development free of charge. The only payment we require of you would be to cover the cost of surgical procedure and recovery.” The sum she gave him was still eye-wateringly high, but Obi-Wan had sufficient in savings to cover it. He wondered what, precisely, these people owed Nym, but got the feeling it would cost him to find out.

He was offered private quarters in the facility for the duration of the procedure, which he politely declined. The facilities onboard the Veeka were more comfortable for human needs, and the sense of relief he got from Faara at his refusal was notable.

The next day started with the Arcanian technicians extracting a number of genetic samples, some less pleasant than others, followed by a full cranial scan to assess the extent of the damage without removing the prosthetic. They took more samples every other day for the rest of the week, leaving parts of his arms, legs, chest, and spine feeling like he’d been punched repeatedly with a heated prod.

“No offense, but I think if I ever lose an eye, I’ll just stick with the droid parts,” Phel muttered.

By that point, Obi-Wan agreed: the process was rather more involved and less pleasant than just having the prosthetic replaced. The Force seemed to suggest this was the right thing to do, however. Whether it had something to do with the Arcanians’ debt or something else, he couldn’t say.

Ulic found the facility fascinating, even beautiful. “No, it’s not a Sith thing! Look, creation and destruction send ripples through the Force. They’re not inherently good or bad, they just are. They’re constantly making things here, and destroying the results they don’t need or that aren’t right for whatever reason. It’s like looking at light through a prism.”

The cloning process itself, once the technicians had viable samples, was surprisingly fast. Toward the end of the second week, they began the process of removing Obi-Wan’s prosthetic and preparing him for the transplant procedure. It wasn’t nearly as unpleasant as he’d feared, although Faara had informed him that the procedure would have been simpler had it been performed immediately after his injury.

Despite the fact that they went in-depth in describing the course of the procedure, he found it easiest to focus not on their words but their confidence. Faara didn’t mind working with him as much as her assistant did, but pitied him; she wished he had elected for procedures that would improve upon what she perceived as deficiencies, rather than simply wanting his basic functionality restored. Replacing an eye was almost pedestrian, and the only challenge had come from making certain the crafted eye reflected the surgical enhancements made in his childhood to prevent him from needing spectacles.
the tips, with a small cluster of seeds designed to break off in the wind. He traced his fingers up the stem, feeling the brittle-sharp edges against his skin. It stirred a memory: he’d been here before. Where was here?

“I was just wondering that, myself.”

Obi-Wan sat up. Ulic was sitting in a loose sprawl beside him, the Sith lord clad simply in an open-collared shirt and pants. He smirked at Obi-Wan’s wide-eyed look. “The armour and robes seemed a bit much. Before you ask, the surgery went well. You’re in an induced coma with a bacta mask on, to keep your eye from twitching too much as it heals. You have another couple days before they wake you up.”

“Oh.” Obi-Wan ran a hand back through his hair; it hung loose around his shoulders, which he generally disliked as it got in the way. “Thanks for keeping an eye on me. Shouldn’t I... not be dreaming, then?”

“This isn’t a dream, in the technical sense. More like an interactive memory.”

“Hmm.” He frowned. “This is Melida/Daan. There ought to be a city on the other side of those hills.”

“There is. You don't want to go exploring. Your memory here is...vivid.”

Letting himself fall back into the grass, all Obi-Wan could think to say was, “Oh.” He’d only been to Melida/Daan during a vicious civil war. A war that had led him to leave the Jedi Order when he’d just barely been accepted as Qui-Gon’s Padawan. “I wonder if my memory is trying to tell me something here.”

They rested in companionable silence for a while before a thought prodded Obi-Wan. “Hey Ulic? If I wanted to build a better lightsaber, where would be a good place to get crystals?”

“A better lightsaber. You mean a multi-crystal blade?”

“Yeah.”

“Hm. Well, Ilum probably wouldn't let you in. You could always break in--”

“No, stealing the crystals would set a bad precedent.”

“It was a joke. Mostly. But you’re right, that's negative energy you don't need. You could try Ossus, the archaeological teams are constantly unearthing relic sabers. But if you want to guarantee the crystals have the proper resonance with each other, and are legitimately earned, you should try Jedha.”

Obi-Wan considered it. “That’s a temple world.”

“Literally. Look, those crystals aren't going to be cheap, no matter where you go. But if you find the right people to deal with, you might be able to exchange services instead.”

The sky was getting darker, although there had never been any sign of the planet’s sun.

“Looks like you're going back under. I’ll be around, kid.”

“Thanks, Ulic.”
Blinking felt strange, not least because there was actually an eyelid and pressure again. The constant dimness of the Arkanian facilities was a blessing to the light-sensitive new eye. Phel hadn't been allowed to visit, but Ulic didn't need permission; the spirit said he looked ridiculous with his left eyebrow shaved out and eyelashes growing back. Doctor Faara informed him that the skin might look raw for a while but would eventually fade to match the surrounding flesh tone. He was advised to avoid over-exposure to solar radiation for the next six months.

There were headaches, of course, as his brain readjusted and the eye got acclimated to normal light exposure. By then, Obi-Wan was allowed to return to the Veeka but asked to remain on Vohai another week to make certain the replacement wouldn't be rejected. Considering he was applying healing energy to the grafts, tissue rejection would be unlikely, but Obi-Wan hadn't specialised as a healer. He rather missed Bant and her insights. She would have been able to tell at a glance if there were complications.

The lack of contact with his childhood friends ached. Obi-Wan knew it was safer for them and himself to keep his distance — if the Sith lord had any influence or other sort of infiltration into the Temple, any incoming comm could be traced. He rested his head back against the bulkhead, giving his eye a break from focus on the streams of text. It had been barely a year, but it felt like a lifetime.

“What's got you down?”

Obi-Wan opened his right eye to squint at Dee as the droid settled in across from him. “Missing people. How could you tell?”

“You were sighing more. CO2 levels were up.”

“Thanks for monitoring that.”

The droid gave an electronic snort. “Who are you missing?”

“A few people I grew up with. I haven't commed them in over a year. Remember that Sith lord that Ulic and I have been trying to upset?”

“Yeah?”

“He might be able to find where I am if I use standard comms. I was just considering sending a physical message.”

“Slower, they wouldn't be able to respond. It could be read by anyone in transit.”

“But they’d know that I’m okay.” He sighed again. “It was just a thought.”

“It has logic, though. You should do it. The air scrubbers will thank you.” The droid leaned back with a particular head tilt it used when it was faking being serious, and Obi-Wan laughed. “Three more days?”

“And then I'll either be cleared to go back to work, or they'll insist on another week of observation.”

“Let's hope you're cleared. Nym has a job coming up. Sounds like a convoy op.” The droid pushed a holoprojector across the table.

“Thanks, Dee.”
The droid hesitated in the middle of standing. “You know, it took me a long time to get used to that? Being thanked just for doing my job, I mean. Thanks, Bastra.”

Obi-Wan blinked at Deesix’s retreating back. What had brought that moment of honesty on? Shaking his head, he flipped the projector on.

A palm-sized version of Nym grinned at him. “Hey kid, hope you're surviving the Arcanians’ tender ministrations. Got an op in a couple weeks, we’ll need all the pilots we can get. If you're still alive and you’re in, meet us at the following coordinates on the eighteenth of the sixth.” Nym’s holo disappeared and was replaced by a scrambled coordinate set. Running the conversion, Obi-Wan recognized it as one of their deadspace points near Lok. He sent back a quick confirmation that he wasn’t being tortured overmuch and that he’d be there.

“They seemed happy to see us gone.” Phel ran over the secondary checks from the co-pilot station. They’d been planetside longer than any time since xe’d begun working with Bastra, and it was a bizarre relief to feel the artificial grav generator kick in underneath them.

In the pilot’s seat beside xir, Bastra chuckled. The new skin around his replaced eye was still noticeably pinker than the rest of his face, and Phel had earned xirself a tough hand-to-hand session in the empty cargo hold, Jedi-style, after calling him ‘Patch’. The man fought dirty, and Phel was looking forward to figuring out his tricks. “The Arcanians as a culture are speciesist. Not to the same extremes as some other races, but humans are considered inferior and also pathetic because most of us don't embrace enhancements.”

“You didn't tell them where to shove that attitude?”

“I could have, and they could have refused to work with me.” He sighed. “It's an ugly double-edged sword, Phel. If they had refused, I had the option to go elsewhere. If I had more stake in the matter -- if I lived among them and was subjected to it constantly, or if they routinely refused treatment to other species regardless of the urgency -- then I might have cause to force the issue. But in this case, I’m a literal outsider, and my opinion means next to nothing. They're subject to the laws of the Republic as far as not interfering in other races’ way of life -- they have a history of trying to ‘improve’ species they see as lesser--”

“For real?!”

Bastra nodded. He didn't exactly look disapproving, but definitely unhappy. “They were censured for it. But also by Republic law, as long as they don't let their cultural attitudes affect their relations with other species, they can have all the superiority they want.”

Phel shook xir head. “That seems broken.”

“It is, and it isn’t.” Xir friend glanced over. Outside, one of Vohai’s moons slid past, shining pink with reflected light. “How would you feel about the Republic dictating to you that you can't hold other races in contempt?”

“Oh. But...you shouldn't hold other races in contempt?” xe said slowly. “‘Cause we're all just trying to get by.”

Bastra grinned in appreciation. “Precisely. It would be a directive with good intentions. But it's also
not possible to control how others think. Well,” he amended, “it’s possible, but not ethical. There’s a fine balance to allowing freedom to live as one wants, and enforcing social strictures that make certain that others are not harmed. Some races have sport-hunting as a cultural norm. They’ve been forbidden from using members of sentient species as targets. That doesn’t always stop them from doing so anyway -- sentients are more challenging, after all.”

“Fucking serious? That’s awful.” Phel was starting to regret asking about this. Bastra didn’t talk much about his past with the Jedi, but he obviously had a lot of experience dealing with this kind of thing.

“I agree. If they’re caught in violation, political battles are waged. But at what point do you tell an entire culture that they need to focus on changing a deep aspect of themselves?”

“When other sentients are being hurt by it, maybe?”

“Define ‘hurt’.” Bastra looked grim. “These are the kinds of arguments the Senate gets tangled in every day. You’d think it would be simple -- it should be simple! How much negative impact is required before it’s enough to be accepted as a valid reason for change? But if someone finds dealing with them to be that miserable, they can just leave, right? Except it’s never that simple, and won’t lead to improvement in relations elsewhere. What it comes down to is just...people not wanting to change their society so that it doesn’t negatively impact others. Change on that level needs to be wanted; if it’s enforced, there’s an inevitable lashback after a while. It becomes an awful game of push versus shove, and the people caught in the middle are the ones who feel the brunt of it.” He rubbed his face, wincing at the tug on new skin. “It requires a massive, concerted reeducation campaign. It’s been done successfully in the past, but while the ideas may come initially from outsiders, the campaign itself has to be visibly led by people within that culture.

“And that is why I didn’t say anything about the attitudes of the Doctor and her staff towards me or Nym, even though I very much wanted to.”

Phel scowled. “Still....”

Bastra’s hand touched xirs. “That would have been a battle doomed to failure from the start. Sometimes, you have to preserve your energy to use where it will make a real difference. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“I get it. I don’t have to be happy about it, do I?”

“Nine hells, no. I’m not.”

“Alright. Are we meeting up with Nym, then?”

The lopsided grin Bastra gave xir made xir regret asking. “In a week. First, we’re getting you some damn armour. And I need a new jacket.”
but the Kiffar hadn’t seemed to remember him when they’d met again on one of Nym’s ops.

A makeshift table had been made from a wall panel balanced across a stack of crates; a holoprojector in the middle was displaying the Karthakk system. “Everyone here? Hands up if you didn’t make it yet,” Nym growled. A ripple of laughter went through the room and the Feeorin pirate grinned. “Alright, here’s what we’ve got. Trade Federation’s building a new facility on Nod Kartha.” He hit a button on his remote and the map zoomed in on the third planet, a miserable soggy ball of dihydrogen monoxide perpetually on the cusp of freezing. Obi-Wan, Phel and Dee had all agreed they were never again doing a land op there after the last one unless it was a truly dire emergency.

“Of course, in order to build this facility, they’re using the cheapest labour they can get. Bastards have a new business agreement with the Zygerrian Slavers Guild.” An angry mutter rose; the pilot standing on Obi-Wan’s right spat something vicious in Ryl. “Yeah, I hear you. We’re gonna whack two nexu with one spear here, and rescue a load of helpless people. And we’re not doing it on the ground, so the lot of you can relax, alright?”

Obi-Wan snorted, and Nym aimed a finger in his direction. “I heard that, Bastra. No, we don’t want them on the ground, because then there’s security and shockwhips and it’s harder to find everyone. We’re hitting them right as they get too far into Nod Kartha’s gravity well to get to hyperspace, but not so far in that they’ll crash easily. Down-side: means if things get dicey, we’re also going to be in the gravity well, so plan accordingly.

“They have three freighters -- probably a hundred prisoners in each -- plus an escort ship supplied by the Trade Federation. Expect droids, but also expect living pilots among the defenders. So we’re splitting up and doing this in one go. Four of you have ion cannons; I shouldn’t have to tell you what your jobs are, we’ll assign targets once we get there. Get on it quick-like, though. The fewer distress messages they get out, the better, or we’re going to be dealing with reinforcements from the planet about the time everyone’s in the middle of boarding action, and that’s gonna suck.”

He hit the remote again and the holo changed to a cluster of ship diagrams, rotating slowly on the vertical axis -- Zygerrian freighters, Trade Federation Vulture droids, and a Fidentia-class superfreighter. “Splatter the fighters, destroy the escort if possible. The Fidentia is a version of our old friend the Custodis, but it’s modified purely to hold Vultures; there’s nothing in it but droids and more droids. Then we get down to business. These are YV-865s, as usual. If you don’t know the layout of these things, ask Jinkins for the specs. Two docking hatches means two boarding parties, one on each side. Usual tactics apply.”

Obi-Wan’s jaw clenched. Usual tactics meant no survivors. It was a grim business, one with extremely good reasoning behind it. The Jedi would be horrified, but the Zygerrian crew would rather kill their captives if they had the chance.

“Wei, we’re splitting your people among the boarding ships. The lucky assault captains are me, Jinkins, Reti, Bastra, Loridis, and Pinn. Coordinate with us once we’re done here. The rest of you are running defense. Vana’s in charge of you trigger happy rocket-jockeys. As soon as the crews are down, get the passengers out, save the looting for last. Anything we find is being added to your bonuses, so be karkin’ honest or good luck finding work in this quadrant again.”

Obi-Wan was assigned to pair with Pinn’s re-re-rebuilt kludge of a YT-could-be-anything and four of the fighter/bomber pilots for escort. Between himself and the Twi’lek captain they had six crew, one of whom wasn’t combat-capable; Weirun assigned them five of his people and issued transfer notifications. By the time the Veeka linked up again, Jez and Soori were already onboard. The Theelin twins looked ready to take on a small army on their own; Soori was flirting shamelessly at Phel while her brother rolled his eyes.
It wasn’t until he was in the pilot’s chair coordinating with the others that Ulic spoke up.

*I dunno about this one, kid.*

Obi-Wan nodded. The Force was roiling, and he had no way of knowing what it meant. Change, perhaps; but change wasn’t inherently good or bad. *It’s for a good reason, though.*

There was silence for a moment and then Ulic said, *You’re furious.* His mental voice was soft; not accusing but making an observation.

He was furious, heated emotions on a low simmer until they were needed. *I have it under control.*

*I’m going in with you.*

He paused; Dee cast him a sideways glance before going back to running a last-minute check on the systems. *Are you sure?*

*Someone’s gotta keep an eye on you.*

A reluctant smile tugged at Obi-Wan’s cheek. He didn’t need a minder, no. But having someone else to watch his back was a welcome feeling. *Thanks.*

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Nym’s snoopy little probe came in handy again; when the group dropped out of hyperspace from their position above Nod Kartha’s orbital plane, they were almost on top of the targets. Pinn’s sublights flared in front of them, burning hard at their called target; the *Veeka* followed on his heels, their four fighters spreading out in a defensive screen as Vultures came boiling out of the *Fidentia*’s hangar.

As if on cue, four heavy ion blasts reached out and slapped the larger ships; lightning flickered over their hulls and the running lights went out. One freighter which had been in the process of an evasive turn began to list sideways into the planet’s gravity well.

The cloud of droid fighters reached them, and Obi-Wan settled his mind into the Force, letting it guide the modified shuttle through the fight. He pulled a tight spiral around Pinn’s ship, giving Phel and Soori on the guns chances to blow Vultures out of their way.

Jez, clinging to the grab bar near the cockpit door, muttered, “How the kark is he doing that?” Phel’s response was lost in the wail of a proximity alarm. The Vulture driving headlong at the *Veeka* disintegrated in a cloud of fire at Soori’s hands, and they blew through the shattered remains.

The comm went live as one of their fighters asked for support. “*We’re going in on the escort, Bastra. Vana says to waste it.*”

“Right behind you, Elaz,” Obi-Wan replied. “Keep an eye out in case they drop more fighters.”

“Yeah, about that. *Wanna toss some torps into their hangar, just in case?*”

His two gunners yelled an enthusiastic confirmation before he could respond. Obi-Wan grinned. “That’s a yes, then.” The sleek little *Sigil*-class fighter peeled off and dipped below the orbital for a ventral run; stars spiraled in front of them as Obi-Wan dropped into formation.
Three torpedos blew out the escort’s drives, a volley of plasma bombs courtesy of the Havoc cooked the bridge, and a strafing run vented the habitable levels into space. Nym’s voice overrode the happy comm chatter. “Good work, people. Now we get to the hard part. Bastra and Pinn, get on the drifter, see if you can’t stabilize it before boarding.”

“That’s not what hull grapples are for, Nym.”

“No, but they’ll do the job.”

Obi-Wan switched the rear viewscreen on and guided the Veeka in ‘above’ the drifting freighter relative to the planet, tapping the guidance thrusters to match the more maneuverable shuttle to the freighter’s spin. “Ready back there?”

“I want to know who designed these with the airlock at the rear,” Jez snarled back from the cargo hold. “Dunno how you can align it properly. Launching grapple...got it!”

The shuttle shuddered and twitched as the connection with the freighter went taut. He kicked in the aft thrusters to counter the movement. For a tense moment it was a fight between engines and inertia, but they got it slowed enough for Pinn to move in on the freighter’s other side. The boarding airlock sent subsonic vibrations through the Veeka’s hull as it pulled the two ships together.

“Let’s go.” Obi-Wan slapped his helmet on and keyed in the comms check. Phel had tossed xir coat aside as being too much risk during close-quarters fighting, and had even consented to a helmet that matched xir new armour. Even Deesix got to be part of it this time, and he grinned at the droid’s obvious excitement.

The pressure between the ships equalized and Pinn started the countdown. Obi-Wan palmed a blaster for his left hand and drew an end-heavy vibroblade nearly the length of his forearm from the sheath strapped across his back under his jacket. The freighter’s airlocks popped with a hiss, and Soori’s first shot took an armoured Zygerrian through the gap in their faceplate. Obi-Wan launched past and drove his blade through the other guard’s throat with a flick of his wrist. “Keep them from firing into my ship, thanks!”

“Sorry! You should get a better airlock installed.” Soori quipped back. “Me and the kid will stay here, you three go have fun.”

Deesix let out an unearthly cackle as it shot a guard at the end of the corridor, then charged forward and mashed its elbow into another’s face, sending the slaver’s helmet flying. Jez glanced at Obi-Wan. “That’s, uh. Some droid.”

“Figured it was time to let it out to play.” And also to test the new armoured plating Obi-Wan had acquired for the droid. They followed in Dee’s wake, letting the droid act as a battering ram. They ran into Pinn’s group at the rear of the crew compartment. One of the other mercs jerked their head back up the passage. “It’s clear from here to the airlocks. We’re going to move forward to wipe the bridge.”

Obi-Wan glared narrowly at the large door leading to the cargohold: he didn’t like the sense he was getting from inside. “We’ll make sure nobody’s hiding back here and then join you.” He waited for Dee and Jez to take up positions out of the firing line from the door. There were at least two slavers in the back, using the captives as living shields.

Ready Ulic?

The spirit sounded grim. I’m already behind them. They have remotes for the slave collars, they
could kill everyone in the hold.

Jez cleared his throat. “Are we waiting for something?”

“Two slavers. Meatshield situation.”

The merc cursed softly. “Got a plan?”

“Half of one.” Obi-Wan put the blaster away and took a position in front of the door rather than off to the side. “Wait to fire on my mark.” The palm of his hand tingled as the fury welled up. Slaves. Why was it always slaves? His lip curled in a snarl, hidden by his mask, and he hit the door control.

The two slavers started to shout warnings, brandishing the controls in their hands; the shouts dissolved into shrieks as Obi-Wan’s left hand clenched. The remotes, along with the hands holding them, crumpled in a burst of sparks and blood. “Fire!” Blaster bolts sprayed past on either side and both Zygerrians dropped. Someone in one of the enclosed pens lining the walls started screaming.

Lightheaded, Obi-Wan sagged against the doorframe as Jez ran forward to check the slavers. “Shit. What’d you do to them?”

“Made sure the remotes couldn’t be used.” He sensed the mercenary’s eyes on him. “It’s...just something I can do, alright? Anything else would have wasted time.” He switched channels. “Pinn, how’s it looking up there?”

“We’re clear. Sending the rest of my group back to help you get them moving.”

“Alright.” He nodded to Dee and gestured to Jez to start opening pens.

The group of captives in the first one he opened cowered back. Obi-Wan held his hands up to show the small, triple-pronged electric lock overrider. “We’re here to get you out, there’s a transport waiting.” He set about snapping collars off and led them through to where Pinn was standing guard at the airlock to the freighter.

“How are we doing for time?”

Pinn had shucked his helmet, letting his lekku hang free; he grinned. “Ahead of schedule.”

“Hey, Bastra,” Deesix called. The droid made sure the group it was leading made it onto the transport and then turned back to him. “I had an idea of what they could do with these ships. Do you think Nym would listen to me?”

“Probably. Will he like it?”

“It involves explosions?”

Obi-Wan and Pinn laughed. “He’ll like it. Comm him.”

He turned to see Ulic, barely visible in the emergency lighting, beckoning down the cross-corridor past the crew quarters. There’s someone down here, but they’re not crew.

Had one of the slavers brought family? Obi-Wan found that hard to believe, but he followed the spirit to one door in particular.

Ulic pointed. Someone shot the lock.

Obi-Wan commed Phel, who arrived with the faceplate of xir helmet up and grinning. “You should
have seen what Soori did to this one guy who tried rushing us. You need to teach me how to do flips without landing on my ass, cus that was something!” Xe plugged their slicer into the override port.

“Nobody ever thinks to futz with the droid access, do they?”

The door popped wide enough for the two of them to get their fingers in and pry it the rest of the way. A frightened gasp from inside made them exchange a look, and Obi-Wan turned the small headlamp in his helmet on to illuminate the room.

A pair of bright green eyes stared back at them, terrified, from a huddled shape in the corner.

“Aw, shit,” Phel muttered.

Obi-Wan dropped to a crouch, pulled his helmet off and set it to the side. “Hey. You speak Basic?” He spoke softly, barely above a whisper. The child’s eyes narrowed, but he got the sense that they understood. “Are you hurt?”

A nod, and when the child shifted there was the distinct sound of a chain. Obi-Wan shoved down another surge of anger. “Do you know where they keep the key for that?” He nodded to the metal band locked around one skinny ankle.

The child pointed at the wall behind him, to where the key was literally hanging on a cord, and Obi-Wan felt a surge of Darkness that had nothing to do with him. Phel growled, “That’s just fucking cruel,” as xe yanked the key off the wall and passed it over.

“Looks like I’ll have to show you how to keep that under control. Later, though.”

“Yeah, later. We can’t put her with the others, someone might…you know…”

“Yeah.” Obi-Wan eased forward, and the girl let him unlock the chain on her ankle. Now that he was closer, he could see the fading bruises on her face and legs where they weren’t covered by her simple shift dress. “Can I take that collar off for you?”

After a moment, she nodded; he leaned just close enough to kill the electric lock. With the first sign of real energy she’d shown, the girl flung the collar across the room at Phel, who flinched back. She lunged forward, shoving Obi-Wan off-balance onto the floor, but after two steps the girl yelped and fell to her knees. Biting her lip on a whimper, she clutched at the ankle that hadn’t been chained.

Obi-Wan stayed where he’d been pushed. “Are you alright?”

“Why do you care?” she spat through tears of pain. "You're just some raider!"

“Well, now we know she speaks Basic,” Phel muttered.

Sighing, Obi-Wan picked himself up. “We’re knocking over a slave operation. Unless you object?” He walked around her, well out of reaching distance, and pulled his helmet back on. “Hey Nym. Are we about ready to go?”

“Yeah, kid, just wrapping things up.”

“Phel and I found another captive, but we’ve got to take her on the Veeka. One of the other captives might take a grudge out on her. She’s Zygerrian.”

Chapter End Notes
So lemme tell you, I've been *so impatient* to finally reach this point. This is where the fun begins :D

Okay, so, I could have left the political discussion out. Could have. Current events notwithstanding, it seems that every race that has some corporate stake in cloning in Star Wars is super speciesist, and it was easier to address here than it will be with the Kaminoans being even worse later on.
Quinlan frowned at the package Master Windu handed him.

“Courier gave the origin point as Drev’starn. It’s been cleared.” The Master of the Order gave him a level glare. “Any idea why you, Padawan Muln, Padawan Eerin, and Padawan Reeft all received physical messages from Bothawui?”

Quin’s eyes narrowed. “If I can figure that out, you can figure it out.”

Mace snorted and then sat back in his chair, his expression relaxing from foreboding to merely stern. “Kenobi disappeared without a trace over a year ago. Now the Jedi known to be his closest friends have received actual messages from him -- not comm calls, not holograms, but paper that bears no identifying marks. I was hoping you would care to share the message contents.”

If Quinlan didn’t know better, he would have said Windu seemed upset. Not just upset but disturbed. “What’s bothering you about this, sir?”

“If these really came from Kenobi, he’s gone to a lot of trouble to hide his location and circumstances. That’s a level of paranoia I’d expect from a Shadow, not a disgraced former Padawan. I want to know what has him spooked.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Quinlan slipped his finger under the seal and popped it open. A splotch of ink on the underside of the seal showed orange. “You didn’t open these, Master?”

“No.”

“Well, someone did.” He bent the thick paper so Mace could see the colour of interference. “That should be black. Maybe his paranoia isn’t unfounded.”
The message, written in Obi-Wan’s precise, tight hand, was undated and unsigned. Despite that, the warmth of his friend’s kindness and compassion flooded his senses. For just a moment, Quinlan could almost see Obi-Wan, dressed in that armour and smiling with an ease he’d never shown before, long copper hair bound in a loose warrior’s knot. Oddly, the cybernetic eye he had earned on Naboo seemed to be absent; Quinlan wasn’t certain what that could mean.

“Still alive, not alone. I miss you all terribly. Can you do me a favour and remind Qui-Gon of what I told him to do last year? I’ll owe you; we can work out the particulars later.

“P.S: if there’s an assignment back at home, let someone else take it. Just trust me.”

Quinlan felt a surge of relief that Obi-Wan hadn't mentioned anything about Ryloth or Nar Shaddaa - the only people who knew Obi-Wan had been involved at all were himself and Aayla, and it had been damned difficult to dance around the Council’s questions regarding his identity. Still under suspicion by the Order and under stern orders via the Healers on Chalacta to seek treatment for the memory damage done by what Obi-Wan had called glitteryll, neither Quin nor Aayla had yet been cleared for field work.

One of Mace’s eyebrows arched. “Curious. Do you have any idea about those last two parts?”

“About Master Jinn, no.” Quinlan shook his head, frowning. “The second part is probably one of his precog events. There aren't any current issues on Kiffar we’re being asked to deal with?”

“No.” Windu sighed and steepled his hands in front of his lips. “But there's a matter on Kiffex we were considering assigning to you.”

“Send someone else, then. It's in the same system, and that's too close for me.”

Mace studied him for a moment. “You were requested specifically.”

The hair on the back of his neck prickled. “Then definitely send someone else; best choice would be Master Tholme. There’s no such thing as coincidence.”

Mace looked like he wanted to grumble about it; instead, he nodded. “Alright. Kenobi may no longer be of the Order, but that’s not going to cause his precognitive episodes to cease. Thank you, Vos. Tell Padawan Eerin she can come in.”

He wasn’t certain which woke him first: the terrified scream, or the fear and pain boiling over into the Force from his cabin. Obi-Wan lurched out of the pilot’s chair, past Dee, and through the lounge just as Phel’s door opened.

“Wha-?”

“It’s Zohli,” he said shortly. The Zygerrian girl was asleep, tangled in the thin sheet and thrashing against it. Obi-Wan knelt beside the bunk and brushed her mind with a wave of soothing calm, gentle as a cool pond on a warm day. It took far longer than it should have before she settled and opened her eyes; tears streaked her cheeks and ran into her auburn hair.

“Shh. It’s alright,” Obi-Wan whispered. “Do you remember where you are?”
Zohli choked on a sob but nodded. He was about to ask if he could touch her when she rolled over and wrapped her thin arms awkwardly around his neck. Obi-Wan ended up sitting on the floor with an armful of shivering eleven-year-old Zygerrian while Phel wrung xir hands in the doorway.

“What do you, uh...should I get anything?”

“Cup of water, please.”

They got her to drink, and Obi-Wan cradled her as he stood. She was far too light for her size, and he struggled to keep the concern from his face as he eased her back into bed.

Zohli clutched his arm. “Stay?” Her green eyes were puffy and still reddened from crying, and his stomach twisted. The angry child who’d been ready to fight her way out of a slaver’s transport had collapsed, finally, replaced with a little girl reaching out for safety.

Phel didn’t even wait to hear his reply, quietly sliding the door closed. After a bit of shuffling and asking what Zohli was comfortable with, Obi-Wan settled with his back against the bulkhead on top of the sheets, his head pillowed on his arm and his spare hand wrapped around hers. It wasn’t the most comfortable of positions, but he could meditate if not truly sleep.

How are we going to deal with this?

Ulic surprised him by answering, Don’t worry about it. Tomorrow can wait.

The twitching of one of Zohli’s ears across his nose woke Obi-Wan again closer to morning. She’d rolled into him and was half-burrowed in his chest, her head on his bicep with his right arm around her shoulders. Tucked under his head, his left hand had gone completely numb.

With a soft laugh at how ridiculous the situation was, he stroked her hair. It had been dreadfully tangled, and the girl had begged them to just cut it short when the comb had snapped. Now it was soft and clean, smelling of soap and the oil that Phel used. Her old clothes had gone into the incinerator; Zohli had taken particular delight in watching the memories burn in effigy, and between Obi-Wan’s and Phel’s things they had scraped together a few shirts and a pair of knee-length pants which, while baggy, wouldn’t trip her. As malnourished as she was, they’d hesitated to give her anything more substantial than basic ration bars and water, but she hadn’t complained.

A scan from their adequate medical suite had turned up badly-healed fractures in her ribs, right hand, and left foot. The latter she had declared was the prize for a nearly-successful escape attempt; she was savagely proud she’d even got that far. There was also a great deal of physical and mental trauma which they were simply not prepared to deal with. The doctors at Ryndellia would already have their hands full dealing with the others they had rescued -- nearly three hundred people of various ages, races and genders. But Zohli might easily be the worst case they would see that day.

Careful not to wake the girl, Obi-Wan eased himself out of bed.

Dee glanced over at him as he entered the cockpit, clutching a fresh mug of caff in one hand. “Did you expect that to happen?”

“What, last night?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah. Most sentients won’t react to trauma until the traumatic situation has ended. Once they reach a point that feels safe, breakdowns are common;
“It’s a survival trait. How long?”

“Fifty-three minutes until we drop out of hyperspace. Kole sent word at the last transfer that Ryndellia Waystation has issued us docking codes for their med bay hangar.”

“Oh, that’s good. Better than having traumatised people shuffling three kliks through the concourse.”

The droid was silent for a moment while Obi-Wan sipped his caff. “Is she staying with us?”

He tilted his head at the droid’s tone: cautiously neutral, as if it didn’t want to influence his decision. “Tough question. We’re running out of room here. On the other hand, I can almost consider looking at used freighters to find us an upgrade. Considering what little she’s said, sending her back to Zygerria would probably not be the best course of action. And even though a repatriation group would likely take her in, the chances of her being rehomed are slim. Zygerrians are not popular.” Obi-Wan sighed. “What do you think?”

“I agree with your assessment. Also, Hondo commed and asked for you to contact him once we wrap things up with Nym.”

Interesting. The Weequay pirate had been making noises about acquiring more ships soon. Hondo Ohnaka wasn’t one to be content with just a ship of his own; the man thought big, and aspired to someday command a fleet similar to Nym’s operation. What was he up to this time? “We’ll see how things go. To be perfectly honest, I don’t know the first thing about raising a child—”

“I dunno, you did alright with me,” Phel said as xe entered. Xe dropped loosely into the gunner’s chair, xir own mug of caff in hand.

Obi-Wan laughed. “You were already practically an adult, Phel.”

“Yeah, but I was mostly feral.” Phel nudged the back of his chair with a foot, making it twist on its mount. “I’ve been in her situation. She needs someone. And that’s not me.”

“I’m not that much older than you, you know.”

Phel shrugged. “You were raised different. Hells, at least someone raised you, period.”

There was a thought. “I wasn’t raised so much as trained. But...I could probably handle that. If she wanted to stay.” Obi-Wan wished he could be certain Zohli’s clinginess was the result of her actually liking them, rather than simply instinctive attachment to the first people to show her kindness in months.

When he saw who was among the medics waiting to receive the former slaves, Obi-Wan started laughing. He left his helmet off and signaled for the others to wait and walked down the ramp. “So this is where you ended up, Fan.”

The Twi’lek stared at him. “Karkin’- you? Seriously?” He grinned and dragged Obi-Wan in for a backslapping hug. “Damn, last I heard you were still on Mandalore! How’d you end up with this pack of ruffians?”

“Long story.”

Fanu’dar leaned back and squinted critically at the replacement eye. “That’s good work. Looks like you’re doing well for yourself?”

“Well enough.” They stepped out of the way of the crowd of captives as the medical staff led them
past. “Actually, I have a favour to ask.”

“Oh, this ought to be good.”

He snorted. “Not that kind of favour. One of the ships had an extra captive, kept separate. Zygerrian girl. She's in bad shape, Fan.”

“And the last thing we need is someone taking their justified rage out on a kid. I'll see if we can arrange a private space for her. Is she mobile?” He followed Obi-Wan back to the Veeka. Zohli was leaning on one of their training staves for support; she squinted at the Twi'lek with suspicion, but allowed him to scan her and answered a few gentle questions.

The way she kept glancing up at Obi-Wan for reassurance made his heart clench.

Fan stepped out to comm his team about a private bed for the girl. She reached out and grabbed Obi-Wan’s hand, and he went to one knee beside her.

“Is it safe?”

“Fan’s a friend of mine. I trust him.” When she leaned against him, Obi-Wan wrapped her up in a hug. “It’ll be alright. You’re brave, aren't you?”

She shook her head, pointed ears rubbing under his chin. “I’m scared.”

“Want to know a secret? Brave people do things even though they're scared. I get scared all the time.”

Zohli looked up at him, one of her ears twitching flat. “Really?”

He smiled back. “Our job is very dangerous. Any one of us could be injured, and the idea that maybe it’s my bad call that gets Phel or Dee hurt scares me even more.”

“Will you stay?”

He sighed and squeezed her shoulders gently. She was so bony, he feared she might shatter. “I have to go check in with the rest of our group. But I swear to you, if I have to go somewhere, I'll let you know first.”

Zohli’s frown looked dangerously close to a pout. She held up her right hand with her smallest finger extended. “Promise?”

Obi-Wan linked his finger with hers. “Absolutely promise.” He glanced up as Fan returned.

“We have a quiet corner set up for her.” He tilted his head at Zohli. “You feel up to walking a ways, or do you want a lift?”

The Zygerrian girl took a breath and straightened her shoulders, raising her chin stubbornly. “I can walk.”

She glanced back at Obi-Wan one last time before reaching the medbay entrance, and he held up his fist, smallest finger extended. Phel chuckled.

“Man, does she have you wrapped around her finger.”

“Can you blame me?”
Xe shook xir head and clapped him on the shoulder. “I think you’ve been adopted.”

Nym had wrangled the largest conference room the station had available -- barely enough to accommodate everyone’s full crews -- and had even arranged for an array of snacks and drinks to be delivered. Something about his grin was particularly gleeful.

He waited until everyone had got settled, squeezed shoulder to shoulder on the amphitheatre benches. “So hey, we did good! No casualties on our side, none of the slavers made it out, and we got them locked down before a distress call could go out. Which means I have a bit of extra entertainment to share with you.”

He killed the room lights and activated the holotable to display the aftermath of the battle. Wrecked Vultures drifted like motes of dust around the central setpiece of three derelict freighters and the shattered hulk of the *Fidentia*. The timestamp showed it was footage from twenty hours earlier, after they had departed the scene. “Bastra’s droid, Deesix, used to be TF, and made a suggestion that was too funny not to implement. Thanks for the idea, Dee.”

There was a smattering of applause, and the droid ducked its head, mumbling shyly. Obi-Wan grinned and patted it on the shoulder.

“Seems Trade Federation policy is to not waste anything -- the ruins over Naboo notwithstanding, since they just weren’t welcome back into the system to pick up their mess. So we left them a little present. I set up the probes to get a good view, and here we go.”

He hit a button and stepped back out of the light. In the hologram, the timestamp jumped to roughly ten hours previous and the ships shifted position. The image wobbled as something bumped one of the probes and then another ship drifted into view.

“Oh, no way,” someone whispered in awe. Obi-Wan felt a gleeful, almost manic grin stretching his face. Dee had suggested the Trade Federation might send a frigate out to pick up the pieces once they’d set off the distress beacons, but that was a full *Lucrehulk* battleship. Tractor beams lanced out, pulling in the tiny, glittering specks of the fighters, before latching onto the larger ships and swallowing them whole.

For a moment, everything seemed normal; the battleship aligned ponderously to enter hyperspace. Then it shuddered; hull plates buckled and rippled and then parted to expose blooms of fire that blossomed along the length of outer ring’s curve.

Someone on the room was chanting, “Oh please, oh please, oh please--” like a mantra. The sequential explosions reached hungry fingers toward the rear of the ship; cheers and encouragement rose through the room, until the fire reached the *Lucrehulk*’s reactor and everyone in the room inhaled sharply.

The reactor lit off spectacularly, and the conference room erupted. The pilot sitting behind Dee slapped the droid’s shoulder in appreciation.

Obi-Wan found himself laughing with delight, and felt a pang of guilt over his lack of remorse for the loss of the battleship’s living crew. He’d once asked Deesix if the droid felt any regret over the destruction of other droids in the facilities they hit, or the ships they engaged; Dee had shrugged and said, “*They know the risks, but what choice do they have?*” The droids’ control chips, like the one
Obi-Wan had removed from Dee before rebuilding the droid, kept them from questioning their orders. Even granted an opportunity for clemency, they would have continued fighting.

A mental nudge jarred him from his thoughts. Ulic’s voice whispered, *Unsuspecting targets they might have been, but they’re still supporting a political organization that’s responsible for slavery and genocide. As are the Jedi. Nobody has a moral high ground here, kid, and you’re going to talk yourself in circles. Take some comfort in the fact that this is going to make Sidious’ supporters hesitant to develop more out here.*

Obi-Wan gave a rueful smile. *It’s a tough lesson to learn.* He caught Phel giving him a worried glance and wrapped his arm around xir shoulders. *It’s all Darkness isn’t it?*

*Shades of it. We can discuss it later.*

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Ryndellia’s medical center was nearly overtaxed trying to help the people Nym’s group had brought in. Obi-Wan kept apologizing, and every doctor and orderly patted his shoulder and assured him that this was the kind of work they had signed on for. They were thrilled to be able to assist freed slaves, even though the extent of the injuries that needed to be treated was distressing.

Fan pulled him aside. “Zohli…. I don’t know what to tell you. She’s…” He sighed and shook his head, his expression somewhere between pissed off and on the verge of tears, *lekku* twitching with disquiet.

Obi-Wan shoved the rage down again. “How bad is it?”

A smile flickered around the corner of Fan’s mouth. “They’re a hardy people, Bastra, but she needs bacta treatment. The internal injuries are extensive. We’ll have to re-break and re-set the ribs, along with surgery on her right hand and left foot. At the moment, we’re calling it at a week of cycled bacta treatment, maybe two at the outside, as well as a long run with a recovery psych.”

He tapped the datapad he carried against his palm. “Is she conscious right now? I’d like to speak with her.”

“Yeah. She’s been asking for you.”

Zohli was sitting up, reading and trying not to pluck at an IV line where its tape pulled on the fine fur on her arm. Her dark auburn hair was sweat-damp and mussed. She flinched when he rapped his knuckles lightly on the door frame. “Oh. Bastra?”

He offered a gentle smile. “Hey, Zoh. How are you doing?”

She opened her mouth to speak but what came out was a sob as she reached for him. Obi-Wan settled carefully on the edge of the bed and wrapped his arms around the girl; she clung to his armoured jacket, digging thin fingers in around the edges of the plates. He rubbed her back, trying not to frown at the stark feel of her ribs and spine under her wrapped medical tunic.

Eventually she quieted, rubbing her face with the back of her hand. “Sorry-”

“Shh, no. Don’t be sorry. There’s nothing to apologise for.” He finger-combed her hair gently and she sighed, leaning against him. “Zohli, I have to go for a bit. I’m still on contract, and part of that is
getting people to a repatriation group.”

Her fingers dug into his sleeve. “But--!”

“Shshh.” He pulled her back in against his chest. “I’m not abandoning you here. Alright? I’m not leaving you behind. The doctors want to put you in a bacta tank for treatment. Have you been in one before?”

The girl shook her head, sniffling quietly.

“They smell dreadful, but it’s not a bad experience. And you sleep through most of it. I should be back by the time you wake up, but if I’m not…” He leaned back and pulled a comm unit from his pocket. “This is for you. It’s a direct link to my own comm. If I can, I’ll answer it immediately. If I can’t, I’ll return your call as soon as possible. Alright?”

Zohli wrapped her thin fingers tightly around the commlink. “You promise?”

“I promise.” He picked up the datapad from where he’d set it on the shelf. “I need you to do something for me. There’s a tailor here on the station. This is what they usually make, so if you pick out some colours and styles you like, I’ll see about getting some stuff made for you while I’m away.”

It was both a necessity and a promise that he’d be back; he left Zohli paging wide-eyed through the catalog while he went to speak to Fan about her treatment and size measurements.

His friend was delighted. “You’re adopting her?”

Obi-Wan shrugged self-consciously. “Not so much, but I’m certainly not sending her back to the family that did this to her. I know there’s groups that specialise in rehabilitating and re-homing children, but--”

Fan shook his head. “But Zygerrians aren’t widely loved. I never thought you’d be the parenting type. It’s thoughtful of you.”

He smiled at the Twi’lek’s tone. “Didn’t expect that from a pirate, did you?”

“We all know Nym’s not doing this purely out of charity; it’s a secondary good. Still, I remember what you were like a couple years ago.” There was something in Fan’s smile that made Obi-Wan blush; the Force whispered of his friend’s pride in him. “You’ve come a long way, Scogar.”

He led the way back to his office and handed Obi-Wan a datapad. “There’s no cost for her treatment; even though Zygerria opted out of Republic coverage, the repatriation accords cover it. Particularly since she has no identification; it appears she’s been registered as deceased.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes snapped up from skimming the datapad. “What?!”

Fan grimaced. “She’s given her name as Zohli Scintel-Vadrass. Minor royalty. There’s a slew of news articles from last year suggesting she was killed in an aircar crash on Zygerria. We don’t have access to her biometric file, of course, so she could be lying about her name, but I doubt it. The holos in the articles look like her, same birthmark on her cheekbone.”

Pressing the back of his hand to his mouth, Obi-Wan examined the surge of emotion that threatened to overwhelm him. Anger, but that had been there for a while. Grief, that this would happen to any of the people they had rescued, never mind a child. No hatred, which surprised him. Protectiveness, though, and a determination to do better than the people who had failed her; those were rising to the surface quickly. Phel was so right: Obi-Wan wasn’t walking away from this. He took a breath and nodded for Fan to continue.
“Alright. If you’re accepting the role of guardianship for an essentially orphaned minor under the minimum emancipation age, there’s some forms you need to look over and sign. Oh, and I commed the tailor, and she wants to offer you a massive discount, because even a basic set of clothes for a growing kid is going to cost.”

“That wasn’t necessary, Fan--”

His friend grinned. “Maybe not, but consider it a gesture of support and appreciation.”

As soon as he’d signed the guardianship forms, his comm chirped with an automated message full of links to educational testing, remote-learning programs, and a bunch of discount offers from various companies covering everything from essentials to entertainment. “They really don’t waste time, do they?”

Fan shrugged. “It’s assumed that a guardian might not know how to get a kid into schooling, particularly if they’re transient -- which you are. And also that a kid in need of guardianship might not have anything but the clothes on their back.”

Obi-Wan frowned, not liking what was going unsaid. “This is a frequent occurrence.”

“More frequent than we like.” The other man looked grim. “We’ll be running her psych eval shortly, if you want to stay for that. They’re going to set her up with a counselor here until you return, and then she’ll have weekly remote sessions. It can be worked around your schedule. Are you based in the area?”

“Mostly the next quadrant, but it’s not that far. We’re out here often enough with Nym.”

He nodded. “They may ask for face to face meetings every so often with both of you, to make sure it’s working out alright. Speaking of things working out, have you seen the others recently?”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “I ran into Tovari a bit over a year ago on Mandalore. No idea where everyone else is.”

“Booster’s back on Corellia last I heard, trying to pick up his pieces. Pulkka and Feid teamed up, they’re pulling muscle work on Ord Mantell.” He gave Obi-Wan a significant look. “Last time we talked, Pulkka sounded itchy to get moving again. She never did like being in one place for very long. Maybe Nym has something they could do.”

“I’ll see if I can catch up with them, then.”

Fan’s expression turned sly and one of his lekku gave an impish sort of twitch. “So, uh...what does the Duchess think about all this?”

Obi-Wan groaned, letting his head fall into his hand while the Twi’lek giggled at him. “I was rather hoping you’d have forgot about that.”

“Not a chance, Bastra.” Fan’s grin was almost predatory. “I’m doing you enough of a favour not asking in front of your crew, alright?”

“I didn’t know lekku could express ‘sultry’ like that.” Obi-Wan sighed and leaned back in his chair. “If you must know, I haven’t spoken to her in over a year. She has no idea where I am.”

“What?!” Fan sputtered something indignant-sounding in Ryl, his hands flailing in an attempt to express his consternation. “What happened?”
For a moment he considered telling Fan the truth, but how could the matter of a Sith lord be explained without taking days? Or making his friend question Obi-Wan’s psychological health, for that matter. He settled for saying, “We had some...strong disagreements, and I maintain my distance now because I want neither the media publicity nor any backlash on her reputation.”

His friend’s face twisted. “That’s…okay, I can kind of see why. She’s got that pacifist thing going on. And dating a planetary leader would probably make mercenary work awkward.”

“The last thing I want is to be recognisable.” Obi-Wan rested his elbows on the desk. “It was fun, but I don’t think we were good for each other. Not at the time, or now, anyway.”

“Any other prospects, then?” Fan grinned when Obi-Wan laughed.

“Nosy! No. The odd fling here and there, you know how it goes.”

Bobbing his head in understanding, Fan handed him a holocube. “There’s a reason I decided I wanted something stable.”

The cube contained a series of images of Fan and another Twi’lek with darker blue skin, sometimes with their arms around each other, once at a planetary location that looked comfortably tropical. “You two are adorable,” Obi-Wan said, handing it back. “What’s their name?”

Fan smiled bashfully. “Kyel’lhnevar. He works in station security, we met a bit after I moved here. Once you get back, you should come around for dinner. The rest of your crew’s invited, too.”

“I’ll see who else is interested.”

Nym mostly wanted Obi-Wan along to help him deal with the various repatriation groups, claiming he was a better public speaker. While Obi-Wan allowed that this was accurate, he was less fond of his picture being taken with the charity representatives and freed slaves. He kept his mask on and let Nym claim the spotlight.

He received three calls from Zohli during the two weeks, right before each surgery when she was in peak panic mode. Nym scowled when Obi-Wan mentioned it.

“Dragging a kid into our business is a bad idea, Bastra. Worst case scenario, she freaks out or gets hurt. Or both.”

“I was barely a year older than she is when my life was put in danger, Nym. Maybe she doesn’t have as much training as I did, but I can help her with that.” Obi-Wan aimed an accusing glare Nym’s direction. “Weren’t you just telling me how you grew up on the streets?”

“Not the same thing as being enslaved out of a cushy life when you’re ten.” But the Feeorin shrugged and added, “I’m not going to tell you what to do; I just think it’s a bad idea.”

Zohli spent a full day exploring every corner of the *Veeka*, including some very tight spaces in the maintenance crawlspace under the cargo bay. The only one who actually worried about her doing so was Deesix, the droid fussing over the potential for damage to the ship.

The girl only laughed and patted the droid’s shoulder. “It’s so sweet of you to worry about me
getting hurt!” Deesix spluttered indignantly, but wasn’t actually able to say that hadn’t been its concern.

The next day, Obi-Wan walked into the lounge to find Zohli in the process of stringing painted clay beads from the back of the droid’s cranial dome as it knelt on the floor. “Dee still looks too much like a regular battle droid,” she explained, carefully patterning shades of blue and yellow onto the sturdy cords. “This will make it stand out better.”

“But that’s why I asked to be painted blue,” the droid protested. Obi-Wan noticed that it wasn’t trying to stop Zoh from decorating its chassis.

“They have blue droids now. Big ones.”

That caught his attention. Obi-Wan settled down across from them at the table, setting a tray of ginger biscuits down next to the teapot. “How big?”

Her freckled face scrunched up in concentration. “Taller than Dee. They don’t have necks, like—” she hunched her shoulders up to her ears. “They look like they ought to fall over if you push them, but they don’t.”

“Internal gyroscopic stabilisers,” Dee muttered.

“How long ago was this, Zoh?” Obi-Wan was hesitant to ask about the circumstances, but she offered it anyway.

“Right before we left. One of those skinny guys with red eyes and a weird hat came and talked to the captain, to examine the cargo,” she snarled the last word with sudden vehemence and then hissed something in Zygerrian, making a flicking gesture with her fingers. “He had two big droids with him.”

“Know anything about that, Dee?”

“I might have, but we got wiped and reprogrammed before each new assignment. They’re always testing new designs, so it doesn’t surprise me.”

Before Obi-Wan could say anything, Zohli threw her arms around Deesix’s shoulders. “That’s awful!”

The droid rubbed the top of its dome with a three-fingered hand in a gesture Obi-Wan realized it had picked up from him. “It’s...normal? Even standard operations droids are wiped and updated regularly.”

“But that erases who you are, doesn’t it?”

“I...suppose?” The droid looked to Obi-Wan for help, and he nodded.

“Not that I’ve spent much time talking to battle droids, but they all seem to have a similar personality. Is that a social thing, or part of the programming?”

“Oh,” Deesix was still thinking the question over when Phel came through from the cockpit. Xe blinked at the sight of Zoh hugging a rather perplexed droid before shaking xir head and pouring a cup of tea.

“Yes, a social development. We all knew we were expendable, and that any one of us could be sent for reprocessing at any time; that information was part of our standard operations package.”
“No wonder you're all so sour,” Phel said.

Obi-Wan wondered if that would affect the droid’s outlook now that it was no longer immersed in that environment. When asked, Dee shrugged.

“Remember that memory expansion and advanced operations package I asked for early on? The AOP included a more refined adaptation algorithm. That knowledge is still a part of my programming, but now I can recognise that particular absolute is no longer applicable.”

Zohli sat back to inspect her work. Several strands of coloured beads as thick around as Obi-Wan’s smallest finger now hung from the back of the droid’s head between its sensor pods. The unvarnished clay whispered and tic-ed across the matte durasteel surface of Dee’s torso casing as the droid tilted its head experimentally. “I was going to make them loop, instead of single strands, but then I thought those might get caught on things.”

“I appreciate it,” the droid said after a moment, earning itself another hug.

Obi-Wan and Phel’s training sessions became additional entertainment. Phel was far more self-conscious of xir fumbles when there was an audience, and Obi-Wan realised he’d need to start including Zohli in the sessions once she was cleared from medical recuperation. She wasn't Force-sensitive, but regular physical training would be good for her.

He started by letting her see him.

Obi-Wan’s method of dropping all the surprises at once on Phel didn't seem like such a good idea in this case, so Ulic began by being a harmless, visible presence as he moved around the ship, merely nodding to Zohli in acknowledgement as he passed.

Eventually she gathered the courage to ask, “Are you real?”

Ulic paused and nodded. “As real as anything else around here.”

“Are you human?”

He reached out and let his hand pass through the back of the lounge chair closest to him. “I was once. I'm something else now.”

“Bastra knows about you?”

“They all do. Deesix can’t see me, but it can hear me.”

The girl pushed aside the paper she’d been sketching on. “I was trying to find you yesterday but you weren't anywhere.”

“I was reading.” Her ears flattened back in a sceptical glare, and Ulic grinned. “I can't touch things the way you can, so when I want to read, I go invisible and sort of...experience it. Bastra got some books for me a while ago, I’ve been doing research.”

She was still glaring at him. He decided to push a little and settled himself in a half-lotus in the air beside the table. Zohli's eyes widened and she sat upright in surprise, but didn't startle. Good. “I died a long time ago. Now I'm helping Bastra learn.”
“About the Force? I saw what he and Phel were doing this morning.”

“No, he's already had lots of training with that. There's--” How to explain it? “Advanced stuff that he needs to know. I'm kind of like the counselor you've been talking to, only for Force things.”

One of her ears straightened, and it was almost unbearably cute. “Why does Bastra need a counselor? He seems fine.”

“Seeming fine and being fine are very different things.” Ulic sighed. “When Bastra was being trained -- when he was your age -- he was taught to do some things that aren't healthy. Stuff like suppressing his feelings, or ignoring things that upset him because his teachers said he shouldn't be upset. He grew up in a place where the teachers were never questioned.”

Something about what he said tripped a switch in the girl's head; he could feel it the moment her mood changed. Her green eyes narrowed and she snarled, “But that's wrong! We should always question what we're told! Especially if it feels wrong!”

Ulic held his hands up, placating. “I’m with you, there, kiddo. It's why I'm helping him now. It's just much harder for adults to change their way of thinking about things, because of the way people's brains change as we mature. Every thought you have is actually a physical thing inside your head. Kids’ brains can adapt faster and change more easily with new information, but adult brains kind of settle. It's harder to unlearn stuff.”

Zohli was still scowling, but she nodded in understanding. “Sometimes I see him just sitting with his eyes closed. Is that when you're helping him?”

“Yes.” He grinned. “I don't have to be visible all the time. It's challenging when we're in hyperspace, especially. Bastra meditates, and I help him through fixing his head a piece at a time.”

“Could you help me fix my head?”

He drew back, frowning. “You could learn to meditate, and it would probably help you, but you don't need my brand of help.” The girl's psychic pain, markedly reduced from those early days a few weeks before but still tangible, was something he very much did not want to interfere with. “Ask Bastra about that.”

“Ask me about what?”

“Meditation,” Ulic said, glancing over his shoulder. Something that wasn't quite hostility radiated from the young man -- protectiveness on Zohli's behalf. Obi-Wan was incredibly wary of Ulic talking to her, and Ulic could admit it wasn't without cause. The Dark side licked at his senses around her, offering a promise of something more intoxicating if she were merely pushed a little. The psychic damage she had suffered could too easily be warped into something wonderfully toxic.

Ulic may once have been in thrall to that siren song, but it had lost most of its hold on him with his ‘death’ in the Force. “Relax -- I'm behaving myself. You should teach her.”

“I can mention it to Doctor Oy-shso next time, they’d want to know about something like that.”

Zohli nodded eagerly. Obi-Wan had already explained to her that she would never be able to do many of the things he -- and now Phel -- could do, but she might be able to hone her reflexes.

Obi-Wan flashed Ulic an apologetic smile; Ulic shook his head. He understood that protective instinct; had even felt it himself toward Nomi’s little girl Vima. “What's up, Scogar?”
“We’re coming in to Takodana; I thought Zoh might want to see it.”

Paper and coloured pencils scattered everywhere as the girl scrambled out from behind the table. Sith spirit and former Jedi shared a laugh as she rushed to squeeze between Deesix and Phel in the pilot and copilot’s chairs.

Ulic sighed, smiling. “You'll have your work cut out for you with that one. Can't blame you for claiming her, though.”

Obi-Wan’s fingers twitched and the pencils that had rolled onto the floor rose to slide back into their case. It was less frivolous and more fine control practice as he worked to neatly stack the drawing paper in its sturdy plas sheath. “I have something like a plan. The first step is to introduce her to Maz.”

“And the second?”

“To see what Hondo wants this time.”

Hondo squinted against the backwash of dead leaves and grit flying up under the red-and-grey shuttle’s repulsors and pondered the practicality of acquiring some goggles. They’d have to be stylish goggles, though; the usual sort just made the wearer look insectoid and silly. He’d look into the matter later.

He’d expected Bastra’s new look -- the flesh around his left eye was still clearly new in texture, even if the tone had faded to match the older skin -- but the short, feline humanoid tucked against the man’s side was a surprise. Hondo’s eyes narrowed as he noted the air of protectiveness around the group; knowing what the Veeka’s crew had been involved in recently, it was obvious where the girl had come from.

“Bastra!” He flung his arms out expansively and clapped the human’s back as he got in range. “It's been too long, my friend! Almost too late, as well. But! We can make up for lost time. Who is this?”

Bastra grinned and hugged him back. “This is Zohli. Zoh, meet Hondo Ohnaka. He’s a wonderful person, but never trust him with something he might sell for a profit.”

Hondo Ohnaka might be admittedly self-centered, but he wasn't rude. He swept his hat off and bowed to kiss the back of the girl’s hand when she offered it for a shake. “My dear, it's a pleasure. And Bastra is quite correct: as Mama Ohnaka once said, never settle for anything less than the highest possible value.”

The girl -- Zygerrian without a doubt, now that she wasn’t hiding in Bastra’s shadow -- clearly wasn’t certain whether to be alarmed or charmed. She’d had schooling, though: she smiled politely and said, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mister Ohnaka.”

“Ah! My dear, call me Hondo. Bastra and I are close associates, after all. There's no need to be formal.” Covering a moment of awkwardness -- close associates, indeed, Ohnaka, what were you thinking with that word choice? -- he wrapped an arm around Phel’s shoulders on one side and Bastra’s on the other. “But it seems our timing is better than I had planned! That little ship must be getting crowded, no?”
Both humans gave him cautious glance as he steered them toward Maz’s castle. “Alright, Hondo. What have you got going this time?” Bastra asked with an arched eyebrow. Hondo envied him the ease of that expression; as a child he had spent much time holding one brow low in an attempt to train the other to move alone. It hadn’t been nearly as effective as he’d hoped.

“It's nothing I have going, not this time. Well, perhaps it is better to say it's something I’m planning in response to someone else's plans. You know how utterly crooked CorSec is, yes?”

Both humans nodded, and the droid following them gave a sarcastic little laugh. The Corellian Security Force was corrupt and rotten to the core, a fruit nobody wished to pluck; it maintained its strength because of its disease rather than despite it. “Would it surprise you to learn that their impound lot regularly ‘loses’ its contents? Or that some of their people have a regular sabacc night? Neither of which has anything to do with the other, of course!”

Bastra got the hint immediately; his partner was a bit slower on the uptake. The androgynous human squinted at him. “Are you planning to win a bunch of ships from some hapless police officers, Ohnaka?”

“Win?” He scoffed. “Oh, no, no, that would imply that everyone is playing fairly!”

When Scogar and Phel had broken open the door to her cell, the best Zohli had hoped for was to annoy them into shooting her. She definitely didn’t want to find out what a bunch of raiders would have in store for her and the others.

But she would be damned if she was going to die with that collar around her neck.

Their patient kindness had been unexpected -- and the first she’d experienced in nearly a year that hadn’t come with ugly strings attached. Scogar had given up his bunk for her as if it was perfectly natural. Waking from terrors that were more memory than dream to concerned blue eyes had left her reaching for the first source of comfort she saw.

Maybe it was a mistake; maybe they’d turn out to be saving her for something worse. She doubted it: nobody could be that consistently nice without it being real.

They were not what her parents would have called good people. Pirates. Low-born scoundrels, probably. Her parents would have looked down on them just for being human, and Deesix would have been ordered around like a slave.

The more time she spent around the three of them, the more she realized they’d all escaped similar fates.

The ghost was different; she’d never met a ghost before. He seemed alright, but there was something about him she didn’t entirely trust. Scogar’s reaction to the ghost talking to her supported that. Like with Hondo: someone he only trusted a little even if he liked them as a friend. It was a strange mindset, but she was starting to understand it.

She gripped Deesix’s forearm tighter as they followed the others into the castle. The noise and smell of hundreds of people in an enclosed space hit her immediately. This was not a place for children: even the shortest people in the room were clearly adults of their species, and the droid positioned by the door warbled something sceptical at Dee, who whistled back indignantly and didn’t stop.
“What did he say?”

“He asked if I was a babysitter, too. He’s one to talk, he babysits this entire place.”

Someone screamed Scogar’s name over the din of music and voices, but they sounded happy, and Scogar laughed and waved. Disengaging from Hondo, the human turned to look at her. “Zohli, there’s someone I want you to meet.” He held out his hand, not for her to take, but to rest reassuringly on her shoulder as she moved forward.

A small, orange-skinned woman was sitting at the table they were approaching: when she saw Zohli her eyes got even bigger behind the corrective lenses and she vaulted over the table. The woman was even shorter than her, and when she smiled, Zoh felt a wave of kindness, like sunshine on her face. The woman was like Scogar, then, only stronger, much stronger. No wonder he wanted them to meet.

“Who is this, Scogar? Another of your rescues? Let me look at you, child.” She reached out gently and Zohli let her hands be clasped.

Phel stifled a laugh and Deesix muttered something. Zohli eyed the woman as frankly as she was being studied in return. “Is rescuing people something he does a lot?”

The woman chuckled. “It’s in his blood. I am Maz Kanata; this is my home, and you are welcome here.”

“My name’s Zohli.”

Maz pulled her around to a chair on the other side of the table beside a dark-skinned human couple. They introduced themselves as Jhono and Adité Calrissian, and seemed to know the others already. The adults joked and talked about things while food and drinks were placed in front of everyone.

A separate pitcher of something steaming and spicy-sweet was placed between Zohli and Adité to share, while everyone else had drinks with sparkling hints of alcohol. Scogar noticed and asked if Adité was feeling well, and that was how they found out the couple was expecting a baby. Congratulations went around, but Jhono was quick to ask that nobody inquire about the details. “It’s considered bad luck on Socorro. An old tradition, but one we appreciate. We don’t even name our children until they’re three months old.”

Zohli contented herself with asking questions about their homeworld, and why Adité hid her hair in a beautiful scarf. “It’s not rude for me to have my hair showing, is it?”

“Not at all!” Adité squeezed her shoulder reassuringly. “You don't follow our traditions.” She grinned across at Scogar where he sat on Zohli’s other side. “Have you adopted her, then?”

“I’ve assumed guardianship. It's Zoh’s choice if she wants to stay or go, although the doctors want her to wait on that until they’ve cleared her, health-wise.” The smile he gave Zohli was encouraging but seemed just the smallest bit sad. He would probably miss her if she decided she wanted to go somewhere else.

Adité frowned at him. “But you have her with you while you're off being reckless?”

Scogar tilted his head to where Hondo and Phel were sharing an increasingly improbable story. “Hondo was insistent that he had something in the works that couldn't wait much longer. From the sounds of it, there won't be any shooting. On the other hand, this is Hondo we’re talking about.”
The idea of being adopted stuck in Zohli’s head. What would that mean? She knew better than to rush into staying with the first people who were nice to her -- and from the scars on their armour, it was pretty obvious they did dangerous stuff. Would they expect her to do that stuff? What if their ship got shot at? She’d seen the carbon-scoring there, the signs of repairs and new paint. What if--

A hand touched hers, light and gentle, just enough contact to get her attention. She looked up to see Scogar smiling.

“Don't worry about that right now,” he said softly. “By Republic law, you need an adult guardian until you're thirteen Standard. We might break some of those laws frequently, but this is about you getting proper medical treatment and finishing your education. There's plenty of time for you to think things over, and in the meantime, we’ll do our best to look after you.”

He’d said that before, and it seemed like he meant it. Zoh held up her hand, smallest finger extended, and Scogar looped his own around it gently. Pinky promises were silly and childish, and there was nothing stopping someone from breaking one. But the human treated the gesture with an uncommon level of solemnity and met her eyes as he did it.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

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They were up late into the night discussing particulars with Hondo. Obi-Wan hadn't realised Zohli had fallen asleep tucked into his side until he’d reached for a pitcher to refill his drink.

Hondo had given him a knowing grin.

Now, on their approach to Corellia, the girl perched on his knee, carefully not touching the instrument panel. Zohli loved flying; she'd never left her homeworld until the year before, and Obi-Wan was determined to let her experience the good side of it -- even the fun side, if they had time to rent swoops for a city tour.

Coronet City hadn't changed much since his last visit -- a few businesses had closed, new ones had opened in their stead. With Hondo a day behind them, Obi-Wan took the opportunity to take the other three on an afternoon walk down Treasure Ship Row.

Being without his armour in public for the first time in months felt simultaneously liberating and oppressive. He felt lighter on his feet without the added weight, but the lack of assurance that came with that weight made the back of his neck crawl. He caught himself checking for threats through the Force and chided himself for the paranoia. Maybe two humans, a modified B1, and a Zygerrian child made an odd group, even in common street clothes, but the ‘Row was filled with odd, multispecies groups, mostly other ship crews on leave.

Turning, Obi-Wan caught Phel eyeing some hand-painted scarves hanging at the front of one of the open-air shops. They had time, and credits enough for a treat; why the hells not? Grinning, he caught Zohli’s eye and then pulled their group into the shade beneath the awning.
It wasn't the seediest cantina Obi-Wan had been to, but it definitely wasn't the sort of place one would mistake for a casual public house. The bartender was a cynical human man whose face had seen the wrong end of a broken bottle more than once. Old tabacc smoke had stained the ceiling and upper reaches of the walls golden-brown, and the floor was tacky in a way no industrial solvent could strip away. The patrons were mostly labourers and retirees who had become regulars decades previous and clung to habit out of desperation. The music had been old when Obi-Wan was an Initiate, served by an aging broadcast system, and the booth divisions were designed to discourage eavesdropping.

The officers were trying to blend in, but not well enough: haircuts too neat, shoes too shiny. It was a good place for them to indulge their vices, though, unlikely to host their colleagues, and nobody cared about a bit of gambling as long as the bartender got his cut.

They couldn't use comms: even the smallest of earbuds was still visible to someone looking, and it would be obvious there was something going on. Obi-Wan and Hondo had worked out a series of gestures for communication. Qui-Gon would have been appalled at the necessity, but when one member of the team couldn't communicate telepathically and the other was trying to hide that they could, options were limited.

Obi-Wan hadn't expected to have to signal Hondo immediately, but his first glance around the room had him scratching the back of his head to say, *Wait. Problem.*

Seated at the bar already, Hondo gestured with his glass in a horizontal circle indicating he understood. Obi-Wan ordered a drink, took a sip of the watered ale for effect, and then sauntered over to one of the occupied booths.

"Well, well. Jance Retten. Haven't seen you in ages."

Nejaa Halcyon nearly dropped his drink. "Nine burning hells, Bastra! What are you doing here?" he hissed. The stranger sitting opposite -- another dark-haired human man who was doing a much better job blending in than the other CorSec officers -- looked torn between amusement and pulling his blaster.

 Pitching his voice to carry no further than the disguised Jedi Master’s ears, Obi-Wan said casually, "Having a drink. And perhaps a game of sabacc." He raised his eyebrows in question, and the other two men exchanged a glance.

Nejaa scooted over. "Have a seat. This is my friend Rostek. Anything you can tell me, you can tell him."

Rostek twitched a smile. "Sabacc, huh? Funny thing, there happens to be a regular group here tonight we have our eyes on. What were you going to do about it?"

Obi-Wan toyed with his glass to let Hondo know it might be okay. "A little bird told me you have a few crooked officers. A friend and I were hoping to con them out of a couple ships on the impound lot."

Neither Nejaa nor Rostek reacted outwardly to that bold pronouncement, but he could feel the ripple of shock from Nejaa. Rostek was mildly outraged at what Obi-Wan was proposing, but the ire was battling the urge to giggle and losing. The two glanced at each other again, and after a moment Nejaa said, "Okay. I think we can work with that."

Rostek leaned in. "It took me months to figure out where the ships were disappearing to, we’ve been trying to catch them in the process. It's mostly been little ones, fighters and shuttles that we assume
they’re offering as collateral in place of credits.”

“That was our assumption, as well. We’re after slightly larger prizes.”

“Oh, they’re there, and just one of them disappearing from the hangar would be a big deal. We don’t have official permission to take action on this right now, but witnessing and acting are two different matters,” Rostek murmured with a grin. “And maybe we can consider the hulls a bit of repayment for helping shut down a bigger problem.”

He excused himself to the ‘freshers -- and to connect with someone else they were working with -- and Nejaa leaned in.

“Looking good, by the way, kid. Didn’t recognise you at first without that chunk of metal bolted to your face.”

“It’s a recent development.” So was the lack of beard; the brush of air on his jaw once more made him feel exposed. He couldn't wait to grow it back; Phel had compared the look to a gundark with mange.

The Jedi Master squinted at him. “Two questions. Why the hell am I reading you as a complete blank? And what the hell have you been up to that you can countenance pulling a con on CSF officers?”

Obi-Wan frowned, considering. Nejaa knew the value of secrecy, and the man deserved to know the Temple networks might be compromised. He dropped his voice. “The Sith Master has been looking for me, or he was when I made the choice to drop out of sight. I’ve learned to conceal my Force presence.”

Nejaa hissed a breath through his teeth. “Shit, kid. How do you know that?”

“I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you. My source isn’t wholly reliable, but I trust them in this, they wouldn't benefit from him getting his hands on me. He calls himself Sidious, and he has a lot of political power. Enough so that he could conceivably have access to the Temples.”

The Jedi Master ran through a litany of curses under his breath. “I want to learn this hiding trick of yours.”

“We can arrange something. In the meantime, I’ve been working with a bunch of scoundrels and rogues, trying to destabilize Sidious’ power base. Are you familiar with the Lok Revenants?”

“They’re based out of Karthakk, aren’t they? Hassling the Trade Federation.” Nejaa stroked his beard. “I’ve heard mixed reports about them, although their recent luck made me wonder. Is that your doing?”

“Hardly, I’m just a pilot. A pilot in need of a bigger ship, my crew has been growing,” he added with a grin.

Nejaa’s smile was warmed with relief. “When you left here two years ago, I really worried for you. Especially after Booster came back without you. But you’re making friends, huh?”

“And possibly enemies, but that's inevitable.” Obi-Wan thought back to the incident on Ryloth with Quinlan and Aayla. Just because he hadn't seen consequences to his actions there, it didn't necessarily follow that he never would. Fortuna worked for powerful people.

Rostek returned, looking determined. “We can work with this. You and your associate just do your
thing, Bastra, we’ll handle the rest.”

“You're sure you don't mind us just waltzing off with a couple of freighters?”

The undercover officer chuckled at him. “Did you stop to ask yourself that question before making this plan?”

Obi-Wan snorted. “Of course I did, but I wasn't sure whom to contact, for obvious reasons.”

“We’ll fail to catch your identities. You kids have fun.”

Obi-Wan adjusted his jacket -- the old leather one, salvaged and rebuilt into something stylish and contemporary by Ryndellia station’s tailor -- as he stood, letting Hondo know things were fine.

“Thanks, Retten. I’ll be in touch.”

Hondo, in his role as a card sharp, was already plying the bartender with questions about where he could find a game; his voice was just loud enough to carry. Obi-Wan found a perch further down the bar toward the back, looking like a Coronet University student trying too hard and slumming it -- wealthy, bored, trying to feel like he was really living for once. An easy mark.

Someone settled on the barstool next to Obi-Wan, and he carefully suppressed a smile.

“Do your parents know you’re here, kid?”

He gave the man -- one of the CorSec officers, a gangly human dressed rough except for those too-shiny work boots -- a sarcastic glare and flattened his accent. “It’s none of their business, is it? Or yours.”

“Whoa.” The other man held his hands up, grinning. “Just trying to be friendly, kid. This isn’t the sort of place your type usually come.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m here.”

“Trying to get away from the crowds, huh? Know how that feels.” His smile was friendly enough, but there was a level of cold calculation behind it that leeched the expression’s warmth. “The guys and I were going to have a small sabacc game in the back. You ever played?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “A few times. My uncle tried to teach me when I was a kid.”

The officer clapped him on the shoulder. “C’mon and join us, we’ll help you out. What's your name, kid?”

“Lyef.” He scooped up his fresh drink and followed the man to a back corner secluded behind a partial wall with textured glass panels at shoulder height. The table there was larger than the others and round, clearly intended for gaming.

The skinny officer was Embrin; his shortest friend was Tay, and the taller was Jyle. Hondo had already been invited in, giving his name as ‘Weequay.’ The CorSec officers commented at having met him just last month; had he changed his hair so fast? Obi-Wan and Hondo forced themselves to laugh at the tired joke: it was well known that more-religious Weequay didn't take names in Basic when they left their homeworld. Hondo wasn't religious at all, but he was skilled at faking it.

It was difficult to lose; pretending ineptitude was easy, but forcing himself to ignore his knowledge and make poor choices strained Obi-Wan’s control. Embrin took pity on him and started trying to coach him on guessing the other players’ actions. Some of his information was baldly inaccurate, of
course, but Obi-Wan put on a show of trying to follow it.

While he was pretending to fumble, the CorSec officers engaged in a concerted effort to take Hondo for everything he had. Obi-Wan struggled not to laugh: the three officers were adequate players and didn't care about losing. Why should they, if they were going to pay off any debt with effectively stolen ships that cost them nothing? It made them sloppy, and Obi-Wan could sense Hondo’s rising irritation as he forced himself to play at their level.

Hondo let it drag for an hour, making the officers work for their prize, but eventually folded and returned to the bar to drown his sorrows. Obi-Wan was still in the game, barely; he let himself come close enough to winning a round or two to make the officers sweat.

It wasn't fun. Not only was he trying to keep the charade running, he was actively filtering the alcohol from his system as the Cor Sec officers tried to get him drunk enough to make mistakes. Obi-Wan let himself win a round by a bare margin, and felt the *snap* of tension as the three officers determined it was time to take him out of the game.

He let them, feigning inebriation and still playing the wealthy student who could throw credits around like water, and opened himself to the Force, reading the currents and biding his time.

As soon as his fingers touched a fresh hand, Obi-Wan knew this was it. He eyed the cards and let a sloppy grin cross his face. The pile of credits in front of him was depressingly small, not nearly enough to match the standing ante, so when his turn came around, he instead reached into his pocket.

Slurring a little, he announced, “I got a good feeling about this one, but I can't match that. Will this cover it?”

And he placed his lightsaber on top of the pile.

The three officers’ jaws dropped; from somewhere in the cantina, Obi-Wan caught a jolt of awe from whoever Nejaa’s friend had spying on the game.

Tay whispered, “Is that what I think it is? Where the hell did you get that?”

“Family heirloom. It still works, wanna see?”

“Shit, yes!” Embrin blurted. He immediately ducked and glanced around, dropping his voice. “I've always wanted to see one of these up close!”

Holding the hilt to the side, Obi-Wan ignited the blue blade; the resonant hum carried through the taproom, and he felt Nejaa determinedly prodding at his shields.

*Trust me, Master Halcyon, I know what I'm doing.*

*I was wondering what you planned to justify winning ships. If you'd told me--*

*You would have stopped us. Don't worry, we've got this.*

*Damn, I hope so. If that lands on the market, I'll have to report it.*

Not wanting to damage the furnishings in a demonstration, Obi-Wan ran a disposable drink coaster over the blade, slicing the compressed-paper square in half -- or rather, into two fourths, as the middle portion was vaporized in a stinking puff of smoke. “Convinced?”

Jyle reached for the hilt in rapt fascination, and Obi-Wan pulled it back with a mocking finger-wag.
“You get to touch it if you win it.”

The officers looked at each other, greed warring with caution. Obi-Wan gave just the slightest nudge through the Force to tip the balance, and he felt Nejaa’s sharp, indrawn breath. There was the real problem he’d been concerned with.

“We don’t have enough to nearly match that,” Jyle admitted. “But if you win, you get to pick any ship off our lot.”

Obi-Wan let his eyes narrow. “I know exactly what this is worth on the black market. Two ships. And you can keep the credits.” What he and Hondo had 'lost' combined would cover roughly half the cost of one of the type of ships he was hoping for; the exchange rate here was in their favour.

That decided them. “Alright, kid, you're on.”

Obi-Wan didn't often play for keeps; for him, sabacc was a casual game. Just as with navigation, the numbers came easily to him; he didn't need the Force to guess what the others were holding.

So he could tell the moment the others swapped skifters into their hands. Obi-Wan didn't call it out; the Force was pushing him to let it slide. A card shift brought with it a ripple of disquiet, and he feigned a frown before putting another card on freeze. Betting was off -- nothing was going to top the offer literally sitting on the table -- and the three officers got quieter and more intense as they went into a final round.

Another card shift, and a spike of pleasure came from Tay and Embrin simultaneously. Obi-Wan let his grin widen as he pulled the freeze pile back into his hand.

Embrin went first and called. “Pure sabacc.”

Tay pursed his lips and tsked. “Almost good enough.” He dropped an Idiot’s Array on the table with a triumphant grin.

Three sets of eyes turned toward Obi-Wan; he shrugged and placed an Idiot's Array in front of him -- and a second Idiot among the rest of his cards. “Seems at least one of us is cheating, and it's certainly not me.”

“It's got to be you, kid. We play on the level,” Embrin said, not bothering to hide his smug grin.

Obi-Wan let the drunken, foolish mask drop. He pointed at the card shift button on the table, triggering it; the three skifter cards, Tay’s Idiot among them, remained static while everything else shifted. “I very much doubt that.” Before Jyle’s hand could land on the sabacc pot, Obi-Wan called the lightsaber back to his hand.

Silence descended. He tilted his head at them. “What's it gonna be, boys?”

“A karking Jedi?” Embrin whispered.

Obi-Wan shook his head. “I’m no Jedi. Just a man in need of a few ships.” He pointed at Jyle before the man could do more than twitch. “But I'm also not an idiot who walks into something like this without backup.” Hondo accepted his cue to lean around the dividing wall wearing a nasty grin. “You lost the lightsaber but get the money. We really have no interest in reporting you. Cut your losses.”

Tay was grinding his teeth audibly. “Fine,” he growled. The officers set about clearing the cards and credits from the table, which Jyle took with him out the cantina’s back entrance. Embrin and Tay led
Obi-Wan and Hondo out into the mid-night chill; Nejaa and his friend followed a moment later.

Obi-Wan prodded Nejaa gently. *The third one went out the back.*

*Yeah, we have someone on it.*

Tay attempted to make conversation on the speeder ride across the city. “Is that actually a family heirloom?”

The lightsaber had gone back into his pocket. Obi-Wan snorted. “No. I took it off a fool who thought he could hunt me down.”

Embrin glowered. “Should have guessed you two were working together.”

In the front passenger seat beside Tay, Hondo laughed. “Not a likely pair, are we? But consider this a lesson, my friends. You will not be seeing us again.”

“You better pray to Quay or whatever you believe in that you don’t.” Tay swiped his pass at the entrance gate and got a wave from the officer on security duty.

Obi-Wan sent an impression of the guard’s face back to Nejaa. *Even if he's not working with them, he’s probably taking a cut. No questions asked.*

He knew what he wanted the moment he saw the lot. “That Corellian freighter there.”

Tay winced. “They'll notice that one's gone, for sure.”

“You did say *any* ships.” Obi-Wan gave a toothy smile. “I’m sure you're able to clear them from the records?”

The other man snorted. “What do we look like? How about you, Weequay?”

Hondo pointed to a sleek little freighter that looked fast even when sitting still. “That will do.”

“So glad you approve,” Tay grumbled. They watched while he cleared the ships’ files from the system and retrieved their registrations from a cabinet filled with datapads. “Don’t let us catch you in Coronet City ever again.”

“Oh, we have better places to be.” Obi-Wan grinned with mocking cheer and went to claim his ship.

The YT-2400 had seen some hard action, the hull bearing carbon-scoring including a baked-in mark that looked like a sunburst, but was still in excellent condition. Embrin pulled the tracking devices with a wordless glare.

Obi-Wan started the pre-atmospheric flight checks, ran a secondary check for tracking devices, and commend Phel. “Success. I’ll be airborne shortly, but we need to leave the planet.”

Phel’s cackle echoed down the connection. *Good to know, meet you at Takodana?”*

“No, take a hop towards Centerpoint Station and wait for me. I’m going to need to come back here tomorrow in the *Veeka*, we’ll swap in space.”

Nejaa felt impatient and discontent. *Are you out yet?*

*My associate just left, and my flight check just cleared.*
Nejaa was livid. “I felt what you did last night, Obi-Wan. That was Dark.”

“Was it?” Obi-Wan’s eyebrows arched. “Funny, since I’ve done the same thing before whilst working with Qui-Gon.”

They stood in the Veeka’s lounge, face to face and glaring. The little shuttle felt empty with Deesix, Phel, and Zohli having moved to the 2400 and starting the run back to Takodana. It was probably a good thing Obi-Wan had moved most of his belongings, including the puzzle box which now hid Ulic’s crystal, over to the freighter; the Sith’s presence would possibly have made this conversation even more awkward.

The Jedi Master’s green eyes flared with controlled anger. “You know damned well it was! What you pulled--”

“Was no different from any other mind trick! How often have you pushed a mark to get the result you want?”

“That isn't the same thing!”

“It is exactly the same!” Obi-Wan snarled. “The only part that’s upsetting you is the why. Was it selfish? You could look at it that way--”

“And that makes all the difference, Kenobi! What greater good were you serving by pushing them into greed?”

Obi-Wan laughed, bitter and hard. “Do you see the size of this ship? It flies, it does its job. But it can’t do what I need it to. We just rescued hundreds of slaves, Nejaa, and the Veeka here was too small to help reduce the strain on the other captains. Yes, I don’t want to have to sleep in the pilot’s chair anymore, but that’s a secondary matter. The fact,” he prodded Nejaa’s breastbone with two fingers and watched the older man’s eyes go wide, “is that I’ve been trying to disrupt Sidious’ endorsed activities on the Outer Rim in a ship that isn’t up to the task.”

He breathed out hard through his nose, letting go of his irritation with the Jedi. “Sometimes, in order to do the right thing, we have to sacrifice parts of ourselves. Is a little selfishness in service to something bigger, something higher, than myself such a terrible thing?”

Nejaa’s sigh was closer to a growl. “I ought to have you up before the Council, Obi-Wan. At least for a review of your actions.”

“There are millions of Force-sensitive beings in the galaxy who do not answer to the Jedi Council, Master Halcyon. They do what I did and worse every day; the only difference here is that you know me, and it disturbs you.”

“You picked up all Qui-Gon’s bad habits, kid.” The Jedi Master turned away, rubbing the back of his head. The man’s genuine fear -- for Obi-Wan’s sake, not because of him -- was giving way to resignation, though, and he was allowing Obi-Wan to see it. “You're right. I don't like it, but I don't
have to. Just... be careful. I don't want to have to hunt you down.”

“I'm already being hunted. At least I would trust you to not do anything unsavoury.”

Nejaa’s laugh was short and humourless. “Unsavoury, sure. Speaking of which, what else do you know about this Sith master?”

Obi-Wan leaned down to retrieve the last bottle from under the kitchenette sink. “We need alcohol if we're getting into that.”

Hondo was once again waiting for Obi-Wan on the ground on Takodana. The pirate put a hand on his shoulder and guided him back up the Veeka’s ramp before his feet even touched the grass. “We must have words, Bastra.”

Obi-Wan sighed but went without protest. “I thought we might.”

They settled in the lounge and Obi-Wan shook off a flash of deja-vu remembering a similar situation with Nejaa only a few days previous.

“I have had questions for a long time; they need to be answered, my friend.” Hondo squinted at him, and Obi-Wan waited, wondering where he would start.

“Where did you get a lightsaber?”

The most obvious place, of course. “It’s mine,” he answered without heat. “I was thrown out of the Order a few years ago.”

“A Jedi.” Hondo laughed. “I’ve been in your bed and you never told me.”

“We were a bit preoccupied at the time,” Obi-Wan responded with a deliberately bland expression.

The pirate cackled. “So we were! And those men you were talking to in the cantina?”

“Friends. People I worked with during the Stark Hyperspace War.” It was stretching the truth, but he wouldn’t put it past Hondo to have memorised Nejaa and Rostek’s faces.

“You were involved in the-! No. No, that's a different question for a different time. But I’ll want to hear that story later! You made a deal with them.”

“I was involved in the Yinchorri Uprising as well.” Obi-Wan suppressed a grin as Hondo’s deep-set eyes grew wide. “They were investigating the same officers we were toying with. Shortly after we left, the whole group got picked up by a CorSec Internal Investigations team. Neither of us have been implicated, and the ships’ records are lost.” He smiled. “I appreciate your concern. We're entirely in the clear.”

“Would you really have let them have the lightsaber if you had lost?” There was something in Hondo’s eyes now, the cold, calculating pirate side of a person Obi-Wan had come to genuinely care about.

He scoffed. “No. But I wasn’t going to lose.” Obi-Wan studied him for a moment, considering. “What's your particular interest in the lightsaber?”
“Oh! Not the lightsaber itself, no. It's the crystal inside; they sell handsomely, if you know whom to talk to.” Hondo’s grin was massive and devious.

“I see.” Obi-Wan pursed his lips and nodded. “Well, in that case, let me show you...something special.” He pulled the weapon from its concealed pocket in his jacket. “Pay close attention, my friend. It's unlikely you’ll ever see this again.” For just a moment he was again glad that Ulic was elsewhere; he had the feeling the Sith lord would be protesting in horror.

He placed the lightsaber in the center of the table and drifted into a working trance. When it looked like Hondo was about to get impatient, Obi-Wan held a hand over the weapon. It lifted smoothly off the table, and piece by piece he disassembled it, waiting until the only step left was removing the blue crystal from its brackets. Turning his hand palm-up, he let the crystal float over the Hondo, whose jaw was hanging loose in astonishment. The Weequay pirate hesitated before plucking the gem from the air, then gave Obi-Wan a canny look as the lightsaber parts gently settled on the table.

“Bastra, my friend. What are you playing at?”

“I’m not fond of the idea of a whole lightsaber ending up on the black market: they're serious weapons and should not fall into the wrong hands.” He sighed. “But the crystal? I have little use for it. I'm planning to create a more advanced 'saber, one with multiple crystals. Unfortunately, the way the resonances work, I can't just pair another crystal to the original; they have to be from the same source. So you see, what is useless to me is still of value to you.”

“You could sell it, yourself.”

Obi-Wan grinned. “Which of us is aspiring to command a fleet?”

Hondo’s fingers closed around the crystal. It was strange: Obi-Wan had thought he would feel something about losing the crystal, but it felt more like letting go of another anchor.

“So, my friend. What are your plans?”

“Oh, I have a few leads to follow up on a...personal project.” Kardin Lo hadn’t been in touch in a while; hopefully the Muun hadn’t been buried in files and forgotten to sleep. “A ship to properly introduce myself to. And a crew to deal with.”

“Are you going to train the little one?” Hondo shook his head. “I never would have thought you the type.”

Obi-Wan took a moment to reassemble the crystal-less lightsaber, if only to make certain the pieces stayed together. “If things had gone predictably two years ago, I might already be expected to train a Jedi Initiate by now. It’s something of a rite of passage. Zohli’s no Force-user, but she’s indicated she wants to learn to fight. Given our circumstances, it would be hypocritical of me to say no.”

He stood and tilted his head for Hondo to join him on the walk to Maz’s castle. With a laugh, the pirate draped his arm across Obi-Wan’s shoulders. “My friend, I may be able to help you with that.”

The public gardens were peaceful in the rain. Yan Dooku stood under the protective cover of the force field which prevented visitors from getting soaked, waiting. It had been barely two years since he’d last seen Coruscant, but it somehow felt like a lifetime had passed. His Master would ask
questions about his visit, of course, but fortunately he had an easy excuse.

The gentle susurrus of droplets falling from leaf to leaf dulled sound, but not so much Dooku couldn’t make out the approaching footsteps. He schooled his features into a pleasant smile and turned. “My Padawan. It is good to see you again.”

“Master.” Qui-Gon greeted him with an embrace that felt more formal than warm. It was inevitable that young Kenobi might have contacted his former Master, and there was a quiet reserve between Dooku and his former Padawan which hadn’t existed previously. “Walk with me?”

There were few other visitors to the gardens, mostly because of the weather. A Mon Calamari family was out playing on a field of soft grasses, heedless of the downpour. The silence between Dooku and his former Padawan stretched until it was almost uncomfortable; Qui-Gon was biting the inside of his lower lip the way he always had when searching for words.

Dooku chose to take the initiative. “Your message was very kind, Qui-Gon. I do hope you haven’t called me here just to try to convince me to return to the Order.”

“It isn’t my place to make such assertions, Master. You stated very clear reasons when you departed, and I can appreciate them.” Qui-Gon cast him a sideways glance. “However, Obi-Wan did tell me that he is concerned for you, being alone on Serenno with few peers who might appreciate your perspective of the Force. I would have come to visit, but the Council wouldn’t approve a trip so far from Coruscant at this stage in Anakin’s training without reason.”

“Wanting to visit your old Master isn’t reason enough for them?” Dooku kept his tone light and almost teasing; in truth, it had been a relief that Qui-Gon hadn’t requested a visit. Dooku had yet to locate the spies among his staff, and the last thing he wanted was his private conversations with Qui-Gon to reach the ears of his Lord Sidious.

“Unfortunately not,” Qui-Gon said with a soft laugh. “I haven’t made myself popular among them, particularly recently with regards to Anakin’s training. Some of their decisions are not what I would consider in the boy’s best interests.”

He wasn’t telling the entire truth, but Dooku let the matter lie. “So young Kenobi expressed concern for me? How is he?”

“I’m not sure. I haven’t seen him in quite some time. He claims to be well, at least.” Qui-Gon’s smile was positively impish. “I’d rather hear about what trouble you’ve got up to on Serenno. I understand the other Houses are rather displeased at your claiming of the title.”

They passed a good hour or so, sharing stories that were amusing and exasperating by turns, and when it was time to part, Dooku promised his former Padawan to not remain so distant. Qui-Gon, he mused, was possibly more right than he’d known: it had felt good to unburden himself of the trivialities to someone who appreciated the effort of diplomacy. He felt lighter on his feet than he had in months.

Chapter End Notes

TW for slavery, surgery, implied past assault

Update: The dinner scene with Fan and Kye didn't fit into the chapter; you can find it
here
Contemplation

Chapter Summary

The crew takes their new ship on a shakedown flight to the most out of the way corner of the galaxy.

Chapter Notes

Much thanks to norcumi and MechanicalShadow for beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 978.07.22
Takodana

Phel and Deesix were showing Zohli around the cockpit controls when Bastra finally returned, carrying a pair of datapads. Phel glanced at him nervously -- they hadn't asked if it was alright to teach her -- but Bastra grinned and nodded in approval.

Xe bit xir lip a moment before voicing the second question that had been bothering xir for the past three days. “Why'd you have to go back to Corellia? I get why you used the Veeka instead, but that was weird.”

It had been stranger than strange to suddenly be aboard another ship. The engines had a different tone, things didn't work in quite the same way, and xe’d spent the trip back to Takodana paranoid that something was going to break and xe wouldn't be able to tell until it was too late. Nothing had, of course, and Deesix was a capable enough pilot to handle the strange controls when Phel had frozen trying to find things on the panels. Why did different manufacturers have to design simple things so differently?!

Zohli jumped up to give Bastra a hug in greeting, and he handed her one of the datapads. “Look that over once you're done here, love.” Phel ducked xir head, hiding a smile. It was just too damn cute.

The girl frowned at the screen. “What is this, a test?”

He smiled as he settled into the chair in front of the nav console. “Yes, but there's no wrong answers. The Republic offers a basic educational course over the HoloNet for people who live on ships or are otherwise unable to attend a school. This is to see where you're at, and then they'll send course material for you.”

Her ears flattened as she scowled. “You want me to go to school?” Phel swallowed a giggle at her tone. Her small fists already hit hard, and xe didn't need more bruises.

“Zoh, just because we're breaking laws, it doesn't mean I’m going to neglect your formal education.
You're eleven; there's two more years in the fundamentals, and then you can decide if you want to specialize or focus on practicality.” Zohli was fuming, arms folded tight against her chest; Bastra patted her shoulder lightly. “Look, I wouldn't have you do it if it wasn't important, love. You know that. You don't have to stay with us forever, and if you choose to go, this will help if you need to get a job somewhere.”

“Ugh! Fiiiine!” She didn't quite stomp from the cockpit, and Bastra’s mouth twitched against a grin.

“Sorry, I didn't intend to interrupt.”

Phel and Dee shrugged simultaneously. “No big deal, she just started asking what was what,” Phel answered. Xe watched carefully as Dee started up one of the more intensive diagnostics.

“In answer to your question, a Jedi Master needed to yell at me.”

They turned and stared at him. Bastra shrugged. “He's actually a friend.”

Phel scowled. “Why'd you have to let him yell at you, though?”

There was that expression that said Bastra was debating how much to tell them. The man was cagey about a lot of his past still, although he seemed to have come to terms with it. “Short version is he was there the night before and felt me use the Force in a way he didn't approve.”

“You mean, Dark stuff?” Xe was still trying to wrap xir head around that concept.

“No. Mind tricks are small things, comparatively, but still manipulative and remove a sentient’s freedom of self-determination. The Jedi teach that they should never be used except in a matter of survival. I manipulated our marks’ emotions in a situation where words could have sufficed. Basically, I was sloppy and resorted to the easiest tool in my kit,” he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“Still, you didn't have to go back. They don't have power over you anymore.”

Bastra’s smile was bitter. “Technically, they do. If I’m suspected of having gone truly Dark, they're within their rights to pursue me as they would any other Darkened Force-user and drag me back to Coruscant to stand trial.”

“But...you have gone Dark.” He’d been very up-front about that when he’d started teaching Phel.

“Yes, but they don't know that. And I’d like to keep it that way.” Bastra shook his head. “Going back was a gesture of trust, and also an opportunity to justify myself so Master Halcyon didn't feel the need to pry further.”

An uncomfortable silence descended, punctuated by the faint chirping of the ship’s computer as it produced diagnostic results. Dee nodded, satisfied.

“The ship's in good shape. A lot of modifications were made by the previous owner, but they weren't incompetent.”

Bastra stood and leaned over the droid’s shoulder to inspect the readout. Phel frowned as the other two discussed the details. Zoh had found three smuggling compartments already, and was certain there was a fourth. The previous owner hadn't been the cleanest of sentients -- the air-cleanser modules in some of the rooms indicated things had been worse before the ship had been confiscated - - and one of the first things xe had done was find out if there was a cleaning droid.

There had been, deactivated and left in a cabinet in Maintenance -- and was it going to take time to
adjust to being on a ship large enough to have an actual Maintenance section. The scaled-down MSE had the intelligence of a tooka -- barely enough to understand that the cabins were not to be cleaned during the night cycle. Phel was certain xe’d nearly had a heart attack when the droid had woken xir up at third hour. It had been grumpy from being both yelled at and unceremoniously picked up and deposited in the corridor; xe’d had to apologise the next day, but they had come to an understanding.

“--Not that I stopped to actually inspect the ship. We were on the edge of wearing out our welcome.” Bastra turned to look at Phel. “What do you think of it?”

Xe chewed xir lower lip. “It's...well, there's more than enough space. But the gunnery controls are separate, and it'll take a while to train Zoh for any of the secondary systems.”

“They do have emergency controls here, but you're right: if someone's running a turret remote, they can't also do nav or comms. We may need to hire another crewmember or two.” Bastra mulled the idea over, and Phel got a sinking feeling in the pit of xir stomach.

More people. Even with the 2400’s accommodations, more people meant less privacy. Less opportunity to train with Bastra -- Phel was getting better, xe could feel the difference, but xe still had a lot of work to put in.

Bastra was looking at xir with an odd little smile. “Relax, Phel. I have some people in mind, and if they're interested, I think you'll like them. In the meantime, take a look at this.” He offered the second datapad, and an air of anticipation descended. Xe was getting better at interpreting the stuff xe had always felt but never been able to define; this was something important.

It took xir a moment to understand what xe was looking at. “This...this is the Veeka’ s registration. What...?”

A grin split Bastra's face. “She’s a little rough around the edges and needs someone familiar with her quirks. Not that I’m kicking you out--”

Phel surged out of the copilot's chair to hug him. “Are you serious!?”

Strong arms hugged back, reassuringly steady. “I even picked up an astromech while I was waiting for my friend to meet me, so you won't be flying entirely solo.” He leaned back to smile at Phel. “I’m completely serious. You can stay as long as you want, of course; nobody would dare touch a ship around Maz’s place.”

“I...yeah. There’s. Shit. There’s a lot I still need to learn, I don’t think I’m ready to just go off on my own.” Xe frowned until a thought made xir grin. “But I can be your wing for bigger jobs! This could work!”

Bastra chuckled and whistled something. An answering whistle preceded an astromech droid down the connecting corridor from the lounge. The matt-silver of its casing was a little battered, but the golden yellow paint job was new. “Phel, this is R2-K8, she goes by Kate for short. Kate, this is Phel.”

Phel knelt at the droid’s level. “Hey, Kate, nice to meet you.”

Kate chirped and extended a limb from a panel on her side. Grasped between the manipulators was a device on a strap which the droid offered xir.

“What is-- oh!” Phel wrapped the flat panel over the top of xir left forearm and secured it in place. “It’s a translator?”
Bastra was grinning in a way that could almost be insufferably smug. “Well, learning Binary isn’t the easiest of tasks. You have to be a particular sort of nerd,” he added, tapping his temple.

Deesix bobbed its head and whistled at the astromech, who tweeted back. Phel’s face hurt from grinning as the translated greetings popped up on the screen. “This is great! Uh. Do you like hugs, Kate?”

An affirmative-sounding whistle translated into an excited, “Yes!” Hugging an astromech was awkward, but xe figured it out.

“Is she staying with us?”

“She's certainly welcome to, but since the Veeka is yours, I’ll let you two discuss what you want to do,” Bastra replied. He moved to take the copilot's seat Phel had vacated and pulled up the diagnostic review. “We have a bit of work to do here, I’ll let you know if we need you. Why don't you two take a bit to get to know each other?”

Phel led the way back to the lounge, shaking xir head in wonder. If anyone had told xir two years ago that xe’d have a droid and a ship and friends who just did things for xir because they were friends, xe would have laughed. And then probably would have punched them out.

Phel and Kate had gone to ask Maz if there was a place to leave the Veeka while they were away. Obi-Wan was quietly relieved that Phel had chosen to stay a while longer: xe had shown a spike of progress in recent weeks, including being able to shift light objects around -- enough to play games of catch with Zohli using a soft foam ball. It would never have been enough for xir to be taken as a Padawan, but Obi-Wan hadn't expected even that small amount of telekinesis. Phel was thrilled, and had immediately started in on trying to manipulate small things such as credit chits and mechanical locks.

Obi-Wan was concerned xe was setting xirself up for frustration. “Fine manipulation is an advanced skill, Phel.”

“Oh, I get that. But you keep saying the size and weight of things doesn’t matter, and in my head they do. I already know what the innards of this thing look like,” xe’d said, twirling an old-style padlock around xir finger. “And how they're supposed to move in relation to each other. Seems like it should be easier than lifting crates, so there's less limits in my brain. Right?”

Obi-Wan couldn't really refute that argument, since much use of the Force was affected by the user’s perceptions. He left the younger human to it, and wondered what Qui-Gon would have made of xir.

Deesix had excused itself to Engineering to properly commune with the YT-2400’s computer. They were going to need a name for the ship, eventually; calling it by its model number felt oddly wrong.

With the cockpit to himself for a bit, Obi-Wan plugged in his encryption key and sent off a conversation request to Kardin Lo.

Obtaining a realtime conversation with the Esquire was something of a chore. Lo was well aware of the risks inherent in what they were searching for, and they had long before set up an encryption system intended to protect each other's location, facilitated by Qui-Gon. They had never met face to face, and only communicated via text, which was scrambled on each end. After weeks without word
beyond a receipt confirmation of Obi-Wan’s previous request, a personal call seemed necessary.

The comm twittered softly for a moment, only to be interrupted by a discordant error sound. Obi-Wan frowned as the screen flashed twice and a message highlighted in red indicated a trace code had attempted to attach itself to the pingback. The relay series had shut down before the trace could follow the full path, but every connection on the path had in the process scrambled itself.

Obi-Wan had felt ridiculous and paranoid when he’d installed that function in the setup months previous. He wasn’t happy to have been proven right. A sick feeling curdled in his gut as he sat back in his chair, twirling the now-useless encryption key through his fingers. Someone might have hacked Lo’s system from the outside, or gained access to it otherwise.

Regardless of whether the Muun had accepted a higher price, abandoned his location in a hurry, or been killed, Obi-Wan’s data-crawl for Darth Sidious was suddenly much harder.

Obi-Wan was half-curled in the comfortable monitor station chair in the lounge, reviewing the supply list for the run to Jedha and musing over his next move, when Zohli returned and held the datapad out.

“Done.”

He accepted it, trying not to smile at her surly expression. “All of it?” A quick skim showed about eighty percent of the questions answered -- mathematics, language, and science were entirely filled, but the history and civics questions were full of alarming blanks. “Zygerria tailors its education, doesn’t it.”

She slumped on the end of the bench seat that wrapped around two walls and pulled her knees to her chest. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

There was more to it, a haze of dark tension she was reluctant to touch. Obi-Wan shrugged. “That’s fine. The Republic education system is run by computer and doesn’t care where you’re behind, as long as you can catch up.”

Zoh grunted and glared at the opposite wall. A smile tugged Obi-Wan’s cheek. “How about a distraction?” He leaned down, tugged a metal case from where it had been tucked under the monitor station, and carried it over to the table; Zohli scooted over to join him. “Hondo gave me this, but it’s mostly for you.”

Inside, in foam compartments, was a pair of smooth visors shaped to wrap around the upper half of a humanoid face, and a number of plastic components that could be fitted together into a variety of blaster and rifle configurations. When Zohli looked confused, Obi-Wan explained, “It’s a weapons training simulator. We don’t have access to a proper range, and shooting real blasters inside a ship isn’t generally advisable.” He fitted three components together into a standard hold-out pistol and offered it to Zohli. Her eyes went wide at the weight of it. “They’re just harmless pointing lasers. Pulling the trigger sends a signal to the HUD in the visor, showing where your shot might have landed. You can set it up as a practice range, run through beginner safety lessons, or even take a scan of the room and load an active simulation.”

Zohli’s ears had twitched back partway in disbelief. “You want me to learn to shoot?”
He smiled gently. “Only if you want to. Phel and I can always use the practice, too.” That was being generous: with the Force guiding his aim, Obi-Wan didn't technically need the extra training. It never hurt, though.

The girl hefted the training blaster, chewing her lower lip. “No. I want to learn. How do I set it up?”

Obi-Wan helped her start up the basic safety series in the secondary hold, where they’d already left the folding mats from hand-to-hand practice, and then went to hunt down Ulic.

The Sith was reading in Obi-Wan’s cabin, his crackling, spiky Force presence hovering around one of the books Obi-Wan had lifted from Count Dooku’s library.

“I have questions, Ulic.”

“Ohoh.” The spirit re-formed seated in midair. “Ask away.”

Obi-Wan dropped onto his bunk with his back against the wall. “What do you know about Sidious, exactly?”

Ulic’s grin faded. “What’s happened?”

Obi-Wan explained about Lo’s inaccessibility while Ulic paced, frowning.

“The last thing you asked him to look into was the initiation source for the numerous accounts paying the Trade Federation, right?”

“I….” Obi-Wan frowned and shook his head. “I must have. But why would I have asked him to look into that? They're not important.”

The spirit squeezed his eyes shut and sighed. “There’s a misdirection on them, of course you wouldn’t remember.”

Obi-Wan thumped his head back against the wall lightly in frustration. “I remember you mentioning that. I am really disliking these Sith spells.”

“You and me both. Okay. What I know about Sidious -- from my own sources -- is next to nothing useful.” He held his hands up when Obi-Wan stared at him, incredulous. “Look, Sith spirits have little in the way of power, so we hoard knowledge and information. Lord Victis and her brother, Lord Pyryra, are in a good position to know a lot more -- Sidious has some of their prized possessions -- but they only told me as much as I’ve told you.”

“Why would they even share that much?”

The Sith lord rolled his eyes. “Pyryra showed up one day ranting about yet another of Bane’s heirs being a disgrace to the title. Eventually I put together that Sidious was Dooku’s Master--”

Obi-Wan’s eyes narrowed and he sat forward, interrupting. “You told me. That Count Dooku. Had been snared by the Sith traps in the texts.”

The spirit winced. “And he had. Back when he was still considered a Master of the Order. I don’t know if he found Sidious or Sidious found him, but--”

“You might have mentioned that while I was living in the man’s home!”

“Sidious has spies there! I didn’t want you asking questions that might get you killed!”
“And you couldn’t have said something in the year since then?” Obi-Wan folded his arms, scowling.

Ulic glared back. “If I’d told you, what would you have done with that information?”

“Oh, probably not asked Qui-Gon to reach out to Dooku and potentially put himself and Anakin in danger!”

The Sith lord blinked and frowned. “Wait, you did what?”

On his feet now and pacing, himself, Obi-Wan flung his hands up. “I thought maybe if Dooku wasn’t so damned isolated from everyone, he might feel less reason to jump into the abyss. Oh, this is wonderful.” He ran a hand over his hair, wincing when his finger caught on the elastic tie holding it back.

Ulic was shaking his head, a smile growing across his face. “No, actually...this...might not be the worst thing.” At Obi-Wan’s sharp look he nodded. “Okay, yeah, it’s risky as hell. But Jinn isn’t a fool, he wouldn’t just tell his former Master everything. And if Dooku feels some connection to the Order—”

“We might gain an ally close to Sidious,” Obi-Wan finished. “I don’t like it, Ulic. But it’s too late for regrets now. Including Dooku's financial data-trail to things will require more work, but it may fill the gaps.” He aimed a glare at the spirit. “I wish you’d told me this sooner.”

Ulic shrugged and had the grace to look chagrined. “Habit. Sorry, kid. Where are you going?”

Obi-Wan paused at the door. “Adding some new search keywords to the pile. We’ll see what we get.”

Located in the Unknown Regions, about as distant from a hyperlane as a known system could be, Jedha was a solid four day travel from the edge of Republic space. The route had been plotted by trial and error in the early days of deep space expansion, thousands of years before, by Force-sensitive pilots seeking the source of a notable convergence. Early settlers built villages on NaJedha’s moon; their descendents built cities; and their descendents built monastic fortresses, covering the dusty landscape with worshipful statues on a massive scale.

Zohli put aside her datapad and leaned close to the transparisteel, trying to make sense of it all. “Why?”

Bastra smiled as he guided their ship between towers of broken stone. “Sentients sometimes go to extraordinary lengths to express their faith. There are many Force-sensitive beings in the galaxy who aren't Jedi, and many more who believe in the Force but aren't sensitive. Some don't even know it as the Force; there are thousands of names for the energy they feel and worship. And they have as many different ways of expressing their devotion. Including,” he said with a chuckle, “building giant friezes that can only be appreciated from low orbital range on the surface of a moon.”

“But what's the point?” she asked, frowning.

“The uncertainty of life is often too much for some sentients to bear alone. They seek a higher meaning to give them comfort and reassurance that their actions aren't in vain. And there's nothing inherently wrong with that.” Bastra clasped her hand gently; his fingers were warm, rough from
work and training, but the contact was reassuring and affectionate. “Not everyone likes to be questioned about it, however. When we're in the city, remember to ask permission before questioning someone's faith.”

Zoh stood and leaned in against Bastra’s arm as he brought the ship around toward a towering mesa with its top entirely encrusted with buildings. “What’s that?”

“The city? That’s NiJedha. That tall spire on one end is the Temple of the Kyber.”

“That’s where you’re going?”

He smiled. “Yes. Hopefully they can help me find what I need. Or tell me that I don’t need it.”

In the copilot's seat, Deesix made a snorting sound. “And how would they be able to know that?”

Bastra rolled his eyes and Zohli suppressed a giggle; the droid made a point of being openly sceptical about the Force for the sole purpose of needling the humans and their ghost. “While most of their monks are not born Force-sensitive, they train themselves to listen to it. It takes a great deal of discipline for a non-sensitive to feel the Force’s currents, but I would trust their guidance in this matter.”

“But the Force won't tell you directly?” Zoh asked. She caught herself absently playing with one of the switches on the nav panel and snatched her hand away, burying it in her pocket.

“The Force works best when its message is indirect.” He glanced over at her. “You know I have visions sometimes. It’s up to me to figure out what they mean, whether to act on them or not, and how to do it. If I didn’t have the free will to choose, I’d be nothing more than a puppet, and that isn’t how the Force works.”

“But do you know that for certain?” She grinned at him. “What if the choices you make are what the Force is telling you to do, and you just think it’s your own idea?”

“If that were the case, why would it even bother with a vision?”

“To give an explanation for your sudden weird behaviour?” Zoh giggled at Bastra’s surprised glance. “Come on, you need to do better than that! If you started making decisions without a reason, you’d resist them, right?”

“This is making me really uncomfortable, you know,” Phel said from the comms station. The other human had let Zohli spike xir hair that morning, and it stood out in little points tipped with a pretty shade of blue-green. “I don’t like the idea that I’m being pushed around by something like that.”

“You’re terrifying,” Bastra told her with a grin. Zoh hopped back into the nav station seat cheerfully as the comm popped and someone provided landing directions.

As soon as the ramp descended, a chilly breeze invaded the ship. Zohli shivered and pulled the scarf Bastra had bought her on Corellia over her head. It dragged on her ears, but it was better than feeling the tips freeze.

“Sure you don't want to join us, Dee? Kate?” Bastra asked as he handed Phel a pair of gloves. The both of them were wearing their armour under their jackets, and Zohli felt a little left out. While it was fun to pretend she had two tough bodyguards, it made her feel a little useless.

Kate whistled something that sounded like a negative; the R2 unit nudged Phel’s leg and xe scrubbed the top of her dome fondly before the droid rolled back toward the cockpit.
Deesix scoffed. “I’m sure I’d get mistaken for a standard B1 and shot at again. You have fun.” It startled a little when Zoh gave it a hug for safety, but patted her shoulder awkwardly. *Progress.*

Jedha City was kind of like Treasure Ship Row, only louder, bigger, and more crowded. People in robes were everywhere, singing, chanting, and waving spicy smoke around. Zohli was forced to grab Bastra’s hand so as not to get lost among the press of people filling the streets. Some kids her age in matching red wraps were playing a clapping game in the shadow of an archway; Bastra paused and bowed politely to them. *“Đì wanna wanga. Butımız hìz Hitemps ge Kyber?”*

The smallest child bowed back and pointed further down the street. *“Ho dassu zwoo lungée zatova, amini dex kam truwei.”*

“What language was that?” she asked once they were out of earshot.

Her guardian smiled. “Bocce. It’s a universal trading language. There’s no guarantee everyone here speaks Basic, but in a city full of immigrants and pilgrims, everyone learns Bocce.”

They turned right at a broad thoroughfare which followed the curve of the plateau into heavy shadow. Zohli looked up — way up — at the spire blocking out the sun. “I bet they can tell what time it is by where the shadow falls.”

“Likely,” Phel muttered with a shiver. “Kriff, the sun’s the only thing keeping it warm out.”

Zohli let go of Bastra’s hand and edged over to slip her fingers around Phel’s elbow. “The humans here look a lot like you. Is this where you’re from?”

“I don’t know.” Xir smile seemed a little sad. “I don’t remember.”

They were met at the base of the steps onto the temple grounds by a human man about Bastra’s age; he was dressed in thick dark clothes under a red wrap similar to what the children had been wearing, his hair shaved close except for a long braid-lock in front of each ear. He looked like he worked out in his sleep, and carried a staff like it meant something.

“Welcome to the Temple of the Kyber.” His Basic was flawless but heavily accented; Zohli thought it sounded beautiful.

Bastra folded his hands together in front of his chest and gave a shallow bow. “I greet you, Guardian. I wish to consult with someone regarding a personal need.”

The big man studied him carefully. “Usually you mercenary types only come here seeking one thing. Do you think we’re fools?”

Bastra actually smiled. “Hardly. I won’t deny what I seek, however, if I am told it is not what I need, we will leave in peace.”

“Hmph.” The guard — no, Guardian, it was definitely a title — looked past Bastra at Zohli and Phel. “And what of these two?”

“They are my friends. My family. I thought to show them the Temple while we were here.”

Zohli wasn’t sure if the flush in her cheeks was from him calling her his family, or merely the cold. The Guardian arched a dark eyebrow at them, then nodded decisively. “I am Baze.”

“I am Obi-Wan. With me are Phel and Zohli.” Bastra gestured each of them in turn and they did their best to mimic his bow. Zohli tried not to frown; if he’d given the guard their real names, did that
mean he’d also given his? ‘Obi-Wan’ sounded more like a title, definitely fancier than ‘Scogar’.

Their awkward bows seemed to amuse the Guardian; he even winked at Zohli. “Follow me.”

The walk from the front steps was long and scaled several more sets of broad, shallow stairs. Guardian Baze said, almost as an afterthought, “The patterns of the steps are meant to represent the ripples of a single action through the Force. Each set of steps circles the Temple perfectly. The pearled granite that forms the outer cladding of the Temple was brought, a piece at a time, from Tython by the faithful.”

“That must have taken ages,” Zohli blurted without thinking, then blushed.

The Guardian’s laugh was kind. “Centuries, because many pilgrims take the original subspace routes. The journey is a path of self-examination; they spend the time in quiet contemplation of their selves and their place in the Force.”

The final set of stairs at the door were normal in height. Warmth radiated from a heating-pot against the back wall of the wood-paneled antechamber, framed by two massive carved doors. Another smaller door was set into each side wall. Guardian Baze turned, holding his staff up to prevent them from walking past him.

“What you will find here is only what you bring with you.”

Bastra nodded. “Is there a place we may leave our weapons?”

One of the side doors opened and another Guardian, a Wookiee female, emerged carrying a chest. It hurt to even give up the small knife Phel had given her, but the others were leaving much more; Bastra even placed his vambraces in the chest before stepping back.

Guardian Baze dropped his staff so one end rested on the floor. “You are here to consult rather than worship; while you may enter the sanctuary if you wish, we ask that you refrain from speaking in that room, and walk only along the sides so as not to disturb those in contemplation. Please follow me, and watch your step: the stairs are uneven.”

There was another antechamber through the huge doors, this one with only one door in the far wall. The Guardian led them instead through another side door and up a flight of stone steps that had been worn in their centers by thousands of years of sentient foot traffic; in places it was nearly a ramp. Narrow windows at the landings let pale light in, and glow panels clearly replaced older fixtures which had once burned fuel; dark carbon streaks marked the walls there and scarred the ceiling above.

Her legs were cramping horribly by the time Baze brought them through another wooden door into a comfortably warm room lined with carpets and large cushions to sit on. A low table held a drink service on a warming plate and a pitcher of water.

“You may wait here. Please refresh yourselves,” the Guardian said. A smile twitched on the corner of his mouth when Zohli thanked him. “You are quite welcome, young one. I must return to my duty. May you find the guidance you seek.”

Zohli waited until she heard Baze’s steps fade before asking, “Why did you tell him a different name?”

Bastra was already kneeling at the table, pouring golden tea into handle-less glass cups. “Because it's my real name.” He offered her one of the cups, something serious and shadowed in his eyes. “There's a name I use, and a name I was given. It's important not to lie in a place like this. If you
cannot be honest with the Guardians, you cannot be honest with yourself. It's not their place to judge
your actions, only your intent.”

They didn't have long to wait before a human woman with streaks of steel-grey through her short
dark hair entered. She was dressed like the Guardian, although there was an embroidered pattern on
the edge of her red wrap, and instead of a staff she carried one of the boxes poked full of holes that
let incense smoke out. She bowed to them. “I am Guardian Danwi. Please, sit.”

Bastra prepared a cup of tea for the Guardian, who smiled warmly as she set the incense box on the
table. “You have brought darkness here, young man. What is it you seek?”

Still kneeling, Bastra bowed low until his forehead nearly brushed the carpet. “I humbly beg your
forgiveness for that, Guardian Danwi,” he said as he straightened. “I came with a request for myself
and a request for another.”

Surprised, Zohli exchanged a glance with Phel.

“Tell me your request for yourself, Obi-Wan.”

He seemed to be bracing himself. “I was once in training to be a Jedi. I was cast from the Order for a
transgression I could not atone for, and now seek to aid those in need with what few resources I have
on my own. My lightsaber was merely a weapon and represented what I was, but I wish to build a
new one, to use as a tool to represent what I am now. I know how much I am asking of you. If you
believe I don't require one, I will accept this judgment.”

Guardian Danwi hummed softly to herself, eyes half-closed as she breathed the steam from her tea.
“That may be the truth as you know it, but it is not true. A tool you require, and a tool we will give
you. But first you must be tested.”

Bastra bowed again. “I accept this condition.”

“What is your other request?”

He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew something wrapped in white silk. Phel hissed a quiet
breath while Zohli leaned for a better look. Bastra unwrapped the object and laid it, still on its cloth
wrapping, on the table. It looked like a crystal, the size of Zohli’s thumb, a shade of deep red like old
blood with a glow that seemed sickly. Guardian Danwi’s dark eyes narrowed at the sight of it.

“Is there a way to cleanse this? Or heal it somehow?”

With an expression of distaste, the Guardian leaned back from the crystal. “Not while it is shattered.
You must return it to the source and restore it. I cannot say what would become of it as a result; none
have attempted such a cleansing before. You must leave that with one of your companions while you
undergo testing.”

“Of course. Thank you, Guardian.” Bastra rewrapped the crystal and offered it to Phel, who
accepted it without a word.

Guardian Danwi nodded, looking satisfied if not entirely pleased. “You and your companions may
stay here for the duration of your test. Your needs will be provided for. Are you prepared to begin
now?”

Bastra glanced over his shoulder at Phel. “Would you mind comming Dee?”

“Sure thing.”
He nodded. “Then I am ready now.”

Danwi insisted they finish their tea; as soon as the last cup touched the table, another Guardian arrived to lead them to the guest quarters in the higher levels.

Zohli decided she hated stairs.

Phel and Zohli were handling the unfamiliar situation well. When they were each handed visitor garments and asked to only wear the simple dark blue tunics and trousers while staying at the Temple, neither of the two uttered a word of complaint. They were shown to a small room that contained three beds against the walls, with the most basic ‘fresher any of them had ever seen in a side alcove closed off by a curtain, and asked to leave their possessions in the trunks beneath the beds.

“Are you two alright?”

Zohli was already shedding her jacket, shivering in the cool air. “It’s just what we have to deal with, yeah? And anyway, these look warm.”

The clothes were warm, the fabric soft and unconfining; the fur-lined boots they were given had soft soles that resisted slipping and were nearly soundless on the stone floors. When they emerged, their guide was waiting to show them how to tie the pale golden sashes at the waist. “It is not so much that we wish to enforce conformity, as it is that we wish not to startle those who are here for personal contemplation with something unexpected. Your public countenance is intended to be fearsome, but that is not necessary in this place. The sash colour marks you as companions; if any of you becomes lost, tell a Guardian that your companions wear yellow.” The older Twi’lek man’s voice had a softened rustiness, as if he’d suffered throat damage in the past.

Obi-Wan smiled knowingly. “You weren’t always a Guardian.”

“No.” The Guardian gestured for them to follow him down a level. “I had a hard life; I came here seeking peace and found purpose.” He showed them where the refectory and library were located before leading them down the hall. “I know the young frequently have energy to burn off. This is our training hall. You may use it any time, although if our Initiates are in session, we ask that you move to the far end.”

The room was at least as large as the Coruscant Temple’s main salle; at the moment it was mostly empty save for a few Guardians who were drilling alone or sparring in groups. Obi-Wan caught the expressions of utter glee of his friends’ faces and knew they’d likely be here most of the time. “Do you happen to know how long this testing will take?”

The Guardian tilted his head, one of his age-paled lekku twitching the equivalent of a shrug. “I am under the impression that it will be similar to the testing our Initiates receive before they become Guardians. It may take no more than a few hours, or it might be a day or two. It depends greatly on what the Force wishes to show you. We are often shown our fears, our flaws, or our potential.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “The Jedi have such a test for Initiates progressing to Knighthood.”

“Then you know what to expect,” the Guardian chuckled as he led them across the springy floor to the changing rooms to the rear.
“Unfortunately, I don’t. My Trials were somewhat unusual, and I was not informed they were my Trials until I had failed.” It hurt less to admit than it had two years ago; it almost felt like the events on Naboo had happened to a wholly different person.

The Guardian gave him a look that was heavily amused. “Is that what they told you? Hm. This wardrobe holds spare training garb. Your day clothes may be left in any of the lockers not already in use. Used training garb may be left in the hamper to be cleaned.”

Guardian Danwi found them running through a series of footwork drills some time later. She waited until they had finished the set before approaching. “We are ready to begin, Obi-Wan.”

Both Phel and Zohli hugged him for luck, and Obi-Wan went to wipe the sweat off and change back into his visitor robes.

Three Guardians with different variations of embroidery on their wraps waited in the small, windowless room Danwi led him to near the Temple’s peak. The stone walls were covered by curtains to keep in what little heat gathered, and it was lit only with small, dome shaped portable glow globes placed on the floor.

The Guardian kneeling in the middle of the room, an older Togrutan of indeterminate gender, gestured him forward to sit on the cushion placed on the bare stone. A metal dish rested on a small tripod between them, holding a small heater brick. Obi-Wan felt the Guardian use the Force to set the brick to smoldering before sprinkling a handful of dried herbs over the top.

“Give me your hands, child.” The Guardian pressed their palms over Obi-Wan’s, letting the smoke from the herbs coil around their fingers. “We do not perform this often for outsiders -- the discipline required to endure the stress is something that must be learned over many years. As a Jedi, you know this. We cannot tell you what you will see: your responses to your visions will determine whether we are able to grant your request. Begin meditation; when you are ready, cup the smoke in your hands and breathe it in.” They turned Obi-Wan’s hands over the dish, cupped over the top and capturing the smoke beneath his palms.

Then the four Guardians left, leaving the glow globes where they had been placed.

Whatever he had expected, this ritual-less ceremony had not been it. Shaking the thought from his mind, Obi-Wan settled into a trance. The scent of the burned herbs brought to mind the aroma of dry grass and fresh-fallen leaves on the cusp of a planetary winter -- crisp and slightly sweet.

Water was running nearby -- a lot of water, splashing into wide pools. The sound echoed through a space much larger than the room he sat in. Humidity washed over his desert-parched skin and his eyes flew open in surprise.

Obi-Wan found himself sitting in the grass in a large, indoor parkland. Fountains and waterfalls ran into wide pools deep enough to swim in, and paths meandered through gentle, artificial hills covered in an array of plant life. A domesticated bee lazily investigated his hair before losing interest.

There was no sign of the cushion he’d been sitting on. Carefully, Obi-Wan climbed to his feet and discovered that he was dressed in his armour again, including the gauntlets he knew he had left with the Temple Guardians. “A vision,” he muttered. “Right. Self-projection.” The grass had felt very real under his hands, though, and when he stepped onto the path, gravel crunched and shifted beneath the soles of his boots.

“If this is the Room of a Thousand Fountains, where is everyone?” The Force around him should be practically singing from the presence of so many focused Jedi, but it was silent save for a whisper of
reassurance. “And why here?”

“And an excellent question,” someone replied, and Obi-Wan whirled in surprise at hearing a voice so close behind him. “Who are you—oh!”

The speaker was a Jedi, a man a few years older than himself, and it took Obi-Wan a moment to recognize his own face beneath the thicker beard and loose, shoulder-length hair. His double seemed as astonished as he felt; the older man eyed his armour and jacket with open curiosity.

“I—” he started, then shook his head. “No. What is this?”

His older self squinted at him. “Last I knew, I was meditating in my quarters. This doesn’t feel like one of my usual visions, however.”

“No, it’s. It’s my vision. Induced.” Obi-Wan let a wry smile slip out. “I’m being tested, but this is...not what I was expecting.”

“Tested.” His older self’s eyes narrowed further. “How old are you, and why are you dressed like that?”

“Twenty-two.” He cleared his throat uncomfortably; the older man was clearly a Master or close to being named one. “I was cast from the Order two years ago.”

“You were what?! What happened--no. Wait. Naboo?” At Obi-Wan’s nod, his older self sighed. “What changed?”

Obi-Wan held up a finger in a request for patience while he considered his answer. He had no way of knowing what had gone differently in this world -- if it even was real and not just a conjuration. “I Fell. I used the Dark side to fight Maul.” The sorrow in his older self’s expression hurt to see. Obi-Wan tried to find the positive aspect. “Qui-Gon thinks if I hadn’t, he might not have survived.”

“You Qui-Gon is alive?!”

Obi-Wan found himself wrapped tightly in an unexpected hug. Gingerly, he put his arms around the other man and blinked when the robed shoulders under his hands shook with a sob.

“You don’t know how fortunate you are,” his older self whispered into the collar of his jacket. “It doesn’t hurt so much anymore, but not a day goes by where I don’t wonder if I couldn’t have done things differently. If things wouldn’t be better if he were alive in my place—”

“Hey.” Gripping the other man’s shoulders gently, Obi-Wan pushed him back so he could look his older self in the eyes. “I can’t tell you if things are better. I don’t think there is any such thing as better, merely different.”

“That scar....”

“Maul.” He smiled but there was little cheer in it. “Qui-Gon wouldn’t want you to try to fill the space he left. You’re far too short to manage it, anyway.”

The joke startled a laugh out of his older self, who wiped his face. “Oh. It’s just been.... The past ten years haven’t been easy. I suppose the last two haven’t been easy for you, either.”

Obi-Wan tilted his head, considering. “Oh, I don’t know. At first, yeah. I wanted to just...cease to exist. I wanted the Force to forget about me, but it wouldn’t. It took me a long time to realize that just because that part of my life was over, it didn’t mean my existence was. All my real problems came
from inside my head,” he added with a lopsided grin. “They’re not...entirely gone. But I’m getting better now that I’m trying to actually live.”

His older self squinted. “And what does living mean to you now?”

Frowning, he rubbed his chin. “I suppose...helping others to choose their own destiny, rather than the one someone else chose for them? If that makes any sense. I seem to be rescuing a lot of pathetic life-forms lately.”

They chuckled, standing there on the gravel path through the middle of the garden, and a ripple ran through the room, a shudder as if a prelude to awakening. Obi-Wan’s older self took a step back. “I think our time’s about up. May the Force be with you.”

“And with you--” The words had barely passed his lips when Obi-Wan found himself in a large room with dark walls and base lighting along the floor which did little more than prove that there was a floor there. An oppressive atmosphere surged in to replace the Room of a Thousand Fountains’ air of peaceful contemplation.

“This doesn’t look familiar at all,” he murmured.


The Temple food wasn’t bad. It was spiced strongly in a way Zohli wasn’t familiar with, but it wasn’t unpleasant, and almost spicy enough not to be boring. Bastra had gone out of his way to find sauces she could use on his cooking, and had even dared to try some. She hadn’t realized humans could turn such amusing shades of red.

He’d been away for hours. Zohli glanced across the table and caught Phel’s worried glance. Bastra hadn’t seemed concerned about the testing, but what was really involved? And would he be the same person when he returned?

Phel’s hand closed on hers where it rested on the table. “He’ll be fine, Zoh. I bet he’s been through a lot worse before.”

“Yeah, but this time he has us and we can’t be there.”

“*You don’t want to be there. It’s boring to watch someone meditate for hours.*” The ghost’s voice whispering into her mind startled Zohli; it seemed to surprise Phel as well. They both twitched, eyes going wide. There was a soft mental chuckle and the ghost said, “*That’s my crystal Bastra was asking about. I’m the ‘darkness’ the Guardian said he brought. Gotta be on my best behaviour here.*”

“Is he really just meditating?” Zohli whispered.

“*Yeah. Everything he sees is happening in his mind. Of course, the Force transcends the boundaries of pretty much everything, so he might see the past, the future, or some alternative reality where things are different.*” They got the impression of a shrug, which made something inside Zohli’s head itch. “*That’s how these tests usually go, anyway.*”
“That’s so confusing.” She tried to think about what it would be like to both be sitting in one place and have her mind in another time or place and couldn’t.

“You have an interesting friend,” someone said. Zoh and Phel glanced up to see a human Guardian who looked about Bastra’s age standing nearby. There was something odd about the way he didn’t seem to look directly at them, until she noticed that his eyes had a milky haze of blindness. He smiled serenely. “May I join you?”

“Uh. Sure.” Zohli shifted her tray aside so the man had room to sit. A small box with controls on it clipped to his belt clicked softly and the Guardian placed his tray with careful precision. “Does that device, uh-”

“Help me get around? Yes. I’m surprised you can hear it.”

She blushed. “I’m Zygerrian, we have a wider hearing range than humans.”

“Ah!” The Guardian laughed softly. “I am Chirrut.” His smile seemed to be a permanent feature, but it was gentle and full of good humour. Zohli relaxed a little as they introduced themselves.

Guardian Chirrut tilted his head. “Your friend seems shy.”

Phel blinked. “Me? I’m not--”

“No, your other friend. The dark one.”

There was a tense moment of silence while the Guardian began to eat his meal. Then, very quietly, Zohli heard the ghost say, “Can you really blame me?”

“Hm. Your friend brought you here to see if you could be healed. Would he have done so if you didn’t want it?”

“No. I asked him to.”

“Then you are welcome here,” the Guardian said cheerfully.

Phel nudged Zohli’s foot under the table. Xe glanced between her and Guardian Chirrut. “Should I--?”

Grinning, Chirrut gestured to Phel. “I don’t have all the answers, but I hear many questions.”

Phel bit the inside of xir lower lip, frowning. “Zohli said a lot of the humans here look like me. Is there some -- any -- way to find out if this is where I’m from?”

“Hm.” The Guardian frowned, then raised his hand to wave someone over. “Hey, Baze!”

“Ahh what is it this time?” The big Guardian from the front gate dropped into the seat beside Phel across from Chirrut. “Hello, again.”

“Our friend here thinks they might be from Jedha. Is there a way to check?”

“Hm.” Baze chewed a mouthful of flatbread with intense concentration. “Maybe. Maybe not. Is Phel your only name?”

“That I know of.”

The bigger Guardian grumbled and shook his head with a frown, the braid-locks at his temples
swinging. “We get raided sometimes. We’re far enough from the Republic, slavers think they can get away with taking people -- and they’re usually right. They don’t try the cities -- that’s part of what Guardians are for,” he said with a dark grin, nudging Phel’s side lightly with his elbow. “But the smaller settlements aren’t so lucky. If your parents were taken before you were born, or you don’t know your family name, you’ll be out of luck.”

Phel sighed. “Well, it was worth asking.”

“All questions are worth asking. Not always worth answering,” Guardian Chirrut said with a grin. “Your guardian. He’s a Jedi, yes?”

Phel shrugged. “He’d say he isn’t.”

“Because he is not part of the Order anymore.” Baze seemed to laugh silently. “Being a Jedi is a way of life; it’s more that one strives to be Jedi. Being a Jedi suggests that there’s nothing more to learn or improve upon.”

Chirrut’s smile had taken on an adoring quality that Baze either didn't notice or was ignoring. Zohli bit her lip on a grin.

“It's a thing to aspire to, but it isn't the only thing one can be. Your guardian seeks to help those whom the Order might say are beyond helping. What does that tell you about the sort of person he is?”

Zohli shook her head. “He’s killed people. We’ve seen it.”

“Was he fighting in defense?”

She frowned and considered the question. “Does that really make that much difference?”

Baze grinned. There was something fierce in the expression. “All the difference in the galaxy.”

Phel shrugged. “He can’t always try to talk someone down, but he never starts a fight. He’s been teaching us to tell when someone else’s intent is actually a first move.”

Chirrut perked up. “Has he been teaching you to fight?” When they answered yes, the Guardian gave a grin that was pure mischief. “Have you learned stave work yet?”

“Turn around. I want to see your face before you die,” the voice purred. “How did you get in here without setting off the alarms?”

Obi-Wan lifted his hands from his sides, away from the carved bone grips of his blasters, and turned. “I’m...having a vision. It sent me here.”

“A vision.” The other man scoffed, and underneath the harsh sandpaper quality hid a voice Obi-Wan recognized too well. “Of course. I thought you seemed-- Well, well.”

Another version of himself stared at him with sickly yellow eyes past the end of the red-bladed lightsaber he held aimed at Obi-Wan's face, a smirk forming on his lips.

“How amusing.” He extinguished the blade and stepped forward, raising a hand to touch Obi-Wan's
cheek with fingers that burned like heated coals; it took all Obi-Wan’s control not to flinch. “You feel real enough.” The hand dropped, running down Obi-Wan's chest to brush the durasteel plates over the layer of beskar-weave fabric. “No Jedi would wear this, though.”

“I'm not a Jedi.”

His double snorted. “Well, you're no Sith, either.” He prowled in a circle around Obi-Wan, studying him. Now that he'd turned, Obi-Wan could see a set of stairs leading up to a chair like a throne, set in front of a large window that looked out over a dark, barren landscape. Delicate patterns of ice formed in the corners of the window panes.

"There's Darkness in you. Interesting." The Sith prodded his breastbone again and tsked. "Too much Light though." He turned his back on Obi-Wan, as if offering him the chance to do something, and went up the stairs toward the throne. "Well, are you going to just stand there?"

"I only see one chair here," Obi-Wan responded, following him cautiously. "And I doubt you're offering it to me.”

His double half-turned to look at him, eyes alight. "True! So!” He settled into the throne with a flourish of dark robes. A grin filled with dark humour lit his thinned features. “Why would your vision bring you here?”

“I'm not sure, exactly. It's not like anything I experienced at the Temple.” Beyond the throne, hard crystals of ice ticked against the transparisteel as they fell. The entire world -- or moon, he couldn't be sure -- was steeped in a Darkness as old as the night.

“They cast you out, hmm? Bandomeer?” At his raised eyebrows, his double laughed. It was a cold, bitter sound. “They threw me out, too. When Xanatos offered to introduce me to a teacher who would actually appreciate having me as his student….” He spread his hands with a dark chuckle. “How could I say no?”

“Well,” Obi-Wan said carefully, aware that the other expected him to agree. "I did.”

“That was foolish of you. My Lord Sidious does indeed appreciate my skills more than the Jedi ever did,” his double sneered. “I see you know his name. You should consider joining him. The Order has been in decline for a thousand years; it's ready to topple, and you don’t want to be on the wrong side when that happens.”

"Right and wrong are entirely subjective. What makes your position the right one?"

The Sith rested his head against the back of the throne, a confident smile on his lips which failed to reach his eyes: they burned with a hard light that held no warmth or compassion. “The right side is the one that remains standing when the dust settles, my friend.”

“But what do the Sith have to offer to those who have relied upon the Jedi for so long?”

His double laughed again. “Unlike the Jedi, we will not fail the people of the galaxy. We will give them what they need.”

“As if the failings of the Jedi weren't machinated by the line of Bane for a millennium.”

It was the wrong thing to say; the heavy sarcasm in his delivery hadn't helped. Obi-Wan's double surged to his feet, eyes blazing. “Their failure in seeing what was happening beneath their noses is failure enough! The belief that everyone offers only good faith is their failing. The corruption spreading across the galaxy thrives on such kindness--”
“And thrives more under an iron fist!” Obi-Wan didn't realize he’d moved until he was nose to nose with his Sith double. “Neither extreme benefits anyone but those in power. Nobody is ever satisfied unless the limit of compromise is everyone else letting them do as they wish unchecked! They quibble and complain in the Senate and make laws with loopholes large enough to fit a planetary blockade through! Would you be able to see all such schemes, shut them down before they go too far?”

“Of course we would! The Force is our ally, we would sense such deception--”

“And if some ill-meaning fop gave the idea to a senator who meant well?”

His double’s eyes had gone wide. “What?”

“How do you sense deception when there is none?”

“You’re trying to trick me!”

“I’m trying to make you think!”

His double took a step back, eyeing him warily. “You spent a lot of time training with Jinn, didn’t you? My Master went to a great deal of effort to remove that particular thorn from his side.”

Ignoring the obvious attempt to needle him, Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “What danger does a single Jedi Master pose to Sidious, if he’s so powerful?”

His double snarled, “My Master’s plans are formed on the knife-edge of chance, and Jinn had the uncanny ability to tip the balance. With all his soft Jedi compassion, Jinn just couldn’t bear to hurt Xanatos.” His teeth bared in a fierce smile. “He didn’t last long after that.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes narrowed. “And how much time did you spend with your own mind eating at you with regret afterwards? Don’t forget, I know you. How long did it take you to learn to turn your self-hatred outwards?”

“Shut up!” The lightsaber was out and arcing down at his head in a moment; Obi-Wan did the only thing he could and threw himself backwards.

His back smacked into a wall that was closer than it should have been, and silence fell, the red light fading to nothing. A thick grate underfoot bit into the palms of his hands as he picked himself up, rubbing the back of his head where it had connected with the bare metal wall. It was a prison cell, dimly lit by diffuse fixtures at the edge of the ceiling; the light was tuned to an eye-aching blue tone that would make true rest nearly impossible.

It took him a moment to notice the person curled in the corner: they were so still with their head resting on their knees, wrapped in the dark rags of what had once been functional tunics and trousers, they appeared to be little more than a shadow. Obi-Wan knelt before them and fought eyestrain for a better look.

“Maul?”

Bastra still wasn’t back when they woke up that morning. They had shared breakfast -- bowls of
grains and fruit stewed together with spices -- with Guardian Chirrut, who seemed to have attached himself to them. Phel liked the blind Guardian; he was funny but never cruel, and answered questions with other questions that made you think for yourself. Sort of like Bastra, but less rough at the edges.

And he was about as gentle in training. Phel rolled awkwardly to xir feet, looking for the staff xe had been holding a moment earlier. The Guardian grinned, twirled the stolen staff with a flourish, and offered it back.

“You prefer to let go, rather than control your movements and retain your staff.”

“I’m not fond of getting my arm broken,” Phel laughed.

The Guardian ducked his head, failing to hide his amusement. “Here, let’s go through that again, but slow. You started with a high strike, yes?”

A step at a time, they walked through the sequence, with Chirrut guiding Phel into a twisted move xe hadn’t known xe was capable of doing.

“You see? Again, half speed. See if you can keep your grip.”

After five tries, Phel managed to keep ahold of xir staff. Xe still ended up on the mat with the end of Chirrut’s staff against xir breastbone, but xe had lasted longer. Drenched with sweat, the two of them moved to join Zohli where she was working through some basic gymnastics. Chirrut accepted a bottle of water with a nod of thanks.

“Your guardian is a good instructor.”

Zohli rolled down from a wobbly headstand. “He is. Sometimes I wonder if he would be happier where he came from. It seems a waste, him just…being on his own like this.”

The Guardian’s head tilted to one side. “There’s no way to know. If there’s no way to know, why bother worrying about it? May I ask you a question?”

Zoh glanced at Phel, who shrugged. It usually meant an uncomfortable, personal question was coming, but it also meant that whoever was asking knew that it was uncomfortable. Bastra was really good about backing off when asked, and xe was certain the Guardians were, too.

“Okay?”

“Your people have a philosophy that the strong have the right to rule, and the weak are meant to serve, yes? You don’t agree with this?”

The girl’s eyes narrowed. “When the ‘strong’ people have to hobble and beat the ‘weak’ people, it proves they aren’t strong at all. If they were really strong, they wouldn’t be afraid that the weak could win.”

“Did you come to that conclusion yourself?”

Zohli frowned and took a seat beside Phel on the mat. “No. We had a tutor. She asked questions like this and made us think about things.”

“That must not have made her popular.”

“They put her on trial and made us say she was lying and a terrible person.” Her chin rose and
defiance flashed in her green eyes. “I refused. My parents said I was an embarrassment. They said they were sending me to my aunt, but instead they gave me to someone else. Bastra told me I’m registered dead on my homeworld.”

Phel wrapped xir arm around her shoulders, hugging her close. Zohli didn’t talk much about her home -- she’d been working on that with her therapist, but it was a delicate subject, and Phel tried to make xirself available after the sessions were over with cups of hot chocolate and silly holos to lighten her mood.

“Ah.” The Guardian nodded. “So the ‘strong’ rulers of your homeworld punished someone who wanted to give the ‘weak’ the tools to be equal?”

Zoh nodded and took a drink from her water bottle. “I think maybe ‘strong’ used to mean something else, but then someone figured out how they could trick everyone so it was easier and they didn’t have to risk looking weak.”

“That is too common, on many worlds besides your own. That is why teachers are so important, people like your tutor and your guardian: they are there to balance the power, to help others to grow beyond their means. Your guardian is a strong person, who wants to give others the tools to be strong without him. That is why he’s a good instructor. And that is hardly a waste.”

They were silent for a moment, considering that. Finally, Phel asked, “Will he be alright after this test is over?”

Chirrut laughed. “Of course! The whole purpose is to determine what kind of tools he will need, to continue to help.” He bounced to his feet and held a staff unerringly to Zohli. “Come! Your turn!”

The Zabrak’s eyes cracked open, baleful yellow and unhealthily bloodshot. It took him far too long to focus on Obi-Wan, and although the Force shuddered with a surge of rage and hatred, Maul merely closed his eyes again.

“More illusions, Master?” he rasped. “Or am I just hallucinating now?”

Obi-Wan let his eyes fall half-closed as he scanned the Sith for injuries. Broken bones, allowed to heal wrong, re-broken and re-set. Nerve damage from electrical discharge. Scars, some fresh, some pained with infection. Shattering pain from his spine, where--

He stepped back until he felt the chill of the metal wall through his jacket once more, staring at the crumpled Zabrak in horror. The extent of damage from a lightsaber wound radiated out from the healed flesh and bone of the other man’s spine, plasma-seared meat forced into labour again without full restoration.

“How are you still alive?” Obi-Wan’s choked whisper echoed harshly from the bare walls.

Maul drew a pained breath. “Two hearts. And a stasis trance. Sith healing is...not kind. But in increments....”

The back of his fist pressed to his mouth, Obi-Wan considered his options. The man had tried to kill both him and Qui-Gon -- and might have succeeded if not for Obi-Wan making a dreadful choice. He was a Sith Lord, and once healed would likely return to serving his Master, wreaking more havoc
through the galaxy. Possibly making Obi-Wan’s work harder and more dangerous.

But he was being shown this for a reason.

“It’ll take ages to heal, at the rate you’re going.”

The Zabrak snorted. “Why do you care, phantom?”

“Why does your Master not help?”

Maul raised his head, blinking slowly at him as if he were ignorant. “My Lord Sidious does not suffer failure in his apprentices. I must restore myself.”

“Will you let me help you?”

“Why would you?” the other asked, but he seemed more alert, and was studying Obi-Wan with curiosity. “I thought I took that eye.”

“You did.”

The Sith swallowed dryly. “This is real.”

Obi-Wan sighed and settled onto his knees, grateful for the padding in his trousers. “Yes. On top of what I did to you, you’ve been tortured.”

“It is our way.”

Recalling so many conversations with Ulic, Obi-Wan shook his head. “It doesn't have to be.”

“I felt the Darkness rise in you that day, Jedi. It's still there, just under your skin. You feel it, don't you? Like calls to like, but still you resist your destiny.” Maul’s stare was puzzled and accusatory, as if he couldn’t understand why Obi-Wan remained apart, and envied him for it.

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan murmured, “It doesn't have to be like that.” He extended his hand -- too far from Maul to touch -- seized his anger at what had been done to the other man, and pushed that energy into the Zabrak's pain-depleted reserves. Not healing, but providing more to draw upon. The Sith hissed a startled breath and his eyes flew wide.

“Why?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Because it's right.”

“You need to leave. He will have felt that!”

A glance around showed the detail of the walls fading. Obi-Wan smiled wryly. “I have little choice anyway. I hope we meet again, Maul.”

“Don't curse yourself--”

Obi-Wan blinked blearily at the dim light of the glow globes and the Togrutan Guardian kneeling before him. The pile of herbs in the bowl between them had long since turned to cold ashes. The Guardian offered a small, carved wooden box, closing Obi-Wan’s hands over it. The simple object contained a powerful shield around its contents.

“For your safety and ours, do not open this until you have left the system. The Sith always have spies here, acolytes seeking to detect when crystals leave our care.”
“I under--” he cleared his throat when his voice cracked. “I understand, Guardian.”

The Togrutan smiled and helped him to stand. “It has been nearly a day. You may recover here for as long as you wish, but I sense you are needed elsewhere.”

“For tonight, at least.” Obi-Wan bowed, clutching the box to his chest. “I’m grateful for your hospitality.”

“And we are grateful you felt you could come to us.” The Guardian led him to the stairs leading down. “We are often regarded with some ridicule, for how can common sentients ever truly understand the ways of the Force? We are no Jedi, after all.”

“No, but the Force is in everything, including those who cannot sense it, and there is benefit in exploring that.”

Zohli practically threw herself into his arms when he entered the room they’d been given. “You're alright!”

Hair still damp from a quick shower on his way back, Obi-Wan laughed and hugged her. “Of course I am. Please tell me you haven't broken anything in the last day.”

Sitting in half-lotus on xir bunk with a datapad on xir lap, Phel held up xir left hand with two fingers strapped together. “Only dislocated.”

Zohli blushed. “It was an accident!”

“I still get to tease you about it.” Xe grinned. “I’m not mad, it was funny.”

Obi-Wan sighed and ruffled Zoh’s short hair. “What am I going to do with you two?”

“Armoured training gauntlets might be a start, but for now, how about dinner?” Phel joked, setting the datapad aside. “So what was it like? What did you see?”

Frowning in thought, Obi-Wan followed them toward the refectory. “Possibility. Darkness.” He smiled. “And hope.”

Chapter End Notes

I really liked Rogue One, but as an artist as well as an architect, I have issues with the suggestion that all the carvings on Jedha are fallen statues -- something that large would only fall if it wore away through time (in which case its fall would not be that neat, there'd be pieces everywhere), earthquake (also not so neat), or was deliberately knocked over (but if someone were to destroy a statue that way, they'd be more thorough about it). So I headcanon all the statues on the ground there as being carved in situ and you can fight me about it.
Bocce:

“Di wanna wanga. Butimoz hiz Hitemps ge Kyber?” -- "I wish you a good day. How far is it to the Temple of the Kyber?"

“Ho dassu zwoo lungee zatova, amini dex kam truwei.” -- "It's two kilometers that way, you should turn right at the main road."
“I was thinking about what we could name it,” Zohli announced after they’d entered hyperspace. She handed a piece of drawing paper over to Obi-Wan and he frowned at the design she had carefully inked there. “It’s that blaster scar on the hull. The big one?”
“I’m pretty certain that was caused by a turbolaser,” he murmured with a smile. “But yes, it looks a bit like a solar corona.”
“We should call it the Sunflare.”
Phel and Deesix both leaned over to look; Obi-Wan offered the paper over so they could see it better. Zohli had stylized the shape of the laser scar, forming a spiky half-circle with two rays spreading from the center in the opposite direction; widened spurs on the rays continued the circle on the other side.
Phel nodded. “I like it.”

The droid gave a resigned sigh. “You’re going to want to paint that on my chassis, aren’t you?”

“Oooh, I hadn’t thought of that!” Zoh’s tone and broad grin suggested the exact opposite. “What a great idea, Dee!”

As requested, Obi-Wan waited until they were well away from Jedha and heading back into Republic space before opening the box the Guardians had given him. Everyone else wanted to know what was inside, so he broke the seal at the kitchen table.
There were two separate items inside, tucked into small drawstring bags of the same red fabric used for the Guardians’ wraps. The larger bag contained three full crystals that were colourless and slightly milky, as if filled with mist; when he tipped them into his hand together, they made a clear ringing tone through the Force that even sent a shiver up Zohli’s spine. Compared to other lightsaber crystals he’d encountered, they were ‘quiet’, but in a way that suggested they were listening rather than quiescent.

Ulic’s eyes were huge as he stared at the crystals. “Shit, kid. They weren't kidding about giving you tools. You want to think about what you want them to do, because those will handle…a lot. Maybe anything.”

The second bag contained two more crystals, each half the size of the others but clearly from the same source vein. Obi-Wan frowned, rolling the marble-sized stones in his palm, until the purpose clicked in his mind and he laughed. “They're for a shoto blade. It's an off-hand saber, mostly for guard use, and somewhat shorter than a regular lightsaber,” he explained before the others could ask.

“They must have a lot of faith in you, kid,” Ulic muttered. “What did you do during that test?”

“To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure what their criteria were. In hindsight, it's clear what they were looking for, but I don't know that there was any correct response, merely a value of some sort.” He had given them a short summary of what he’d experienced; Ulic had called him a few colourful names over giving some of his energy to Maul, but grudgingly agreed that it was a typically Obi-Wan sort of action.

He let Phel and Zohli hold the crystals briefly. Zoh said they felt tingly, but Phel’s eyes had glazed over when xe had the three larger crystals in xir hand. Obi-Wan had needed to put them away before Phel snapped out of the trance.

Xe gave him a look that was half terrified and half awed. “I wanted to see what they looked like in the Force. Did I do something wrong?”

Laughing, Obi-Wan patted xir shoulder. “Not at all, merely something you weren't prepared for. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“It kept changing every time I tried to focus on it. Guess I should have got the hint and pulled back, huh?” xe asked with an embarrassed grin.

“I would have woken you up eventually.”

The moment they dropped out of hyperspace at Ord Mantell, Obi-Wan’s personal comm chimed with a message. It was text-only, and a frown creased his face as he read.

“Timing, indeed.”

“What's that?” Deesix asked.

He gave a soft laugh of disbelief. “One of the Guardians told me they felt I was needed elsewhere. I thought they were referring to our work with Nym, but this puts a different sort of urgency on it. There's time enough to get to Nar Shaddaa after this, at least.”
“Nar Shaddaa again? More old friends in trouble?”

“Yes, actually.”

The droid was silent for a moment, then asked, “Am I going to have to stun you again?”

Obi-Wan laughed until it brought Zohli in from the lounge asking what was so funny. “You’d have to have been there, sweetheart. No, what this means is I’m going to have to do some shopping while we’re here. I need parts for those ‘sabers, and Zoh needs some actual protection.”

The girl squeaked with delight and hugged him. “You’re getting me armour?!”

“I’m not sure what type of situation we might walk into on Nar Shaddaa, and I’d rather not regret it later. I have some people to make contact with here, and then I’ll take you into the city, alright?”

“Yay!” Zoh bounced on her toes and then skipped back to the lounge, yelling, “Phel! Kate! Guess what!”

Dee gave an electronic sigh. “Are you sure I can’t go with you? She’ll be bouncing off the walls for hours now.”

“Most places here don’t let droids in, Dee.”

“Even better: I can watch the door for you.”

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan chuckled. “Alright. You were stuck with the ship the whole time on Jedha, after all.”

“It wasn’t that boring. Spaceport computers are gossipy.”

There was something to be said for building a reputation on Ord Mantell. For a start, your favourite tapcaf stopped watering your drinks. Feid savored the rich spicy flavour of her ale -- a local brew she’d never seen anywhere else -- and browsed the holonet from her datapad. Their latest job had paid well, even if it had involved little more than standing around looking scary, and she and Pulkka could easily get by for the next couple weeks without working.

Not that there was sense slacking off when there was work available. Better to save that for the truly lean times.

A commotion at the bar made her glance up. That had definitely been Pulkka’s raised voice, and Feid fingered the grip of her blaster, wondering who’d dared to pick a fight with a Whiphid.

A moment later, Pulkka shoved her way through the crowd, one massive shaggy arm wrapped around the shoulders of a smaller humanoid in body armour.

“Feid! Look who I found!”

That was an unexpected happy tone. She took a closer look and her jaw dropped. “No… Scogar!?”

She was on her feet and hugging him without consciously deciding to; her shorter friend’s arms wrapped tight around her. He smelled faintly of coolant and starship fuel, and when she leaned back to study him, there was something confident in the kid’s eyes -- two of them now -- that hadn't been
there before.

Without letting him go, Feid glared. “You disappeared, *peedunky.*”

Bastra sighed. “I disappeared. In my defense, I had a good reason to.”

She eyed the armour he was wearing critically -- it was serious stuff, law-enforcement grade equipment rather than the hodgepodge most mercenaries collected. “I dunno if I buy that.”

“Me either,” Pulkka rumbled. “You owe us an explanation, youngling.”

He let Feid push him into the seat beside hers. “This is one of those situations where I ask something of you before I tell you anything.”

“Oh, yeah? Now I’m really curious.” She leaned into his space and rested her elbow on his shoulder, giving him the intense smile that used to intimidate him so much.

It didn’t work anymore. Bastra returned the look with a smile of his own and a raised eyebrow. “It’s a matter I prefer to keep in the family. As it happens, I’m looking for another crewmember or two, and Fan mentioned you were getting twitchy.” His eyes lingered on the horn above Feid’s right eyebrow, the one that had lost its tip to a vibroblade that had nearly shaved her a year previous.

She smirked. “Fan knows us too well. Things are getting comfortable here; that usually means we’re about to get trouble. What kind of ship? And what’s your crew like right now?”

“Freighter, *YT-2400.* And my crew is either young or a droid,” he said with a laugh. “I have a teenager who’s starting to get the hang of things, a preteen who’s only just learning, and a droid I know you’ll either get along with or want to toss in the nearest compactor.” Feid and Pulkka exchanged a look, and Bastra shrugged. “You don’t have to make a decision now, of course. I have a job I’d happily hire you on for, and you can use it as an opportunity to see how things work for you.”

“Aren’t you just barely not a teenager, yourself, Bastra?”

He laughed. “By a couple years. Phel’s eighteen, Zohli’s eleven.”

Pulkka was giving him That Look, and Feid braced for yelling. Instead, the Whiphid pinned Bastra with a glare and said carefully, “You’re bringing a child into danger?”

The human gently pushed Feid’s elbow from his shoulder and leaned over the table on his elbows. “Children all over the galaxy live in riskier situations because of their parents’ vocation. Does the fact that I’m only her guardian make our situation any different?” He kept his voice low, but there was something fierce in it -- protective -- and Feid fought down a proud smile. “She wasn’t guaranteed to have even this much of a chance. I’m certain if her therapist thinks it’s too dangerous, they would tell me so, in which case we’d figure something out.”

Feid arched one eyebrow. “Therapist?”

He bit his lip, frowning. “The word ‘rescued’ is not an exaggeration.”

Pulkka was nodding, looking satisfied. “That’s the reaction I was hoping to see.” She looked at Feid. “What do you think?”

Feid drained off the last of her spiced ale. “Sounds like a plan to me.”
Bastra’s grin had a bit of wry mischief in it, and she wondered what they’d just got themselves into. “On the note of having a kid around, I was wondering if you’d help us find some protective gear for her. She hasn’t hit puberty yet, and I’d like to make sure whatever I get for her will last a while.”

“Right now?” Pulkka asked, frowning.

“Not immediately, but before we leave.” His smile turned into a grimace. “We’re going to Nar Shaddaa next.”

They exchanged another look and Pulkka nodded. “Right now.”

When Bastra had said he was bringing friends back, she had thought he meant people like himself. She wasn’t prepared for the people he and Dee returned with. One was a tall woman with long dark hair who looked kind of human, but she had golden skin, black marks on her face, and horns coming out of her forehead and temples. She looked tough and scary, but the other person was much scarier. They were even taller, broad enough to fill a standard doorway, with a long face with actual tusks; despite their shaggy brown fur, they were wearing a dark grey coverall with the sleeves removed.

None of her classes before had mentioned people like them, and there hadn’t been any held as slaves where she’d been. Zohli was genuinely embarrassed at feeling intimidated; she was far too old to be hiding behind Bastra. What had her tutor said about this kind of situation?

Phel was shaking their hands, looking impressed. When Feid offered her hand to Zohli, the girl hesitated before accepting it. “I’m really sorry, but I’ve never met someone like you.”

The woman grinned, showing sharp carnivore’s teeth. “I’m Zabrak. Pulkka’s a Whiphid.” Pulkka’s hand completely engulfed Zohli’s, but was surprisingly soft to the touch.

“It’s really nice to meet you both. How do you know Bastra?”

“We served on the same crew for a while.” Pulkka’s voice wasn’t as deep as Zoh had thought it might be, but it resonated, making her ears twitch. The Whiphid smiled, showing off even more of her tusks, and added, “He’s a good kid. Still has a lot to learn—”

“When have I not?”

She chuckled and patted his shoulder. “We’ll get you there. Now. You said something about shopping?”

They left Dee and Kate behind to start the preflight checks. Pulkka went somewhere to arrange for a bunk she would actually fit on to be delivered to the hangar while Feid led the rest of them to a shop both women recommended. The shopkeeper had vivid red skin and a ruff of bristly dark hair between her two horns, but she was clearly not the same species as Feid; the woman grinned when Feid explained what they needed.

“There's a few things that might last you for a few years. C’mon over here, kiddo.”

Zohli was disappointed that none of them were the no-nonsense armoured suits like Bastra and Phel wore: everything was a collection of padded plates attached to each other that would fit over her regular clothes. She knew it was because she was still growing, but it was so hard not to pout that it
didn’t look like she’d expected!

Feid caught the look on her face and started asking the shopkeeper questions about stress ratings and durability. Bastra knelt beside her. “I know none of these are what you were hoping for, sweetheart,” he said in a low voice.

She crossed her arms, frowning. “I just...ugh, I don’t know!”

“Can I put a positive light on it for you?” When she shrugged, Bastra said, “The harness can be dyed, and the plates will take paint. You can colour them anything you want.”

It took a moment for that to sink in. Zoh blinked at him and said, “I need enough blue-green for full coverage, and some flat gold.”

Obi-Wan had known when Zoh asked for armour paint that it would likely end up in other places, as well. Two days out from Nar Shaddaa, he’d discovered the circular sunflare design she’d devised painted onto the shoulder of his jacket in yellow, and another decorating the right side of Deesix’s chest plate.

The droid shrugged awkwardly when questioned. “She made a good argument for it.”

Some of the smaller details and edging on the droid’s chassis had also been embellished, and Zohli was smugly satisfied about it. She had a clean hand, at least, and had squealed with excitement when Phel asked her to put the design on xir helmet’s faceplate.

Feid dropped into the nav seat behind him. “Okay, I was sceptical when you first mentioned this setup. But they’re good kids.”

“Told you.”

“Even Dee isn't insufferable.”

The droid tilted its head at her and said dryly, “Aw, thanks.”

“No, I mean it, Dee, you're good company.” She laughed. “But I'm used to being around sarcastic people anyway.”

The last three days had been filled with story-telling, and Phel and Dee had taken great delight in providing excruciating detail about their meeting on Ryloth and first visit to Nar Shaddaa. Obi-Wan suffered the teasing with good humour -- Phel and Zohli were quickly warming up to the idea of Pulkka and Feid possibly remaining once this was over.

Ulic had been quiet again, despite Zoh’s attempts to engage the spirit. The Sith was spending a lot of time going through the physical books Obi-Wan had collected, clearly seeking something but unwilling to discuss the matter yet. Pulkka was certainly aware of Ulic’s proximity, even if she couldn't identify what made her fur stand on end, but Feid didn’t seem to notice. Obi-Wan decided to leave revealing Ulic’s presence up to the spirit.

Pulkka had immediately settled in to baby the hells out of the Sunflare’s turrets, showing Zohli and Phel around the working parts and how to maintain and calibrate them. She’d even brought the
training simulator package she herself had learned from, and occasional yells and cheering echoed from the turret bays as the younger crewmembers tested themselves.

“Whatcha smiling about, kiddo?”

Obi-Wan glanced over as Feid wrapped an arm around his shoulders from behind. “Just thinking that this ship is already starting to feel like home.” He grinned. “I like it.”

She ruffled his hair -- not as easily now that it was long enough to tie up in a warrior’s knot -- and leaned back into the nav chair. “So honestly, what’s the situation on Nar Shaddaa?”

“Krayn.”

Feid produced an impressive and lengthy curse in Huttese. “ Couldn't have mentioned that beforehand?”

“Would you still have come along?”

“Yeah, but I’d have called in backup. A lot of it.”

“This is a stealth op. I have a friend who's been deep cover in his operation for a couple years. Regardless of what happens, her cover needs to be maintained.”

Feid was quiet for a moment. “A friend. A Jedi?”

“That's why her cover needs to be tight.”

“Right. Is there a plan yet?”

“No, I need to make contact with her and evaluate her situation.” Obi-Wan glanced over his shoulder at Feid. “I’d really like to have some backup when I meet her, just in case.”

“Like you needed to ask.”

Zohli and Phel weren't happy at being left behind with Kate on the Sunflare; Obi-Wan refused to take chances. “It's just an initial meeting, and it needs to look incidental. Next time you can come along, but it's not your safety I'm worried about here.”

Feid and Pulkka had gone ahead; Obi-Wan followed ten minutes later with Dee, leaving the droid on watch outside the cantina Siri had chosen.

He found a booth to one side within sight range of Pulkka at the bar, placed his helmet on the table, and settled in with a drink, scanning idly with the Force. A few minutes later he found her, just coming in with a group, and nudged her shields gently. Recognition came back, and Obi-Wan watched from the corner of his eye as the group Siri was with bellied up to the bar, raucous and rowdy. Siri -- still looking odd to him with her hair dyed red and those marks on her face -- made a show of scanning the room; one of her companions made a crude remark as she moved to leave, and she responded with something that had several of them laughing.

He pretended not to notice her until she was close enough to hear over the noise. “Not looking for company, lady, try a different mark.”
“No?” Siri favoured him with a sweet smile as she slid into the opposite side of the booth. She was wearing a long coat over close-fitting body armour; spiked pads adorned her shoulders and made her small frame appear larger. “That’s too bad. You look like the kind of company I prefer.” Her Force presence nudged his, and Obi-Wan dropped his shields just enough to communicate. *You look good, Obi-Wan. Thanks for coming.*

*Frankly, you look terrible, and I’m worried. What's going on, Siri? “Well, considering your pals over there, anyone might seem an improvement.”*

She giggled, but there was no humour in it. “See? And it helps that you’re pretty. What's your name, spacer?” *I can't get through! I leave messages but nobody ever responds! I'm in a good position now, but I don't have the ability to take this down by myself. And without the Order sending backup.... You're stuck. I get it. “Bastra. I'm looking for work, not a fling, Lady...?”*

“Zora. There's no reason I can't offer you both. I know people around here who can use a good mercenary.”

Obi-Wan sipped his drink, pretending to consider the idea. “We might be able to help each other out, then. Shall we go someplace more private to discuss it?”

Siri knocked back the entire remains of her drink and gave him a smile that was as lascivious as it was empty. “No time like the present, right?” She stood and slipped her arm though Obi-Wan’s as he collected his helmet. “I have a room here,” she whispered. “It’s mostly for when I just need to get away. As long as you don’t mind looking like you’re entertaining?”

He chuckled. “My backup knows me better than that. Lead on.”

If she was being truly honest with herself, Siri had no idea what she’d expected when she’d commed Obi-Wan as a last resort.

The last time she’d seen him -- really seen him -- was right before he and Master Qui-Gon had left for Naboo the second time. It felt like everything had turned upside down right about then, and the same day they’d returned, Master Adi had told her what the deal was for her Trials: the Shadows wanted her, and if she truly accepted the challenge, it would have to appear as though she had genuinely left the Order. She would have to fulfill a task with a minimum of assistance and oversight, and it absolutely could not be traced back to the Jedi at all. The message system they had set up was for regular reports, and one time they’d forwarded some information that made it easy to get one of Krayn’s underlings out of her way, but usually her reports received some sort of acknowledgment. It felt as if she’d been abandoned.

The moment the door was closed behind them, Siri hugged Obi-Wan tightly. He held her, one hand stroking her hair, and the solid human contact -- contact without any ulterior designs for the first time in too long -- nearly shattered her. She didn’t realize she was crying until the dampness hit the shoulder of his jacket.

“It’s alright, Siri, I’m here.”
She reached up clumsily and patted the side of his head. “You got your face fixed.” He laughed softly and squeezed around her shoulders for a moment before letting go.

“Everyone notices that.”

There wasn’t much furniture in the room -- it was barely wide enough for a bed with a table and chair against the opposite wall and a ‘fresher the size of a locker in the corner. She let Obi-Wan have the chair and kicked off her boots to sit on the bed. “You said you have backup?”

“Two downstairs, one outside, three back at my ship.” At her open surprise, he grinned, reminding her for just a moment of the teenager he had been. “Well, it’s not like I’ve just been sitting around doing nothing the last two years! What’s the situation?”

“That incident in Balaciya two years ago really worked in my favour. I got a lot of attention, more trust from Krayn’s people. A couple months ago, Gaarrhaka ate a lot of blaster bolts, and it wasn’t pretty.” She took a breath, blew it out. “Krayn promoted me. I’m his second-in command now, and it’s eating me alive, Obi-Wan. It feels like a part of me dies every day. I’m in a good position to do something, but I can't do this myself.”

She summed up the situation for him: how twenty years ago Krayn had moved in on Nar Shaddaa’s spice processing, initially offering the moon’s Ompokku king, Aga Culpa, a cheap source of slave labour for the processing plants. Krayn had made deal after deal -- more slaves, more protection, more ships, more access -- a bit at a time, with an eye toward claiming power on the moon. King Aga -- his authority already existing at the mercy of the Hutts -- had accepted what seemed like generous offers until the latest had hit a sour note.

“Krayn made a deal with the Colicoid spice production on Kessel. Well, it was the Colicoids’ idea first: they wanted access to the processing facilities here, and the Hutts said no. So they went to Krayn. Krayn is essentially holding the local Ompokku hostage in exchange for allowing the Colicoids to use the facilities, and Krayn gets to be their sole supplier of slave labour on Kessel.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “For a lawless world, Nar Shaddaa is about as complex as Coruscant. What’s the goal they set for you?”

“Destroy the operation, bring Krayn in to face justice.”

“No pressure.”

Groaning, she scrubbed at her face. “I want to know why they thought one Jedi could do this alone? And what they intended to do about the power vacuum that would result?”

There was a narrow-eyed, canny expression on his face as he studied the wall. “This might be one of those rare situations where even the future being in motion isn't enough to mitigate damage, and someone decided the vacuum was worth the risk.” He glanced at her. “I did some research of my own on our way here. Krayn's being paid by someone powerful.”

“You think he’s just a pawn?”

“Hardly, but he's useful to someone who has a lot to gain from Krayn seizing control of Nar Shaddaa, so they're sending him money in exchange for expanding his power.” Obi-Wan snorted. “He sounds like the sort of person who’d do it anyway, but the extra money buys more friends.”

Siri sat back, idly flexing her feet against the tough mattress padding. Considering Krayn's standards, whoever bought his loyalty would have to be high up the ladder. “How powerful?”
Obi-Wan blew out a breath. “They're good at covering their tracks, but they're also paying the Trade Federation, the Techno Union, the Commerce Guild—”

“Are you serious?!” Siri dragged at her hair. “That means they have influence in the Senate.”

His answering smile was grim and a little too dark. “The Sith Master.”

She swore. “Obi-Wan, I-- Shit. This assignment isn't—”

“Shh.” He reached over and touched her knee, warm and reassuring. “Siri, just because this is your assignment, it doesn't mean you have to operate alone. You're allowed to hire people to help you.” Obi-Wan’s grin was adorably lopsided. “And I happen to know quite a few people with reasonable prices. Let's think up a plan.”

He sent a comm message to his backup in the taproom downstairs. Siri wasn't certain what she’d expected, but the Whiphid and Zabrak women still managed to surprise her. They called Obi-Wan “Bastra”, but didn’t blink when Siri used his real name. He let Siri introduce herself, and she decided that if he trusted them with his real name, they could know hers, too. Their resulting plan left more up to chance than she liked, but as Obi-Wan said, they couldn’t know how Krayn would react and it was better to try to account for multiple scenarios. Even after two years of working with the T’surr raider, Siri found him unpredictable.

Obi-Wan chuckled. “I don’t say this often anymore, but we’ll just have to trust in the Force to guide us. You’ve done so well on your own, Siri. Bringing other people in is going to increase the variables, but it can’t be helped. We’ll just try to keep that number as low as possible.”

Zora’s new playmate irritated him. It wasn’t the first time his second in command had brought a toy around -- they usually lasted a month or so before she either tired of them or they tried to boss her around and got kicked out of her bed -- but there was something about the human that put Krayn on edge. His Wookiee bodyguard, Rashtah, agreed the kid made his fur prickle.

Gav Davine looked like your average nightmare for local security: dark hair worn long, some nasty facial scars, and a sleek ocular implant replacing his left eye. He carried a pair of heavy blasters like he preferred them over words. What had interested Zora so much in this one was mystifying, she usually had better taste than that.

It had taken a couple weeks and a lot of teasing about her “invisible boyfriend” from Jenever and Temm before Zora brought the guy in. At least he didn’t pick fights with the crew, and was content to start in the organization from the lower ranks. He was quiet -- oh, he talked, and he wasn’t brainless, but mostly he kept his mouth shut and his ears open, and that...worried Krayn.

“Are you sure about this guy, cheeka? He doesn’t seem like your usual type,” he asked after one meeting.

Zora rolled her eyes. “It’s rare to find a human guy who knows what a mouth is good for, boss. Let me have my fun.”

“Thanks, I didn’t need to know that.” That was a mental image he didn't need.

She laughed and patted his arm. “I know you're just looking out for me. Don't worry so much.”
He resolved to keep an eye on the taciturn human. His Second could handle her own business, but there was still something creepy about him.

A busy, sleepless hub among Nar Shaddaa's upper-rise stacks, the Corellian Sector played home to sentients of all types, from wealthy businessmen to bounty hunters to the best hotshot ship mechanics in the galaxy. There was something for everyone in the Corellian Sector -- if you had the money for it.

A phalanx of dark-armoured mercenaries climbed out of a speeder, bracketing a crate large enough to contain an adult human as they unloaded it onto a hovercart. The identical armour and smooth, blank-featured helmets drew less curiosity than the crate did: professional guards were a common enough sight. The three guards not guiding the cart fell into formation around it as they entered a building; the guard in the lead, their armour bearing a large red circle in the centre of their faceplate, brusquely flashed an access card in the direction of the front security desk without slowing.

RE6-3N protested the irregularity, but it was token: people like that never cared that a droid could lose its job for letting sentients in without logging their entry. Muttering to itself, Reece made note of the floor the access card connected to and reported five sentients visiting the Red Sun offices with a delivery at eleventh hour, Standard time.

Half an hour later, the five sentients departed, having left their package behind. With an electronic sniff of disdain, Reece logged the event, even though they again passed without stopping. Sentients just didn't appreciate basic courtesy these days.

Reformation Year 978.11.22

After three months spent in close quarters with Obi-Wan, Siri had to admit that he felt a lot more balanced than he had on Concord Dawn. But he never really answered her when she asked if he’d sought assistance. He meditated a lot -- they both did, it was the only way to avoid breaking from the atrocities they were forced to witness or take part in -- but he refused to meditate with her. She hadn’t realised how much she’d missed that sort of closeness with another person until the opportunity was there but never taken.

Siri suspected Obi-Wan had experienced something he didn’t want to share. Something dire. He was good at hiding it, but he’d get quiet at times -- not just brooding, but Force-quiet -- and it made her uneasy. Maybe it was because he was no longer a Jedi. Most of the time, his sense reminded her of the nicer smugglers she dealt with -- a little cold and calculating, friendly but not entirely trusting -- rather than the deep serenity she was accustomed to feeling.

It made her fear what she must feel like to other Jedi, after so long away. It made her fear she wouldn't be able to go back.
She had voiced her worries once, late at night. They had taken to sharing her bunk to mingle their scents convincingly, which should have been awkward, particularly given their childhood crushes on each other. But Obi-Wan was happy to just hold her close when she wanted -- hells, needed, she was so touch-starved for someone who just plain cared -- and neither of them made overtures towards anything more. His arms had wrapped around her tightly, tucking her against his chest.

"Isn't that part of your Trial? To resist the Dark, even when you're buried in it?" He’d smiled against her hair as his shadowed mind brushed hers, still gentle and reassuring through the heavy shielding he’d created. "You're nowhere close to Falling, Siri. And you can request to see a Mind Healer when you go back, if you're that concerned."

"But after what happened with you…"

He’d gone very still. "I'm afraid to ask what happened once that got around."

Siri had hesitated only a moment before telling him everything. How incensed Master Adi had been that Mind Healers hadn't been considered for him, how Master Windu had withdrawn and refused to say a word in Obi-Wan’s defense. How it had terrified other Padawans facing their own Trials, and even upset a few Knights -- it was a contentious issue, and many felt it had set a bad precedent. How upset Bant and Garen and Reeft had been at being discouraged from contacting him, and how she hadn't been able to spare more time with their friends because she was about to be dropped into her own Trial.

How she and Adi had conspired to make Obi-Wan’s dismissal a point of contention in their staged argument before Siri had “left” the Order for her assignment. That part, at least, had been satisfying: they had arranged to have an extremely public falling-out, and Master Windu had been in the vicinity.

His chuckle had purred in his chest, warm and amused. "Please tell me you recorded that."

"I don't know, actually. They might have, for assessment purposes." She had frowned. "Are you sure this isn't another massive ruse, and you're actually on an extended assignment?"

She hadn't really been serious, and Obi-Wan had snorted. "If it is, they could at least have done me the courtesy of saying so!"

Now she studied him as they walked the inspection patrol. In his persona as Gav, Obi-Wan seemed to be an entirely different person: not quite surly, but his flat, half-lidded expression was a perfect mimic of Master Windu at his most annoyed. He would have made a hell of a Shadow. It was such a sorry, blasted waste!

“What did you do to piss off the boss this time?” she teased. Krayn had given “Gav” a four-eyed glare before they’d left; he’d never been that suspicious of her occasional partners before. It was a little funny, but also worrying. Obi-Wan was still low-level in the organization, and hadn't made any in-character pushes to overstep his rank like Dayn had a few months ago, or try to “save” her from the job like Kahna last year.

He shrugged, a loose, careless gesture. “Isn’t he always like that?” The flat, Mid-Rim accent Obi-Wan had affected sounded so wrong in his voice.

“Only around you.”

“I'm flattered, but he's not really my type.” His dry delivery had her glancing at him to see if he was being serious. Only the glitter of mischief in his visible right eye gave it away.
One of the best parts about being Krayn’s second in command was that he frequently left her in charge of things on Nar Shaddaa when he was on a raiding run, sparing her from the stress. The down-side was that she had to do the rounds for the main holding facilities personally. Her good mood evaporated as soon as they entered.

Most of the sites Krayn’s operation occupied had been in use for hundreds of years; decades of pain and despair had soaked into the walls. Although the prisoners were subjected to daily sonic showers, going for too long without a chance to properly bathe still left a particular musky odour that built up over time. The deodorizing agents in the air cyclers introduced a pungent antiseptic smell that clung to the inside of her nose for hours after leaving.

Her eyes skimmed over faces -- desperate, agonized, blank with despair, dark with outrage -- without pausing to focus on individual features. If she looked too closely, she’d have to acknowledge that they were people, acknowledge the awareness and horror and misery in their eyes. She’d started avoiding looking closely out of self-preservation, out of fear that she’d break down; only the knowledge that her work would bring this whole ugly system to an end kept her going.

It was becoming altogether too easy to just...not see the people.

Obi-Wan’s hand rested lightly at the small of her back as they passed cell after cell. They had agreed to not use the Force while around others -- there was too much risk of species sensitive to its currents noticing even the slightest interaction. But even without the Force, his touch was reassuring.

“Work report,” Siri demanded. The sorry excuse for a Rodian they had in charge of the place handed her the datapad. It was all numbers and location names. Every living being in the place, reduced to a string of productivity data and cost evaluation.

Through the brush of his fingers against her back, Siri could feel Obi-Wan’s rage and disgust. He hid it well under a blank, disinterested mask, but once they were back at headquarters, he’d go to the gym on the seventh floor and take it out on the training droids for an hour rather than meditating.

“Gav” had built up a fan base among the lower-level grunts. People had started placing bets on how long it would take for the droids to be in pieces again -- they were designed for it, anyway, but typically only when Wookiees or Trandoshan were involved. Obi-Wan wasn’t the clean fighter he’d been when they were Padawans: there was something brutal and merciless about him now, and she wondered how much of it was really just the result of not being in the Temple for two years.

He really needed to return home. They both did.

Flanked by three bodyguards, Aga Culpa stalked through the halls of the Regent Tower, his grey features flushed with outrage, wishing he could strangle himself a T’surr. The deal with Krayn had seemed good at the start -- mutually beneficial, with minimal impact on Culpa’s bottom line. And Culpa’s bottom line was the Hutts’ bottom line. This latest mess with the Colicoids, however? How dare that...that raider offer them access! He had no authority to do that...save the brawlers he’d loaned out as “security” in the facilities across the moon.

For a hundred generations the Hutts had allowed the Ompokku to manage their business on Nar Shaddaa -- it was effective plausible deniability every time the Republic started making noise about doing something about the pirate activity that made the Outer Rim go ’round -- but the reduced
profits from the processing facilities were risking being noticed. Culpa was no fool: he knew his authority existed at the whim of the Hutt crime lords, and if he stopped providing the Ompokku’s half of the deal, he’d quickly find himself assassinated and replaced.

Culpa liked breathing.

Krayn’s response to his concerns, however, was the posturing of a thug. It wasn't merely Culpa’s life on the line, but that of every Ompokku managing Nar Shaddaa’s spice processing industry. That raider was threatening genocide, and Culpa would likely lose his position if he went to the Hutts for assistance. Possibly his life, too, but definitely his power.

Unacceptable!

His aide handed him a datapad as he passed through the receiving room. “The, uh. Reports you requested, sir.” Still irate, Culpa snatched it from the poor man’s hand with a wordless grunt of acknowledgment and headed through the doors into his office.

His dismal musings were interrupted by his bodyguards closing in and pressing him back toward the door, force-shields springing to life between them and the rest of the room; the guard closest to the door controls swore as they failed to open again. Blindsided by the instant chaos, Culpa did what he was supposed to do and ducked.

An attack never came; just some dry laughter that sounded vaguely mechanical. Peering between his guards’ shoulders -- one was yelling into a comm that returned only static -- Culpa saw there were three of them: humanoids in sleek dark grey body armour wearing smooth, featureless helmets, not a bit of skin, fur, or scales showing. The only insignia was a large red circle in the middle of those eerie blank faceplates and adorning the left pauldron. One of them was seated in Culpa’s chair with their booted feet propped on his greelwood desk; the other two stood to either side with blasters cradled at rest in their hands.

“Oh, do calm down and stop screaming,” the seated one said -- he thought it was that one, anyway. The helmet vox mutilated the humanoid’s voice, obscuring gender and accent entirely. “We’re here to talk, not fight.”

The bodyguard gave up on his comm and glanced at Culpa. The king shrugged uneasily. “The proper way is to arrange an appointment.”

“Oh, we know. Your waiting list is five months long, and we’re afraid we haven’t got time for that.” A languid, five-fingered hand raised and gestured Culpa and his guards forward. “Come, come. Your guards may keep their shields up, if it makes them feel better, but there’s no reason not to be civil about things.”

Culpa’s third guard scanned the room for explosives, found none, and their group shuffled forward until he could take a seat in the primary guest’s chair. Struggling not to betray his nervousness, Culpa cleared his throat. “Alright. What is it you want?”

The blank-faced helmet tilted as they steepled their fingers idly. “We know you're having issues with Krayn. The man has overstepped his bounds and made an enemy of someone rather more powerful than the Hutts. This is not a negotiation: we will be taking care of this matter shortly. You need to tell your people to cooperate with any of our people -- or at least stand aside and let us do our jobs. They will all be spared. If anyone begins shooting, however, we will consider it a formal attack, and things won’t be so peaceful.” There was a dark promise behind the person’s words that left no doubt they meant it.
“Cooperate how?”

“Granting access to security systems and locations. We don’t care about your assets or your production. The slaves currently operating your facilities, we’re afraid, will be recovered -- these are Krayn’s assets, not yours. In return, we leave you every surviving member of his organization to support your production lines.” There was another dry laugh, like cracking ice. “It’s only fair.”

“That’s it? That’s all you have to offer?”

“We told you: this is not a negotiation,” the mechanized voice said calmly. “This is what is going to happen, and your people can cooperate or perish. We’d prefer your cooperation.”

Culpa shifted on the edge of the guest chair; it really was a dreadfully uncomfortable piece of furniture by design. “Very well. Can we expect some notice regarding when this will happen?”

“No. So we suggest you advise your people immediately, after you take a nap.”

There was a soft noise from behind him, and the king blinked as his three guards slumped gently to the floor, the force-shields flickering out. “I’m sorry, what did you just--”

“Take a nap.”

King Aga Culpa woke some twenty minutes later, feeling refreshed but extremely annoyed. His visitors could at least have moved him to the floor: a crick had developed in his neck. A tiny, thumbnail-sized dart dropped from his shoulder when he reached up to massage the strained muscles.

The door opened on command this time, and his aide looked up from his work.

“Yes, sir?”

“Has anyone passed you in the last hour, Nuri?”

His aide frowned. “No, sir, nobody but you. Is something wrong, sir?”

He glanced back into his office. One of his bodyguards was on the comm to security demanding the recorder footage to figure out how the three strangers had breached the building. “No, no. Everything is fine. Would you come in for a moment? I need you to take a brief.”

Chapter End Notes

If you want to know what the design Zohli drew looks like, I added it to the end of this chapter's Tumblr post.
Reformation Year 979.01.14
Nar Shaddaa

It was boring waiting for Bastra. He’d rented a mid-level apartment for them near the spaceport in the Corellian sector, so they wouldn’t have to spend more time than necessary on the ship. It was alright, for Nar Shaddaa, but with Bastra off helping his friend most of the time, Phel didn’t have much to do. Xe’d made the mistake of complaining to Feid, and she’d happily taken xir back to the Sunflare for a training session that was, if possible, more brutal than what Bastra usually provided. When xe mentioned that, the Zabrak woman had laughed.

“He’s been going easy on you.”

It became a regular thing, and sometimes Pulkka and Zohli would join them. The Whiphid was terrifyingly fast for someone her size, and she told them about clan life on her homeworld, and how reflexes and speed were just as important as strength when hunting. There were also a few unexpected revelations.

“I didn’t know you had children, Pulkka.”

She whuffled in amusement and patted Phel’s shoulder. “Whiphid do not put as much stock in biological family as humans do. Because each clan forms a hunting unit, having members who cooperate well is more important. I have many children, and they have many children. My mate passed long ago, and I felt the need to see more than my own world.” She voiced a grating laugh. “My first crew saw me as little more than a mindless cargo lifter; I stayed only long enough to reach a port where I could find better people.”

Zohli leaned against Pulkka’s side, nearly buried under her shaggy arm; the kid had really warmed up to the two mercenaries. “How long ago was that?”

“Your Scogar would have been younger than you are now, I think.”

It was more peaceful than usual without Ulic around, even if he’d been hiding from Feid and Pulkka.
Bastra had brought the spirit’s crystal with him, and the Sith was apparently having fun stealing passwords for vital systems and generally sending chills down people's spines. The spirit was evil -- in almost every sense of the word -- but Phel could appreciate his humour.

Bastra's Jedi friend didn't know about the Sith. She'd seemed nice, for the short time she’d visited them at the ship that first night, but Bastra had been adamant that she shouldn't know about either Ulic or his training Phel. When asked why, he’d shrugged. “She’ll be returning to the Temple eventually, and I’d rather nobody there know. But it's also the Force telling me not to.”

So they waited. Phel borrowed some of Zohli's school books and discovered xe hadn't forgotten nearly as much as xe’d thought. Feid challenged them to shooting games with the simulator Ohnaka had given them. Dee and Kate provided commentary that was blistering and optimistic by turns; Kate would regularly stop to scold Dee if the modified B1 unit got overly sarcastic, which had twice caused earsplitting arguments in binary that had overloaded Phel’s translation unit.

It was past the four-month mark Bastra had estimated. Something had to happen soon.

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One of the benefits of being One with the Force -- or as close to it as Ulic could claim to be -- was that biology was no longer an impediment to memory. Every moment of his previous life -- good, bad, regrettable, glorious, humiliating -- could be recalled at will. He suspected it was why some Sith spirits were more vicious than others: without the fog of time softening the sting of past defeats, the vindictive would only grow more bitter.

Ulic was not bitter by nature, although there were certain moments he preferred to avoid thinking about. After thousands of years bound to a crystal, he might have been forgiven for losing touch with the world of the living, but it was only thanks to the odd Force-sensitive individuals he could nudge that he hadn't been lost forever in a junkyard somewhere. Without the fickle nature of a brain impeding things, in quieter times he had set himself to memorizing any book he could gain access to. Datapads and digital storage were infuriatingly obtuse, but physically written documents bared more than words; even mass-printed works carried a piece of their writers’ intents, allowing deeper understanding.

But there were other, more immediate uses for possessing a perfect memory.

Ulic leaned over, trying not to get too close to one of Krayn’s lieutenants as the human typed her password into the console. He’d discovered long ago that even the most Force-insensitive individuals could tell when they walked through a spirit, and while it was delightfully cruel to continually raise the hair on the back of some thug’s neck, he had a different purpose right now.

Keeping himself concealed from Obi-Wan’s friend was the hardest part -- it was one thing to be noticed by untrained sensitives, but another thing to know there was someone who could identify you and track you down nearby. Obi-Wan had the crystal tightly shielded -- more so than usual, since it currently sat in the box beside that Force-active river stone Qui-Gon had given him, and neither wanted to find out what effect the crystal would have on the stone.

His friend, bless her innocence, had been content with seeing the stone. She'd uttered some nonsense about being glad Obi-Wan hadn't lost his way, and Ulic had been hard-pressed to contain a laugh. It was sweet, it really was.
“Report for you, boss.”

Krayn waved for the Rodian to wait until he reached a stopping point and put the monitor on standby; some things shouldn't be seen by unwary eyes. “Okay, Deej, let's hear it.”

Deej handed over a datapad. “In a kril-shell, Davine’s been browsing our servers a lot.”

The T’surr raider grunted. Testing the depth of their security access was something all new recruits did in their first few months; he would have been disappointed if Zora’s toy was any different.

“Recording anything?”

“Not that I can tell, but there are devices that capture the image on the screen rather than duplicating the data. Those things don't leave a trace.”

“Point.” The heavy ridge over his four eyes folded in a scowl. “There a confirmation this is what he was focusing on?”

“The financial data? Yeah.”

“He shouldn’t have access to that.”

The Rodian’s cheeks angled in a smug expression. “Thought you might find that interesting. And he did it on his ID, too: foolish. Somehow he conned Mayze into upping his clearance a level.”

Krayn's blue skin flushed darker. “Didn't say anything to Mayze, did you?”

“Boss, please,” Deej said, rolling his head. “I know my business, and that ain't it.”

“Fine, send him up. On shift, don't want to make anyone panic, now.” If Mayze came clean about it, Krayn wouldn't have to hire another slicer.

“Sure thing, boss. Anything else?”

Krayn drummed his heavy, blunt fingers on the polished desktop, thinking. “Yeah. Get that Squib of yours, Rikkat, to search Davine's quarters next time he's out with Zora. See if any of that image capture tech is in residence. Don't take it, just lemme know if it's there.”

“You got it.”

Between Siri’s crew logs and Ulic's snooping, Obi-Wan had all the information he needed to make his deeper intrusions into Krayn's servers look like normal shift activity. Nym had lent them a delightful black-market gadget -- with the ultimatum of, “you break it, you buy it” -- that could lie flat over a projector lens and skim the image data. It rolled neatly into what looked like an encryption key stick, although the memory was limited and needed to be dumped daily. The datacard fit neatly into a slot inside one of the shin guards “Gav” favoured.
Gearing up for this had been desperately expensive, but Siri had provided most of the credits directly from what Krayn had been paying her. It was the best possible use for all that blood money; she wanted none of it. Paying Kole for his work on “Gav Davine’s” ID and a fake prosthetic eye and scars had been only the barest start.

He slipped the projection recorder back into its pocket on the front of his coat. They would drop the latest data-pull with Phel and the others later that evening; one of the bonuses of the Corellian sector was that there were a lot of places to make contact.

“Find something interesting there, Davine?”

Obi-Wan disconnected his datapad, letting the cable snap back into the case, and held it up. “Podracing lists. You never get into it, Deej?”

The Rodian spat a breath in an approximation of a snort. “Blood sports are for people who don’t know what it’s like to be in a real fight.”

“Oh, somebody sounds bitter.”

“Keep flapping your lips, human,” Deej snarled as he pushed past. “You’ve got a long way to go before you impress someone around here.”

Obi-Wan watched the Rodian slicer stalk away around the corner, a little smirk tugging at his cheek. “Good.”

When you were only half the height of the average sentient in an organisation, being noisy was essential. Rikkat had tried everything from boots that made sounds with every step to simply carrying a toy horn and honking it when she found herself behind someone taller -- which was incredibly satisfying, but irritated a lot of the bigger sentients. Her latest toy was a scooter with a small motor that made about as much noise as an astromech -- enough to get attention, and it helped her keep up with her longer-legged friends.

But when Deej asked her to be quiet about things, Rikkat would never be noticed.

The Big Boss’ tower was riddled with small passageways for the cleaning droids to get around, and the tunnels were large enough for a human to crawl through in case an MSE broke down. Rikkat had the entire network memorized; only the droids knew it better.

She’d spent a couple weeks tailing Zora’s new mate around. It was a shame the Big Boss didn’t trust the human: he seemed nice, even if he didn’t smile much. He was kind with Zora, at least, which was more than Rikkat could say for some of the mates the Boss’ Second had kept. She would brush past him on occasion, picking up hints of both Davine and Zora on her violet fur. Davine had smelled angry, but there wasn’t any obvious source, and he never acted like it.

Now Deej wanted her to check Davine’s quarters. Of course, there was nothing there, because the human spent all his time with Zora, and Rikkat had to comm Deej for special permission to search the Second’s room. The minutes ticked by while she paced an intersection in the droid tunnels -- Davine and Zora were out on a date and probably wouldn’t be back for several more hours. But the more time she had to search Davine’s stuff, the more subtle it would be. Rushed jobs always left something out of place, and Davine seemed the type to notice that sort of thing.
Finally Deej came back with an override code for Zora’s door and an admonishment to be extra careful. Zora had long ago earned Big Boss’ trust, and it was only her boyfriend they wanted to check. Besides, Rikkat had already searched Zora’s room a couple years before. Big Boss really just wanted to make sure Davine wasn’t using Zora.

Davine didn’t own much. Zora let him use a couple drawers and part of her closet -- nothing but clothes. Rikkat scaled the wall and shifted a ceiling panel aside, but there was nothing in the gap above the room but a fine layer of dust; the air vents were likewise empty. There was a holdout blaster under one pillow, and a nasty-looking vibroblade tucked down the side of the mattress, but that was normal for most people in the organization. Davine’s flight case was stored under the bed alongside a plastine box that contained a bunch of little things -- all Zora’s. It seemed a ridiculously obvious place to hide things, but nothing else in the room looked wrong.

The lock on the flight case clicked over with a minimum of fiddling -- he hadn’t even bothered with the fingerprint lock, which suggested how much he actually trusted Zora. Interesting, and something Deej would want to know. Among a few items of fancier clothing were a couple datapads, some datacards which seemed to contain popular holos and novels, a piece of wood with a series of small holes that looked like some sort of game board, a deck of sabacc cards that appeared to be completely legit, and a wooden box that rattled. The lid was some odd assemblage of panels that shifted slightly but refused to budge; it wasn’t until her comm beeped that Rikkat realised she’d been fussing with the thing for nearly an hour. Her time was running out.

But there was something important in that infuriating box!

The flight case hadn’t been opened frequently, the scents on it dull from lack of handling. She could get the box back in place well before he even noticed it was gone.

The short, rodent-like humanoid poking around Obi-Wan’s stuff had amused Ulic, right up until she’d chosen to wander off with the box under her arm. Of course Obi-Wan wouldn’t leave anything important lying around -- Ulic was surprised it had taken Krayn’s people even this long to search the room.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t been planning on following her anyway.

To his relief, the Squib took the box directly back to her quarters -- via the droid maintenance shafts, which was an entertaining adventure in figuring out whether he was better off crouching over or just sinking halfway through the floor -- and then commed one of Krayn’s internal investigations people to report on her lack of findings.

“He really trusts Zora to not go poking, his stuff was barely secured.”

“Maybe because he didn’t have anything worth securing,” replied a sour voice that sounded like it came from a sentient with non-humanoid speech organs.

“Maybe. He has a box, I can’t get it open. I’m going to have the contents scanned and put it right back, he’ll never know it was missing.”

“You-- Rikkat, what did we say about taking things during a no-signs search?”

Rikkat made an exasperated tooth-grinding noise. “It won’t open, Deej! There’s something in it, and
you told me to check *everything.*”

There was a heavy sigh and some muttered Rodese. “*Do it quicklike, Rikkat. I don’t want to have to explain to Zora why her latest toy is missing something.*”

Ulic tuned out the rest of the argument and checked the shielding around his crystal. Sound, solid, unlikely to dissipate easily, and it wasn’t like he or Obi-Wan could lose track of the box’s location. Obi-Wan would find the whole thing amusing, at least.

And maybe Ulic could have just a little bit of fun.

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“Have I told you before how weird you look with dark hair, Bastra?”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “Only about a dozen times.”

Feid shook her head at him. “I really hope that dye washes out easily, or you’ll be spooking us for weeks once this is over.”

“You’re sure this’s going to work?” Phel asked. Xe kept xir voice low, despite the volume of the crowd around them. The club was busy, and one more group of humanoid standing around with drinks in hand wasn’t going to draw much attention. Zohli was far too young to be allowed into the club, to her displeasure, and she and Pulkka had stayed behind at the apartment.

Obi-Wan winced as a vivid pink light in the ceiling tracked across his face, dazzling him for a moment. “It has to.” He tapped the front of Phel’s jacket, where the latest set of data cards nestled securely. “The reason the Colicoid want to use the processors on Nar Shaddaa instead of Kessel is because the Pyke Syndicate owns the Kessel spice operation -- the Colicoid just manage the mines for them. If the Syndicate finds out the Colicoid are undercutting their deal and trying to make profit off the mines which the Pykes legally own--”

“The Colicoid get kicked out of the Kessel deal,” Siri finished. “Not that it would be that clean, there would probably be a war, and it would be ugly and expensive.” She frowned, the glitter on her face making the expression dramatic. “I don’t like blackmail, Obi-Wan. Imagine what the Council would say--”

Feid chuckled. “Your Council isn’t here right now. There’s two ways to get Krayn’s deal with the bugs to fall apart without too much damage--”

“And neither of them is something a Jedi would do,” Obi-Wan said with a shrug. “The way Qui-Gon would have handled it would have been to just give that information to the Pyke Syndicate and let the criminals deal with each other. That won’t do anything about Krayn’s operation here, though, and it won’t help the slaves the Colicoid have taken.”

Siri’s sparkling eyebrows were still pinched together. “That destroys the agreement with the Colicoids, but what about the rest of the organization?”

“That’s your job. The next Colicoid shipment is in two days, right?” He sipped his drink, eyeing her over the rim of his glass. This was one of the parts they hadn’t been able to plan in advance: it was entirely reliant on future opportunities and timing.
“Yeah? He’s brought all his lieutenants in to make a good showing for the convoy’s captain and some Guild representat-- oh.” Her eyes went huge. “If the Colicoid cancel, Krayn’s going to pull everyone in for a meeting to do damage control and figure out how the Colicoid got their intel.”

Obi-Wan grinned. “Jinkins gave me a few illegal toys to play with. One of them is a knockout gas charge I’m going to install in the conference room’s air vent after regular maintenance that morning. It has a remote control, and-- you do remember how to neutralize toxins, yes?”

Siri rolled her eyes as the others laughed. “Please. Have you seen how much I have to drink to socialize with them? Why do you have to be the one to install it? That’s risky.”

“Because as soon as I noticed all of Krayn’s lieutenants in residence, I, uh... convinced the crew supervisor to put me down for the morning upper-levels security sweeps. And we don't have time to convince the MSEs to work with us. In theory, with everyone unconscious, you can lock the tower down and arrest them all with a minimum of fuss.” It would be an excessive pain to contain twenty-plus sentients in stasis coffins for transport, but it could be done.

Siri eyed him narrowly. “You don't think it’ll work, do you.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “I think it's overly optimistic to hope they can all be arrested peacefully and transported back to Judicial without incident. We're prepared for it, but still. I'm making sure you have something to defend yourself with before you go into that meeting.”

His next thought was interrupted by a mental laugh from Ulic. Hey, kid, you're not gonna believe this.

As part of Krayn’s arrangement with King Aga, the organization got exclusive use of one of the upper-atmosphere spacedocks tethered above Nar Shaddaa on the side of the moon opposite Nal Hutta. In theory, it had been for the use of Krayn's fleet as a defensive force, allowing for faster launch-to-void time. In practice, it gave Krayn's forces the ability to bypass Nar Shaddaa's customs intake and material goods taxation.

Booted feet propped on her desk, Hechev reviewed the latest intake logs and wondered if Culpa had any idea what kind of agreement he’d signed. Krayn's entire raiding fleet docked here, and as far as Nar Shaddaa’s security was concerned, nothing that entered via this particular spacedock existed on the moon. The Arcona rubbed the back of her wedge-shaped head as she processed the intake numbers: Culpa's government was bleeding millions of credits per month, credits that went straight to the pockets of Krayn and his people.

People like Hechev. Her thin mouth quirked at the bonus she’d received for ignoring an extra crate of supplies someone had brought through earlier that day. Business was good.

An alert on one of the other monitors drew her attention; her large eyes blinked at the message for a moment before she leaned over to the intercom switch.

“Hangar control, can you check the bay doors on platform ten?” Three more alerts flared on while Hechev was speaking, and she amended, “And platforms nine through seven… What the karking hells is going on down there?!?” The rest of the platforms had sent up their own alerts, painting the monitor in the shades of yellow that stood out more clearly to her.
There was silence from the other end, and she was just considering collecting her blaster and investigating things herself when a vox-blurred voice responded, “You would be Dock Manager Hechev, yes?”

Hechev scowled. “I swear to all the gods, Domir, if this is a prank--”

“Domir is unfortunately unable to speak for himself anymore, Dock Manager Hechev. We would ask you to kindly step out of your office and surrender to the people we have sent up. There is no need for this to end in violence.”

Hechev’s hand shot toward the security button just as all power in the room went out. Over the comm, the person’s sigh was turned into a half-mechanical burst of static. “Dock Manager Hechev. Please.”

She already had her personal comm unit out, but it returned nothing but silence.

Despite the tone-warping vox, the speaker’s voice was smooth. “Surely we can make a deal, Dock Manager. The Red Sun are not without mercy--”

“Moochani kung!” she spat. “Bargon wan chee kospah!” Snapping the intercom off, Hechev seized her rifle and ran for the door, prepared to fight her way out.

A group of humanoids in glossy dark armour adorned with red circles on the faceplates emerged from the corridor leading to Hangar Control; Hechev fired a wild spray of blaster bolts in their direction just to make them duck as she sprinted for the lifts. A shot caught one of them in the side and they collapsed, but all of the armoured sentients were eerily silent as they took cover.

Hechev succeeded in downing another and wounding a third before a bolt caught her in the thigh, dropping her painfully to her knees in the shadow of the arch near the bank of lifts. A torrent of laser-fire between her hiding-space and the nearest lift made Hechev shy back. She pressed down on the wound to staunch the bleeding, biting back a groan.

“Dock Manager Hechev!”

She took a chance to peek around the archway. Another group of armoured mercenaries had arrived, led by one whose armour looked the same but for a red half-cloak draped over their left shoulder.

“Come, my dear, this is pointless. You put your blaster aside, we stop firing. We can--” The armoured person ducked as Hechev flung her rifle at their head and dove for the lift. A bolt clipped the heel of her boot just as the door slid shut.

The Red Sun leader chuckled. “We’re done here,” they said into their comm. “Come! Collect our wounded. To our new ships!”

“All of them?” Krayn stared at his desk terminal without really seeing it.

“The entire raiding fleet,” Dock Manager Hechev confirmed. Even over the comm she sounded pained. “Blocked our communications, cut the power. As far as I know, nobody else made it out alive. I suspect they wanted me to survive to tell you, their leader tried to offer me mercy.”
“Get your ass to medical, get patched up, Hechev. We’ll pull the security logs and deal with it.” He rubbed the sensitive spots behind his cranial ridges, feeling a headache growing. The last thing they needed right now was a bunch of pirates making off with their ships.

“Either someone let them in, or gave them the access codes. The first I knew about it was when the bay doors started opening.”

He sighed and closed the comm. A long time ago, Krayn had learned that people of other races would stop following you when you made a habit of damaging subordinates. It had taken literal decades to build the persona of a businessman with any substance behind it; it had held up under the scrutiny of the karking Republic, and was strong enough to get the king of Nar Shaddaa to take him at his word.

The Colicoids’ next shipment would be arriving that evening. There wasn’t enough time to go down to the gym and destroy some training droids. Swallowing a growl, Krayn mashed the comms.

“Yeah, boss.”

“Deej. Find out everything you can about these Red Sun people. And get someone on tracking our ships, I want to know where they’re taking them.”

Rimward from the golden star called Y’Toub, just beyond the orbit of Nar Hekka, a convoy of immense transport ships dropped from hyperspace. Literally filled to the limits with raw glitterstim in specially sealed cases, ready to exchange the load of spice for slaves, the ships’ sublight engines roared to life, turning the ships towards Nal Hutta’s moon.

On the bridge of the lead ship, Negotiator Nor Fik’s talons rippled together with a rhythmic clicking. [[Ahead of schedule. Excellent. Captain?]]

Captain Anf Dec’s four legs tapped the floor in agreement. [[Opening communications with Trader Krayn.]]

Against the blackness of deep space, a series of lights flickered into existence, moving like deep-water fish toward the convoy. Dark pulses washed out, flooding the local communications frequencies with a jumble of audio color.

Anf Dec hissed as the comm returned a blur of noise, piercing to Colicoid hearing. Abandoning the communications frequencies, he grabbed the controls and set the navicomp to retrace their last jump. Between the ship’s sheer mass and the velocity of a full sublight burn, a one-eighty turn would take three precious minutes.

Nor Fik’s violet carapace blanched. [[What are you doing?!]] he hissed. [[We have a schedule!!]]

[[If it’s not an attack, we can turn around again. But I have dealt with this Krayn before and I do not trust him.]] The other ships in the convoy followed suit the moment their captains noticed Anf Dec’s maneuver, but nearly a minute too late. Anf Dec’s sensors, flooded with obscuring white noise, showed multiple signals on approach, but couldn’t discern the total numbers against the jamming. [[Transponder codes indicate ownership by Krayn. Our other ships will not complete rotation for realignment in time.]]
Their shields were already crackling under fire from ranged turbolaser blasts. Anf Dec switched power to their rear deflectors. [[Is that enough answer for you?]]

Nor Fik ground his mandibles. [[Take us to safety and open a channel once we are out of hyperspace. It seems our deal is off.]]

Rikkat was getting frustrated. She didn’t want to damage the box trying to get it open, but all the guides about human puzzle boxes she found on the HoloNet were useless, and she was running out of time.

“You! Can-droid!” She slapped the dome of one of Deej’s reprogrammed security droids. “I need help!”

The droid whistled at her in annoyance; the Squib flapped her hand at it impatiently.

“Yes, yes, you’re busy, you’re always busy. This will only take a minute!”

There was an irritated blat but the droid rotated to focus on her.

Rikkat put the box on the floor between them. “I need you to scan the contents of this. I can’t get it open without damaging it.” At a derisive hoot from the droid, she ground her teeth. “Because it’s Zora’s, alright? No breaking Big Boss’ Second’s things!”

The security droid made a sound like a Gamorrean farting but tilted to focus on the box; rays of blue light traced over its surface, and the Squib flattened her large, pointed ears against the ultrasonic scan noise. Eventually the droid straightened and projected a transparent holo of the scan in the air above the box. Layer after layer formed from the outside in, and Rikkat’s excited dancing slowed.

“Rocks? It’s full of rocks?”

The hologram showed a rock about the size of a human hand, a smaller one that looked like a crystal wrapped in something soft, and a string of beads on a braided cord. The droid made some sarcastic noises at her.

“Well, yes, I wanted to know what was in it! Are you sure that scan’s right?”

The security droid rocked on its base, stomping its supports at her before whirling and rolling away. Rikkat sighed and collected the box, then commed Deej. “Hey. There’s nothing special in Davine’s box.”

“She’s on security right now, you can put the box back where it was. One of our guys spotted him and Zora being awfully close with some other sentients when he was out a couple nights ago, we’re going to pull him in anyway. Be careful, alright?”

“I’m always careful, Deej.”
Krayn’s tower was unusually busy for that time of the morning. Obi-Wan pretended not to notice as he followed the set security sweep path, scanning for transmitters that shouldn’t be there. There were always a couple, and whoever planted them could be inventive about it. As tempted as he was to let whatever other double-agents there were in the organization succeed, Obi-Wan was doing his best to not look like one of them. He suspected Deej or one of Deej’s agents was responsible for at least some of the transmitters -- a test for their security teams.

The conference room occupied a place of honour on the highest level; one entire wall was formed from transparisteel, offering a genuinely inspiring panorama of the ecumenopolis. Rain spattered against the windows, glittering in the light from the city below; the false night of Nal Hutta would eclipse the moon for another sixteen days.

Obi-Wan popped open the vent cover in the floor beside the table’s broad base and planted the gas charge where the airflow would push it through. He marked down finding another bug, palmed the one from his pocket, tagged and dropped into the containment case, and continued his assigned work as if nothing had changed.

Deej caught up with him in the corridor. “How’s the scan going, Davine?”

He shrugged. “Be easier without so many people running around. What’s going on?”

The Rodian gave him a sidelong glance. “That’s above your pay grade, Davine.”

The Force had flared from its usual level of general caution in this place to vivid alert. Obi-Wan was hard pressed to keep himself from reacting. “Fair enough. Is there something I can do for you?”

“Yes, you can hand over the scanner to Duyalla here to finish up, and come along without any fuss. We have a few questions for you,” Deej said, gesturing to the heavily-scarred Twi’lek woman who had come up behind Obi-Wan.

With another careless shrug, Obi-Wan slid the scanner’s strap over his head and passed it and the bug container to Duyalla. The Twi’lek woman was frowning in curiosity and made a quick gesture to ask Obi-Wan if something was wrong; he signed back that Deej was just being paranoid again.

The grip the Rodian placed on Obi-Wan’s shoulder looked casual but squeezed a little too tightly to be friendly. “Let’s go, smart-ass. And Duyalla? Since I’m paranoid, scan the room again.”

[We find your claims of innocence difficult to believe, Trader Krayn,) the Colicoid negotiator snarled. Even the translator droid’s programmed politeness couldn’t soften the venom. [You claim those were not your ships that attacked our convoy and claimed two of our transports -- filled with cargo, I might add! But the recordings retrieved clearly indicate they bear your mark in addition to the transponder codes. Either someone has stolen your ships, or you are lying. Neither of these encourages us to continue our agreement!]

Krayn looked about ready to shred the poor droid. Siri couldn’t blame him -- they were already
struggling to contain word about the fleet theft, and now this.

It really was difficult to control the grin that threatened to split her face. Calm. Breathe in. Let it go. Smug satisfaction isn’t very Jedi-like, and will probably get you killed. Celebrate later.

“I assure you, Negotiator, we had nothing to do with the attack on your ships. We’re investigating these impostors right now; if you would be willing to share your recordings of the attack--”

The Colicoid in the hologram bared its fangs. [[Ahh, so you're desperate, Krayn. Why else would you be so willing to trust our recordings? Perhaps mighty Krayn is not so mighty? We will send you our files. And you will send us compensation for our lost ships and cargo!]] Nor Fik terminated the connection before Krayn could say another word.

The T’surr’s throat was starting to flush red with fury. Doing her best to not look like she was getting out of Krayn’s reach, Siri moved over to the console where one of Deej’s people was analyzing the tracking information for the stolen ships. “How possible is it those were our ships?” she asked, keeping her voice low. Krayn smashed his fist on the comm button and started roaring commands, and she winced.

The Duros man sighed. “Beyond doubt. They left the tracking beacons on while they attacked the Colicoid ships and disabled them after.” He pulled up a semi-holo of the Y'Toub system and ran it: white lines indicating the movements of the stolen ships tracked across the orbital plane and converged like a swarm of raptors on a point where the Colicoid transports must have entered the system. He looked up at her unhappily. “They wanted us to know what they were doing with our ships.”

“Zora!”

Schooling her expression into one of barely-contained fury, Siri turned. “Yeah, boss?”

“Get everyone in the main conference room,” Krayn snarled as he stomped out of the command center. “Ten minutes!”

Davine’s logs for the conference room check indicated three audio bugs, a heat sensor, and a micro-holorecorder removed from various points. Duyalla sighed. At least Deej hadn’t asked her to re-scan Davine's entire route. She paced the perimeter around the polished thornwood holotable while the scanner did its job.

Clear.

Clear.

Clear.

Not clear.

Davine’s log said he’d pulled an audio snooper out of the vent. Duyalla knelt and pulled the grate off. Stuck to the inner wall by a small electromagnet was a palm-sized device. She squinted at it for a moment and then pulled her comm, sending a text to Deej.
“He’s planted something in the vent. Looks like a gas bomb, get disposal up here.”

The illusion of going for a friendly chat ended when the lift doors opened and Deej shoved Obi-Wan out into the hands of a quartet of waiting security guards. Two of them, a Weequay and a human Obi-Wan didn’t recognise, got grips on his upper arms.

“Have fun with him, boys. Let me know if he squawks.”

Obi-Wan nodded to the human guard he did recognise. “Hey Jovryn.”

“Can it, Gav,” the other man grunted. They hauled him down to the tower’s security office and sealed the door. The search was rough but professional; his jacket and everything it contained, blasters, belt, and the blades he carried in his boots and up his sleeves ended up in a locker behind the security desk.

Obi-Wan didn’t resist the search, buying time while he reached out with the Force to both Siri and Phel. *Plan A’s failed, switch to backup!*

The fourth guard, a Gotal with ugly, damaged horns, pulled a set of cuffs from his belt and reached for Obi-Wan’s hands; then he twitched and shivered. “What the kriff…?”

Suddenly visible, Ulic walked entirely through the man into the middle of the group; the Gotal collapsed, shivering and choking. The Sith spirit gave a wicked grin as the other three guards froze in shock. “Well. Hello, there.”

Siri didn’t need Obi-Wan’s warning; one of Deej’s demolitions specialists had just passed her in the corridor with the deactivated gas charge in a box.

Tension digging spikes of ice into her back, she waited outside the door to Krayn’s office with his bodyguard Rashtah; the Wookiee looked torn between doing his job and storming off to hunt down some Red Sun goons. The office was soundproofed, but through the Force she could feel Krayn ventsing his rage at some poor person on the other end of a comm call who was only trying to do their job.

Her mind was racing, running through her options, considering some and discarding others. If she couldn’t arrest the entire upper echelon of the organisation, Siri had to at least get Krayn. The Master of Shadows hadn’t told her how to go about doing that -- it was as much a part of her test as the rest of it. She already had the raider’s trust; if it hadn’t been for the directive to also dismantle the organisation, Siri could have brought Krayn in a hundred times already.

It was so unfair to expect one Jedi to do all that by themself!

The remote control in her pocket was useless now. Siri rolled her shoulders, feeling the comforting press of Obi-Wan’s insurance against the small of her back. She would ask him later where he’d acquired it; her new goal was making sure Krayn survived the next fifteen minutes.
Krayn stormed out, ignoring the two of them as he headed toward the conference room; Siri and Rashtah hurried to catch up.

Twenty-five sets of eyes turned toward them as they entered the room; the concerned babble of voices faded to silence. Krayn glowered at the group of them from the doorway for a moment before moving forward. Siri and Rashtah took their positions standing just behind Krayn’s chair, facing the window wall, but the raider opted to stalk around the table, his four red eyes flicking from face to face, seeking weakness.

“Last night, a bunch of assholes from some group calling themselves Red Sun broke into our hangar using one of our rookies’ passcodes and ID. As far as we can tell, Red Sun doesn’t karking exist beyond an office in the Corellian sector, but somehow they managed to scrape together a hundred trained bastards in identical armour.”

A ripple of shocked disbelief ran through the room. Krayn continued, “The rookie has disappeared; we’re assuming he was working for them. Then these assholes took our entire raiding fleet out for a joyride and shot up the latest Colicoid convoy. They made off with two of the transports and all the glitterstim that was onboard; we sent people out to investigate the site, but nothing was left behind.”

The raider snarled, baring his fangs. “We are leaking like a karking drain!” Krayn’s big hand snapped out and swatted the Crew Supervisor, Heering, upside the back of his head. “You didn’t catch that Weequay’s double loyalties, karking wermo! And the only people who knew when the Colicoid were due to arrive are in this room right now.”

It took every ounce of control Siri had to not react when Krayn’s eyes locked momentarily on her face; it helped that she was also making a show of eyeing people around the table. Some looked indignant or outraged, a couple were eyeing their neighbours and cracking their knuckles. Others had gone pale, and she wondered who else had been leaking information.

The air was so thick with tension that Siri didn’t catch the more personal warning until it was a moment too late: a pair of hands locked on her wrists, twisting her arms up behind her back. Siri hissed in pain as Deej said, “We know your boyfriend was one of our security holes, Zora. Who were your friends at the club the other night?”

“Boss?” Siri yelped as Rashtah claimed her blaster; the Wookiee gave her a betrayed look that actually hurt.

Krayn shook his head. “The only way you couldn’t know about Davine is if you were incredibly stupid, Zora. And you’re not stupid.”

She winced at the pinch of binders around her wrists. Krayn moved in close and shoved his face into hers. “You have one chance, Zora, and only one, because I actually like you,” he growled softly. “Tell me the truth, and I’ll make your death quick.”

Blinding white light flooded the room and the Force screeched in warning. Siri threw herself forward, headbutting Krayn and knocking them both to the floor behind the table as the transparisteel exploded inwards in a spray of razor-edged shards and laser cannon fire.

There were too many people running around the upper levels of the tower. Definitely no opportunity for Rikkat to slip from the droid tunnels unnoticed and sneak back into Zora’s quarters. The Squib
wasted time fretting over being seen before deciding that everyone looked too busy to really care if they saw her. Pinching the box under her elbow, she slipped into the corridor and hurried down to Zora’s room.

The room was as neat as it had been before -- a few things shifted around in the past two days, but that was normal. Rikkat dove under the bunk and dragged Davine’s case out.

Uh oh. Had she scrambled the lock that much when she’d left? The fingerprint lock still wasn’t engaged, at least. She popped the lid and squeaked.

There was a scrap of paper sitting on top of the things in the case; written neatly in thick ink was the message, You could have just asked how to open it.

The tower shuddered violently and an alarm sounded; she clapped her hands over her ears in pain. Red emergency lights flicked on, giving the gloom a foreboding cast, but it was the sound of the door locks engaging that sent a chill down her spine.

Taking advantage of the moment of shock, Obi-Wan clapped his hands around the back of the head of the human guard on his right and yanked the guard around between himself, Jovryn, and the Weequay. The Weequay was already drawing his blaster on Ulic, as if it would do anything other than damage the wall, but Jovryn’s attention was returning to Obi-Wan. The other guard was starting to regain his senses; Obi-Wan brought his elbow down into the corner of the man’s jaw. The move was sloppy and missed its target, but the guard still went limp. Obi-Wan reached to the Force for a boost and tossed the unconscious guard into Jovryn’s arms.

The Weequay guard shrieked as Ulic grabbed his weapon hand and squeezed; the Sith’s grin turned into a predatory snarl. He pressed his intangible hand flat against the guard’s chest and through. The Weequay convulsed, gasping, just as the entire building shook.

Jovryn let the other guard hit the floor; his blaster was out, flicking between Ulic and Obi-Wan. “What the hells is that thing?!?” He glared at Obi-Wan. “Who are you working for?!”

Obi-Wan smiled and tilted his head. It was so easy to just push. “They’re working for me. Take a nap.”

To his credit, Jovryn fought it for a second before collapsing unconscious. Ulic sighed, watching as Obi-Wan retrieved his gear. “You should kill him. He knows you’re involved.”

Glancing up, Obi-Wan met the Sith’s eyes. “You think that’s a risk?”

Ulic rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Look at it this way: they have your face on file. It would take a while, but a connection can be drawn between you and Gav Davine. Even scrambling their database won’t help, since there’s probably security camera footage of you.”

Chuckling, Obi-Wan pulled his jacket back on. “I’d be more worried about him knowing you exist. There’s a lot of people in this building who now know I’m involved, and it would take too much time to track them all down.”

Ulic shrugged. “Have it your way. We’re about to have company,” he said, and vanished.
The edges of the security door spewed sparks across the thin carpet, singeing holes in the synthetic material, and a booted foot kicked the entire panel in. A cluster of people in dark grey body armour marked with the red circle stalked in with rifles at the ready; the second one through wore a dashing red half-cloak over one shoulder.

Obi-Wan folded his arms. “If you’d waited thirty seconds, I could have unlocked it.”

“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?” one of them joked. They slid the smooth faceplate of their mask up, revealing Phel’s grinning face. “Besides, I hadn’t had a chance to use the det-cord before. I like it.” Xe unslung the bag xe carried over xir shoulder and tossed it to him. “Now you gotta take that jacket off again.”

“Oh, the hardship.” Obi-Wan opened the bag and pulled out a close-fitting dark jumpsuit similar to what the others wore under their disguises. “Any issues?”

The cloaked person turned from where they were encouraging the others to get the fallen door panel out of the way, and raised their own mask. “Your friend, the one you will not let me meet, was in the top floor when we blew it apart,” Hondo said, looking uncharacteristically concerned. “You did say to trust her to take care of herself—”

“And I can tell you that she’s fine,” Obi-Wan said, sealing the jumpsuit’s collar and reaching up to carefully unstick the false prosthetic from over his left eye; it wouldn't fit under the uniform helmet. He reached out carefully, not wanting to distract Siri in case she was busy. “She could possibly use a little help, though. Give me a hand with this armour so we can go.”

---

Groaning, Siri lifted her head off the floor. The room reeked of ozone, smouldering fabric, burned hair, and Nar Shaddaa’s dirty rain. The latter was blowing in through the shattered transparisteel wall. Small flames guttered where laser-fire had ignited the soundproofing material on the walls and floor, the lights that still worked had turned emergency-red, and a distant alarm was hooting somewhere beyond the penthouse conference room.

There were a lot of bodies, some still hanging in their chairs while others had toppled over onto the floor. Part of Rashtah’s torso was simply gone, and she looked away quickly. The heavy holoprojector base of the table had shielded Siri and -- she checked -- Krayn from the barrage.

Focus, dammit. With a thought, she snapped the thin link connecting the cuffs behind her back. She couldn’t have been out for more than a few seconds, but her head hurt from the mis-aimed headbutt and her shoulders were complaining from being wrenched back. Krayn had fallen beside her and was beginning to stir. With a sigh, Siri pushed up onto her elbows.

Someone grabbed her hair, wrenching her head back and making her yelp. She reached back, grabbing the hand, feeling Rodian-rough skin under her fingers. Deej.

The Rodian shoved the muzzle of his blaster against the back of her neck, hissing, “Friends of yours, Zora?”

Twisting hard, ignoring the pain in her scalp, Siri got her other hand on his blaster, shoving it to the side as she brought her armoured shin up hard between Deej’s legs. The blaster discharge so close made her left ear ring and singed the ends of her hair as Deej staggered over her and dropped to one knee. She yanked on his arm, driving her elbow into the Rodian’s face. He let out a strangled yell
and let go of her hair to clutch at his eye, and another laser bolt buried itself in the carpet near Krayn’s knee.

Siri wrenched the weapon from Deej’s faltering grip and shot him in the throat.

Shoving the dying Rodian off her, Siri staggered to her feet and switched Deej’s blaster over to the stun setting. She could still do this--

Siri threw herself to the side, a blaster shot nicking her sleeve. Krayn was pulling himself up, blood from a split lip running down his chin. “I trusted you. Two years I trusted you Zora. Really?” He fired again, not really aiming but still close enough she had to skip back over a smoking corpse. “You play a long game, lady. What's your goal? Taking over?”

His shots were herding her toward the blown-out window and out of range for a stun-shot to have much effect against his tough hide. Siri reached under her coat and pulled out the shoto Obi-Wan had given her. A clean, pearl-white blade extended two-thirds of a meter from the dull, utilitarian hilt, and she batted aside Krayn's next shot. “By order of Republic Judicial Forces, I have been assigned to arrest you and bring you in to face trial.”

His blaster shots were a lot more accurate now, and he snarled, “A karking Jedi?!?” With his free hand, Krayn scooped up a broken chair and hurled it at her, making her dodge. “You're not leaving this building alive,” he roared, throwing another piece of furniture.

Letting the massive alien get in close would be fatal; Siri skipped sideways and fired a stun shot that fizzled out on the next chair he threw. The chair’s flailing leg caught her hand and knocked the blaster from her fingers. She winced and danced back as Krayn grabbed at her; his secondary pair of arms, as spindly and useless as they looked, had a longer reach.

The conference room doors blew in, revealing a group of grey-armoured humanoids with red circles in the middle of their smooth helmet faceplates; they immediately settled into firing positions, and Krayn lunged for Siri, roaring with fury. One of his big hands grasped at her face, then slipped away as he staggered. The movement wrenched at the hilt of the shoto in her hands, and Siri pulled the blade from the T’surr raider’s chest. Breathing hard, she backed away; a moment later a concentrated hail of blaster shots caught Krayn in the back. He pitched forward onto the debris-strewn floor and lay still.

“Siri. Siri?”

She blinked and looked up. Obi-Wan was there, wearing that identical uniform but with the faceplate up. At some point she had fallen to her knees -- when had that happened? Her friend helped her up, taking the shoto lightsaber gently from her numb fingers.

“Are you alright?”

“I….” Her forehead hurt, a trickle of blood tickled her head from where Deej had torn out some of her hair, her left hand felt swollen and half-useless. “I’ll be okay.”

“Come on. Let’s let our medic check you over.”

Even the medic kept their helmet closed -- Obi-Wan had insisted that she not know who the allies he had brought in were, and Siri could appreciate his wariness.

“The Council’s going to be furious,” she mumbled after the medic had cleaned her scalp wound and wrapped her hand with instructions to get it looked at properly as soon as possible.
Obi-Wan had sat beside her the whole time, holding her other hand. “What makes you say that?”

“I failed.” There were tears running down her face, and suddenly Siri wanted nothing more than to rip off the markings she’d applied to her cheeks as part of her disguise, to see her own face in the mirror again.

His laugh was soft. “I don’t think it would have been possible to follow their instructions to the letter, Siri. And even if you had brought Krayn in? He has support from members of the Senate. If it had gone to trial, it would have been a disaster of interference, and he might not have even been sentenced at all.”

She glanced around, really seeing their surroundings for the first time. Obi-Wan’s friends had set up a temporary command center in Krayn's office, and the one with the cape was directing a sweep of the locked-down building from the top down. It sounded like there was a shootout on the hangar level, halfway down the tower. “Are they killing everyone?”

“No, just the ones who are foolish enough to stay and fight. We want it to look like a hostile takeover. Well,” he corrected with a low chuckle. “More like dismantlement.”

Siri rubbed her face with her hands, wincing at the twinge in her left palm. The medic had said something about cracked carpals. “Krayn could have provided information to implicate his allies.”

“He wouldn’t have. And we don’t need him, anyway. Not with everything I pulled off his database.” Obi-Wan’s smile was grim. “I’ve been busy these last couple months.”

Sighing, she leaned back in the chair. “I can’t wait to see their faces when you present all that to Judicial.”

Her friend looked uncomfortable. “I’m not…. I’m not going back with you.”

“What!”

Obi-Wan pulled back when she reached for him. “I’m just a mercenary you hired, Siri. I’ll make a report you can give them, but they can’t know that it’s me.”

“But--!”

He clasped her hand gently, his blue eyes apologetic and shadowed. “I have very good reasons. If you want to understand, you should talk to Qui-Gon. But I can’t go back.” Obi-Wan smiled wryly. “I’m not a Jedi anymore.”

She’d tried, she really had. Obi-Wan shook his head. Even once they’d loaded all Krayn's slaves into transports and found a few who were pilots and still capable of doing the job of following Siri’s command, she had been arguing with him over going back.

It wasn't until he pointed out how he had obligations and attachments to others that she had let the subject drop.

They’d found one of Deej’s snoopers in Siri’s quarters, terrified and stress-shedding downy lilac fur everywhere; Rikkat had surrendered immediately on condition that Obi-Wan show her how to open
the puzzle box. She was dismayed at learning it required using the Force.

Then Hondo had offered the Squib a job working for him instead, and completely made her day. It was really rather cute.

The payout from raiding Krayn's finances was enough to put happy numbers in the bank accounts of everyone he and Hondo had managed to bring onboard. Obi-Wan was a little afraid to ask where he’d found so many people who were able to act like a trained paramilitary force -- the holo footage from the hangar raid and the tower clearance was impressive. All Hondo would say was that he knew people who knew people who would keep their mouths shut for the right price.

What remained in Krayn's tower looked like a massacre, and they left it that way.

“But what about the people who use it next?” Zohli asked. She had made her meal disappear along with fully half the appetizer they’d ordered, and was eyeing Obi-Wan’s fried tubers; Feid had warned him the girl was on the edge of another growth spurt, and possibly puberty as well.

He shifted his plate in her direction and shrugged. “It's unfortunate, but the way we set it up was to look like Krayn had made an enemy and the response was simply to ruin him. Someone will investigate it eventually, and with luck there will be nothing tying it to us or Siri.”

“One thing I’m not clear on,” Pulkka grumbled. “What happened to the Colicoid transports?”

“Hondo was less than happy about being ordered to send the whole lot into Y’Toub, but the Colicoid ships would be recognisable, and unlike ryll, glitterstim has no medical use we could have donated it to.”

Feid winced. “That's a lot of credits of glitterstim.”

“That's why we used Krayn's accounts to pay everyone--”

There was a crash as a table went over halfway between them and the cantina’s entrance, followed by a shriek of terror and another crash as a server dropped her tray of drinks. A Trandoshan customer had grabbed the girl and was using her as a shield in a standoff with a mercenary in Mandalorian armour.

Obi-Wan eyed the growing confrontation, finished the last bit of his drink, and flipped the bottle around so he gripped it by the neck. Feid’s eyes narrowed. “It’s not any of our business, kid.”

He winked at her. “Just act natural.”

“Natural.” Phel gave him a look. “This is us.”

Gauging the distance, Obi-Wan grinned. “It’ll be fine.”

Starting fights was not his signature. Starting fights wasn't efficient.

But technically the Trandoshan had started it when he’d spotted Jango entering the cantina and -- rather than doing the sensible thing of running out the back -- grabbed one of the serving girls and started waving a blaster around.
Jango hadn’t even known he was there. He cursed his informant -- the rat had probably been trying to set them up -- as he tried to de-escalate what had become a hostage situation.

It wasn’t clear precisely what happened next: the big alien made a strangled noise and keeled over unconscious, dropping his blaster and nearly landing on the poor human girl he’d grabbed. She shrieked and scrambled away into the crowd as Jango finally had enough visibility to double-tranq his target.

As he made his way over, binders ready, the hunter’s foot struck something with a clear clink which spun away under the tables. A glass? No, a bottle. Still glass, and the back of Trossuk’s head was showing a growing discolouration from being struck.

Important things first. Jango secured the target’s wrists and ankles before taking a glance around. Nothing but the usual rough-looking Nar Shaddaa crowd quickly avoiding his gaze-- Wait. Back wall booth, mixed group of aliens and humans making too much effort to pretend nothing had happened, mostly young-ish but the Whiphid female looked to be nearing venerable age. All of them, including what looked like a child, were wearing some form of armour under jackets and vests like it was just habit.

Jango grunted with disquiet and hauled his mark out of the cantina.

He didn't have to wait long after dropping Trossuk off with the proper authorities. The group paused outside the cantina and one of the humans, the male, said, “Go on. I’ll catch up. You too, sweetheart,” he added when the little one -- was that a Zygerrian!? -- seemed ready to object. “There's something I need to take care of.”

After about a minute following the man, Jango was certain he was being led. He let it continue another few minutes before catching up at the street corner.

“That was impressive aim.”

“I’m sorry?” The red-haired man gave him a blank look. Jango snorted.

“It takes a particular amount of force at just the right point to knock a Trandoshan out, and glass isn't normally known for holding together that well. How’d you do it?”

The man gave up playing dumb.

Good.

He shrugged and gave Jango a lopsided smile. “It's all in the wrist.”

“Uh huh. From that range?” In addition to the blasters on the man’s hips, there were several weapons concealed on his person and inside the vambraces. Oh, he knew that armour. It was like looking at a younger version of himself, and under his helmet, Jango allowed himself a smirk at that thought. Now that was irony.

“Practice.”

The blasters kept drawing his eye. He upped the visibility of his HUD a bit and nearly swore aloud; those were Montross’ fancy paired DE-10s, or he’d eat his buy’ce. The last he’d known, the weapons had been in the hands of a particular Jedi Master. Who had apparently seen fit to give them to someone else, because there’s no way they would have been stolen. “What's your name, kid?”

Blue eyes narrowed as they studied him. “Why does it matter?”

Stepping closer, Jango gave the man another careful look. He had training, it was in his stance, but damned if Jango had any idea what sort. “Maybe I like what I see.” At the man’s widening smirk, he
rolled his eyes. “Not like that.”

“No? That's a shame.”

The man couldn't even see his face and yet he was flirting. Uncertain whether to be flattered or appalled, Jango growled, “You have extremely questionable taste.”

The younger man visibly restrained a laugh. He had zero control over his expression, and Jango was not impressed. “I’m Bastra. And you?”

“Fett.”

The other man squinted at him. “We have a friend in common. Hondo’s spoken highly of you.”

Just his luck: someone else who knew that damnable, obnoxious Weequay pirate. “And who's Bastra?” The HoloNet was returning about two million results on the surname alone; popular on Corellia, perfect for a mercenary alias, although the man had more of a Core accent and wasn't even trying to hide it. Jango would have bet anything that air of refinement made him popular with wealthier clients.

“Some nobody with a blaster, just trying to get by.” He shrugged. “I'm not sure what you want with me, Fett. I've no interest in claiming credit.”

What did he want with Bastra, other than a chance to get closer and confirm his suspicions? “Just wanted to thank you for the backup. That could have got dicey.”

A darker red eyebrow arched, pulling at the scar across the man's left eye. “N’entye, Fett.” He’d disappeared among the late evening Corellian sector crowd before Jango got over the shock of having Mando’a spoken to him half a galaxy away from home by some Coruscanti-raised mercenary prick.

Chapter End Notes

Siri's canon story bothers me a lot -- for four years Siri works her way through this group, only for all her hard work to get co-opted by Obi-Wan and Anakin. Never mind that four years is way too long to be in that kind of hell on your own, the whole point of it not being connected with the Jedi gets blown clean out of the water. In the end, Siri completely fails her task (and it's Sidious' fault too, surprise!) and the Council just...ignores her failure entirely and rolls on with giving Anakin the side-eye again.

Sidious funding and subtly guiding Krayn's operation is canon. I did not make that up.

People have been asking: I invented Red Sun out of thin air and candy floss for this story, and I'm sorry for being cagey about it but I didn't want to give away everything too early! If you want to invent a new GFFA cartel with the same name, go right ahead.

Yes, that was Obi-Wan in the previous chapter threatening King Aga with Phel and Feid.

I didn't expect Ulic to show up in that scene until he did.

Huttese used:
Moochani kung! ... Bargon wan chee kospah! -- Pirate scum! There will be no deal!
Fallout

Chapter Summary

In which many plans are being made.

Chapter Notes

Sometimes there are events that are important, but they don't fit easily into the larger chapters. This is an interlude chapter and there's a bit of flashing-back. Mind the datestamps!

Much thanks for beta work to norcumi, MechanicalShadow, DragonHoardBooks and Iunara!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 978.07.16
The Wissenswift

Jinn had warned him that the task was dangerous. He’d laughed; not because he thought the warning an exaggeration but because he knew so much better than the human how dangerous it might be. The wealthy never responded well to others investigating the sources of their prosperity, after all, and were fully capable of paying to shut down an investigation with little thought beyond the state of their possessions.

Kardin Lo eyed the multiple screens filled with fine-print text: numbers upon numbers, source codes running into the multiple hundreds. The humans -- Jinn, Amidala, and the elusive Kenobi -- had been wise to hire him. Despite Jinn and Kenobi’s surprising skills in their investigations, their limited brains would have been hard-pressed to process so much information at once.

Jinn had eventually stepped back from involvement, claiming personal risk. Esquire Lo could appreciate the Jedi Master’s caution, and had continued his work with Kenobi.

Oh, he knew who Kenobi was. As any good investigator should, Esquire Lo had looked into the human’s background: his previous work as a Jedi and now posing as a mercenary harassing the Trade Federation had seemed curious. The strikes against the Neimoidians had created fascinating financial ripples which Lo watched with interest; with every attack, the human had retrieved databank information from the battlefield and sent it forward to Lo.

And yet, despite the ripples, the search had stagnated.

Esquire Lo had become increasingly frustrated with their inability to see beyond the closed loop of known accounts, until Kenobi had suggested a line of enquiry they had not previously attempted. In hindsight, Kardin Lo wondered how such an obvious connection had not already been investigated.
The origination codes for the accounts paying so many actors had simply seemed insignificant.

Even the most insignificant pieces of data should not be dismissed. It was a cornerstone tenet of the Muun school of philosophical thought, and he was angry with himself for neglecting it.

He had retrieved the data, but his enquiry had been noted: the program he had created to monitor extraneous traffic had alerted him to a system watcher that had been triggered by his investigations.

Panic was not in Kardin Lo’s nature, but he knew better than to linger, particularly after finding the system watcher had recorded his origination details.

Kardin Lo maintained backup files of everything; saving that day’s work to a new datadisc had taken less time than he required to pack his essentials.

The Queen had offered him a room and office within Theed Palace. Esquire Lo had graciously accepted the offer, as the accommodations were satisfactory for his standards, but he had little faith in the palace security. They were only human, after all.

Now he sat in a quiet, empty pocket of space aboard his personal ship, pondering his next move.

His computer system in Theed Palace had been searched thoroughly -- he had received a notification the moment he’d returned to realspace after that first hyperdrive hop from Naboo. He had bided his time, carefully erasing his data footprint and then painstakingly crafting a series of alternative IDs; it had required traveling to individual worlds and a combination of slicing and bribery to slip the crafted IDs into various systems on a post-date.

Taking a necessary risk, Lo had then gone to Scipio to access his personal bank account, withdrawing nearly everything in the form of unmarked credit chips which he had taken to a number of other banks and deposited into accounts tied to his new identifications. He suspected the individual following him to be a race other than Muun, given the slowness of their response. If they traced him to Scipio, they would not find the Banking Clans eager to share information.

While remaining aboard ship would make him more difficult to track, Lo knew it would affect his mental and physical health poorly -- a lack of stable location would induce unhealthy levels of stress. Already the past year had left him twitchy with an anxiety he could not entirely attest to being tracked. He arranged for an apartment suiting his needs in Jygat on Mygeeto, prepared to become lost among his own people. His best hope for safety now would be to wait for his own trail to cool before reaching Kenobi; he would transfer a package of all the datadiscs he had filled in the course of his work and disappear back into the larger Muun population where lesser races were unwelcome. Leaving the job unfinished rankled, but Kardin Lo was no fighter, and unashamed to admit so.

Lo had left his personal communicator behind, its memory scrambled to uselessness, but it was not his only one. Only a fool relied on a single source of contact.

Reformation Year 979.01.18
The Sriluurian Jewel

Hondo was not preening. He was not. Merely...attempting to arrange a shoulder-draped half-cape so
that it looked impressive without getting in the way of his movements. Standing in front of the mirror in his quarters in his new ship, he turned sharply, letting the grey fabric swish to show off the gold lining.

It was a very dashing look.

When Bastra had approached him about ruining Krayn’s business, Hondo had accused him of being on the spice. The raider was powerful, and had serious connections; the moment they were identified, their life expectancies could be measured in days. No, his friend had insisted, there was a way to do it without ever revealing anyone's face but his.

The fact that the human had been willing to accept the bulk of the risk himself had been more reassuring than Hondo Ohnaka would ever admit. Bastra had gone out of his way to make sure nobody could be identified, from the blank-faced armour to renting an office so they could meet in private. It had been a most convenient place to deliver the armoured disguises for Bastra and his crew.

While some of the mercenary groups Hondo had hired on had opted to keep the armour Bastra provided, most of Hondo's people found it too confining for their liking; Hondo hadn't been fond of it, either. With the identifying paint stripped away, it had all sold well. The ships they had seized were part of the payment; Hondo had succeeded in keeping twelve out of the sixty highly modified raiding craft. They would all need a fresh coat of paint and new transponder codes, but that was a minimal price to pay for a small fleet; he was going to have to hire on more people! But he could afford it, thanks to Bastra.

The trick lay in keeping them flush with enough credits to stay. Minor raiding, hijack a luxury liner once in a while, perhaps. He would need a base more central to major trade routes than Takodana.

Abandoning the mirror, Hondo leaned over his astrogation charts. The Corellian Run was too well-policed. Hutt space had too much competition. The entire southern rim was lacking in fancy destinations for fancy people with fancy things. Stations were operated by others and had so many fees! It would need to be defensible, perhaps an abandoned asteroid colony or a low-population planet in the Mid-Rim?

He spent a while fussing over search parameters, rejecting most results outright for various reasons -- too hot, too cold, dangerous wildlife, Republic-maintained colonies, Jedi temples….

One result caught his eye and Hondo hummed thoughtfully, running his hand over his jaw spines. An Outer-Rim mining colony along the route to Corporate space, lost in a sabacc game to a Hutt. The Hutt didn't seem to care what it produced as long as he got his cut of the profit -- which was low to start with. Nobody would be fighting over it.

Hondo grinned and wondered if Bastra might be interested in a little side trip to Florrum.

Reformation Year 979.01.19
The Slave I

He should have let the matter drop. Some cocky mercenary in a Nar Shaddaa cantina probably
wasn’t worth the effort: the kid would either make it or end up in a shallow grave in the next five years.

But he’d had Montross’ blasters.

And Jango’s instincts about people had never led him wrong before.

The first thing he did was drop the running search for someone named Bastra -- it was too wide a field. No, the kid had Montross’ blasters, which meant he knew Qui-Gon Jinn -- probably very well. Jango pulled up the dossier he’d built on the Jedi Master after the incident on Outland Station two years earlier.

Jinn’s known associates list was extensive, but the result he needed floated to the surface immediately: Kenobi, Obi-Wan. Former apprentice. The profile holo looked dramatically younger without the beard and scar -- but he’d been a teenager when it was taken. Jango started a HoloNet enquiry on Kenobi and let it run while he plugged the man’s biometrics into the Bastra search. The additional information made quick work of that. Bastra’s ident holo had a cybernetic prosthesis in place of his left eye, the scar fresh and barely healed, and a tiredness to his expression that had Jango frowning. That was the look of someone whose life had recently imploded, a weariness that begged for nothing more than to simply stop. He knew that feeling intimately; it had been a consistent companion for years, ever since Galidraan.

The man he’d spoken to on the street hadn’t had any hint of that soul-crushing weariness. He’d been companionable with his crew, confident and genuinely flirtatious -- hells, it had been a while since anyone had come on to him like that. It was mostly the reputation that kept them away. He’d called that child sweetheart, like she was his own daughter, despite her being obviously Zygerrian -- that looked like a hell of a story there, too.

The Kenobi search was turning up a lot of HoloNet articles from Mandalore -- Sundari, specifically -- and he scowled at the holo clips of the other man clearly escorting their Kalevala-imported “Duchess” around. A number of crude tabloid articles speculated on their relationship, one in particular screamed drama about Kenobi meeting with another woman for a meal in Little Keldabe, and the discussion of his sudden disappearance was even more heated.

The words sudden absence caught his eye, and he refined the search. A single article traced Kenobi to Serenno, where he was assisting his ‘grand-master’ with some project or other. Jango dropped the datapad on the console with a clatter and leaned back in the pilot's chair until it creaked in protest.

Was that a coincidence? Or something more deliberate?

Of course he had noted Jinn’s connection to Dooku immediately. How much did the Order know about Dooku's departure, his activities after? Had they sent the boy to spy on him, or to locate Vosa? Had Kenobi gotten too close to the truth and decided to vanish into the galactic underworld?

No, the Order would have taken Kenobi back, protected him. Why did he leave the Order? The public files were dry and contained nothing more informative than a dismissal date. That was the kicker: dismissed rather than departed. Particularly so soon after an impressive display of skill on Naboo, by all accounts. What the kriff had happened there?

Slicing the jetiise’s databanks would be too much effort just to satisfy his curiosity when there was a much easier source available.

Kenobi -- or ‘Scogar Bastra,’ as his new Corellian ID named him -- was a puzzle, and a potential problem. Scowling, Jango dropped new information in and fired up another HoloNet trawl.
Her Lord was going to kill her.

No. Be honest. It wasn't Sidious’ way to kill his servants for their failures; either they died in service or murdered each other in competition. Torture, however, was not beyond him.

Caliiga considered herself fortunate to be well away from her Lord’s grasp for the time being. Perhaps she could wrest some success from her failure and lighten her eventual punishment.

None of Sidious’ acolytes cared much for his newest apprentice, Tyranus. The Sith Lord treated the Fallen Jedi as something akin to a pet, and they all quietly wondered if Tyranus was even aware of it. Maul’s failure to eliminate a pest on Naboo had put the Zabrak out of commission, however. Caliiga liked Maul: he was brutal, efficient, polite and well-spoken without the flowery prevarications Tyranus favoured.

Tyranus, at least, had been quick to adapt when she had arrived on Serenno to track down his missing houseguest. Her Lord was her Master, her teacher and saviour, but he still misgendered her deliberately. She wasn't certain if it was to throw others off guard or to help her nurture her anger and hatred at being reminded of a past that wasn't hers. Tyranus had shown a bare instant of surprise before sliding smoothly into “my Lady”s, a reminder that he had rightfully earned his reputation as a diplomat.

She’d meditated in the room Kenobi had used, seeking the flavour of his imprint in the Force. All she had felt was muted presence. He’d been there for months, had departed mere days previous. There should have been something. Either Tyranus had done something to scrub the younger man’s essence from his halls -- doubtful, although if Caliiga found evidence the Count had helped Kenobi leave, her Master would be most displeased -- or Kenobi had possessed the most intensive shielding she had ever encountered beyond her Lord Sidious.

The thought gave her pause. He was a failed Padawan, though, not even knighted despite the thrashing he’d dealt Maul. Ignoring the pain of his injuries, her friend had delighted in recounting how he’d felt the Jedi slip into the Dark side; she envied him that precious moment of satisfaction. Kenobi might have picked up a few techniques from the books in Tyranus’ collection, but Tyranus had openly confessed to disappointment that the younger man had only seemed to temper himself.

Caliiga couldn't help feeling that he was hiding something. But this was Tyranus: she was a potential adversary and whatever secrets he concealed might have nothing to do with Kenobi.

“Tell me, Sister, what does our Lord intend to do with the boy?”

She'd nearly laughed: for humans, even a teenager was better described as a young adult than a child, let alone a man in his twenties. But Tyranus was old, older even than Sidious, and his perspective skewed by time. “He has not told me. I suspect he wishes to turn Kenobi properly.”

The old man had shaken his head, frowning. “Kenobi has been resistant to the pull of the Dark side. I told him as much.”
“Then perhaps our Lord sees him as a test subject. He has his sights on a number of notable young Jedi; learning how best to make them fail and Fall would increase the odds of success.”

“Weakening the Order before the plan comes to fruition? I see.” Tyranus had not seemed particularly pleased by that revelation though, and again Caliiga had the sense he was not telling her everything.

Unearthing Tyranus’ cesspit was not her job; the agents in place among his staff, including his aide, had that task well in hand. Caliiga had left for the waystation in Junction to search their arrival and departure records.

She had already reviewed Kenobi’s comm call to the Mandalorian Duchess. It was clear he knew or at least suspected Tyranus served a new Master, but he had been careful not to give the blonde woman any information that might make her a target. More of a target; Caliiga thought of her Lord’s negotiations with Vizsla and chuckled. Watching Sidious set up his game pieces on a board nobody else knew existed was entertaining.

Kenobi had logged his next destination as Coruscant, lingered only a few hours -- shopping, perhaps? Her Master would be delightfully outraged at having a target so close at hand -- then departed for Corellia. He’d never landed there, though, and without a redirection notice, he’d effectively vanished. Finding which way he’d gone had required a miserably deep meditation on the bare sense she had received from his room on Serenno.

That was when the nightmares started: horrific visions that drove her from her meditation and vanished from memory once she’d come to, drenched in cold sweat and shaking. She’d tried three times on separate days, but her sleep in between was so fraught that she eventually gave up. If it hadn’t felt so much like striking a shield, Caliiga would have thought she was being attacked.

Was it Kenobi, or something else? Regardless, his trail was lost.

Her Master hadn’t wanted to warn her target by placing a bounty for his capture, but he’d said nothing of asking a bounty hunter’s help.

“Wait, let me make sure I heard that right. You? Need my help? To find a target?” The other woman had cackled while Caliiga ground her teeth.

“Yes, Aurra, I need help. He faked out the Coruscant departures system--”

The bounty hunter had finished her drink and wiped the last of Caliiga’s. “As any wise person should.”

“I can’t pin him down my usual way. It’s like being haunted or something.”

Aurra’s eyes had sharpened over the glass; she’d set it down with a rattle. “Force-sensitive target?”

“Trained Jedi.”

Aurra’s smile was nasty. “You have my interest, sweetheart. It’ll still cost you, but I’ll cut you a discount.”

They’d dug up a substantial amount of Kenobi’s history, looking for a pattern in his behaviour. Finding out he’d left the Order once previously was an eye-opener, but also a clue that the man had the most illogical priorities ever. He just couldn’t seem to stop jumping into other people’s problems to fix them. Where does a Jedi with an over-inflated saviour complex go?
The Trade Federation and its allies were complaining to Sidious of increased mercenary strikes against their ships and facilities around Lok. Both Caliiga and Aurra thought it was just the Revenants up to their usual antics -- the group's Feeorin boss had a hate on for the Neimoidians -- but the misfortunes of the Karthakk system did match Kenobi’s pattern. They had been in the middle of planning an infiltration into the mercenary group when one of Sidious’ other acolytes, a Twi’lek with a head for tech named Tuuz, commed.

“Your last check-in put you south-east Outer Rim? How fast can you get to Naboo?”

Caliiga had wanted to scream. Instead she’d run the calculations and admitted she could get there in twenty-one hours.

At their Master’s behest, Tuuz wore a dark wrap over his head that pulled his scarred lekku back in a way that was keenly uncomfortable; he’d been rubbing the base of his skull more than he normally allowed himself, his red eyes bloodshot from stress. “One of our slicer alerts tripped; if this information is accurate, it came from Theed Palace, itself.”

“I'm not set up for that kind of diplomacy, Tuuz.”

“It's not a diplomatic run, it's assassination. If you find the slicer still there, they must be silenced and their system destroyed. Be as discreet as possible, we don't have an ident confirm.”

“What if it's the Queen?”

Tuuz had shrugged, baring sharp teeth. “Whoops?”

“I'm on it.”

In the wake of the Trade Federation’s invasion a year earlier, the palace’s security had been upgraded. It still wasn't enough to keep Caliiga out, although slicing and looping the security cams had taken longer than she liked. The source was a private apartment and office in the residential wing -- not the Queen, and Caliiga was almost disappointed.

She was more disappointed to find the apartment empty. Breathing the close, stale atmosphere of a room that had not seen proper ventilation during long occupancy, she had received impressions of recent activity, fear, determination. There was a whiff of aromatic smoke lingering, citrus-sour with a hint of vanilla, and a bit of dried leaf in a drawer where the cleaning droids couldn't reach proved to be gji. Their mystery slicer was a Muun with a legal narcotics habit, not a missing ex-Jedi, and while her Master would be less than pleased, she sent the results on to Tuuz.

“What kind of information were they poking that set off the alert?”

“Financial data. They looked up the origination codes to some of our shell accounts.”

She’d frowned. “Which shell accounts?”

“The ones we ran through the IBC. Either the IBC has a hole, or our slicer is an independent operator.”

“How vital is it that we eliminate them?”

Tuuz had rocked a taloned hand; Caliiga had always wondered how he managed a computer with those long nails. “They saw the codes, and any slicer worth their pay is going to record everything. In theory, they could determine the identity of the creator, but we removed that dangling thread shortly after the accounts were created.”
“It's a dead end, then.”

“That was terrible. Yeah, it goes nowhere. Whoever hired them is more important--”

“Their system was wiped.”

“But not the Palace’s, I'll wager. You'll need to break in again. Sorry.” He hadn't looked it, though, and she’d cursed at him before closing the comm.

Aurra had been called away on a job, leaving Caliga to infiltrate Theed Palace a second time on her own; she’d settled for slicing the system from the maintenance shafts. The Muun had been hired by the Queen’s staff to help with a restructuring of finances to manage post-conflict recovery; there was literally nothing else. She did get his name at least, and basic identifying information, but Kardin Lo was now four days ahead of her and likely already ghosting from the system.

Kenobi, at least, still existed in public databanks; Lo’s data footprint shrank rapidly over the next month. Caliga had tried approaching the last known bank he had used, only to be sneered at despite her guise as a Republic Judicial investigator, and told her credentials were insufficient for her enquiry. It seemed the relationship between Judicial and the IBC wasn’t as open as they claimed it was -- likely the result of her own Master’s work..

There was no indication that Lo’s digging into her Master’s accounts was tied to his work for the Naboo -- clearly someone had hired him on the side, and who that had been was a complete mystery. With his bank accounts and comm records dissolved, the trail was dead. She went back to ferreting out Kenobi, pulling her stolen Judicial uniform back on to speak to someone whom the Mandalorian media had indicated was a close acquaintance.

Tovari Matsuuri had not been forthcoming regarding Kenobi. “I haven’t heard from him since before he left for Serenno.”

“Did he say anything at all?”

The other woman had shrugged. “Nothing Judicial would care about. He was experiencing personal doubts and hoped visiting his grand-master would help. Maybe it did, who knows?”

“How did you get to know Kenobi?”

“We worked on a freighter together, he was a hell of a navigator.”

Which made Caliga curse more, because that meant if Kenobi had a ship, he would be that much harder to catch.

Matsuuri claimed she didn’t have a comm code for him, which seemed odd, but Caliga couldn’t deny what the Force told her. The Duchess probably had one, but when Caliga approached Kryze, her staff denied her an audience and stated that the Duchess’ personal matters were not open for discussion.

In hindsight, they’d probably thought Caliga was a reporter. If she’d posed as a Jedi -- she still had the robes from that last time, stuffed in a drawer somewhere -- they might have been more open, but now they knew her face and she couldn’t change the story without warping the minds of everyone on Kryze’s staff.

Taking a chance, she tried meditating on Kenobi’s Force presence again -- she wished she could do the same with the Muun, but non-sensitives didn't have anything like the same impact on the Force.
The horrors she had experienced before didn't manifest this time, to her relief, but in the intervening year Kenobi had become more adept at shielding himself. She knew he was out there, but it was like searching for a single star against the background radiation of the galactic core. She tried triangulating his location, traveling from one end of the galaxy to the other, only to find that he was on the move. At least that told her he had a ship, but that just made it so much worse.

Caliiga destroyed a series of training droids to vent the rage and disgust she felt with herself. A failed Jedi and a Force-null Muun were making her look like an incompetent fool. When her Lord commed unexpectedly, Caliiga was fully prepared to have the life strangled from her.

To her surprise, he had a different task in mind.

“One of my allies has met an untimely end. You will go to Nar Shaddaa, my Acolyte, and tell me everything you can find about this ‘Red Sun’ which has destroyed part of my plans there.”

“It will be done, my Master.”

Red Sun had left absolute carnage in its wake. Whoever they were, they had cleared Krayn's tower out, scrambled the databanks entirely, and wiped out the T’surr’s accounts. The few people left alive, mostly underlings, described an army of unidentifiable humanoids in dark armour.

Caliiga’s interrogations were not gentle. From the mind of one of the survivors, she ripped a muddled impression of a pale-skinned human man with long dark hair and a scarred face. The trauma of the security guard’s encounter with the man had left the finer details blurred, and Caliiga couldn't pull a complete image. She got a name, though -- Gav Davine -- along with the impression of the man doing impossible things, and a voice saying, “They're working for me.”

Davine was a surname common on Onderon, Alderaan, Ord Cantrell, Bespin, and Concord Dawn; the accent was Mid-Rim and absolutely did not help narrow things down. She took her frustration out on the survivor, pulling out everything he knew about Davine before killing him.

It cost her an extortionate amount to find out that the Red Sun office in the Corellian sector had been paid for in truguts by a humanoid wearing a mask. It had been there for just over a month and then vacated the day after Krayn’s fall. None of the people who had made use of the office had shown their faces, although it hadn’t just been Red Sun people. They were coordinating with other mercenaries, it seemed, but the reception droid was pissy and there was nothing particularly notable about any of the individuals in the security footage.

She seethed, pacing. Possibility one: Red Sun was another cartel taking out its competition. Problem: nobody had stepped into the power vacuum. Possibility two: Krayn had pissed off this Davine, who either ran Red Sun or hired them to help him destroy Krayn’s empire and salt the earth it had stood upon. Problem: Red Sun and Davine had appeared out of literally nowhere and vanished just as quickly. A group that size couldn’t hide for long, and where Davine might have acquired enough credits to hire one was in severe question.

Possibility three: Red Sun were actually powerful enough to hide in plain sight, and Krayn had just been a minor nuisance in the way of something bigger.

The only thing bigger than Krayn was her Lord Sidious. This was a major breach full of dead ends. Her Lord was going to kill her.
It felt so good to look like herself again. And to be around civilized people. And to not have to keep secrets anymore.

Well, not so much on the last one. Siri had taken the time during the journey back to Coruscant to meditate and tuck her memories of Obi-Wan behind deeper shields. If he claimed there were good reasons for not wanting his name involved, then she would see it done, even before the Council.

As soon as she had departed Nar Shaddaa, she had sent a message directly to Master Adi rather than risk having no response from her handler. Within three hours they’d had clearance for one of the repatriation facilities in the Chazwa system, and she’d left the liberated transports to the facility as a donation.

Now she stepped off the shuttle into a vivid Coruscant morning and realized how dearly she had missed air that didn't carry a constant reek of soot and petrochemicals. Wearing the most cosmopolitan of the street clothes she’d acquired over the past two years, she still raised eyebrows when requesting a speeder to the Temple.

Master Adi met her on the platform with a tight hug. They didn't speak for several minutes, simply sharing the familiar warmth of their Force presences, until Adi gently let go and leaned back, resting her hands on Siri’s shoulders.

“It is so good to have you home.”

Siri sighed. “I’d say I never want to do that ever again, but if the Council passes me, I probably will.”

Adi smiled at her and turned, wrapping an arm around Siri’s shoulders and guiding her through the tall double doors. A droid claimed Siri’s bag, promising to deliver it to Master Gallia’s room when she protested.

“Do I even still have a room here?”

Chuckling, Adi nodded. “Despite our display before you left, I never did clear out your room. Your things are packed, though,” she added. “If only to make moving to your new quarters easier.”

“You're that confident in me, huh?”

Adi’s voice dropped as they entered the vast, echoing Grand Hall. “The Master of Shadows projected your assignment to last five years. You’ve succeeded in less than half that. We’re all eager to hear your report.”

“As much as I want to just babble everything right now, I’d rather only tell the whole thing once.” She hesitated. “Is...is Bant in? Or Garen?”

“Reeft is off with his Master on assignment, but everyone else is here.”

“I really, really need to see my friends again regardless of what the Council says.” She touched the pouch at her belt, reassuring herself that the holoprojector was there. The Council would probably be less than thrilled with her for that.
They spent the short wait in the antechamber catching up on Temple gossip, until the chamber doors opened.

Siri took a deep breath. “Here we go.”

Adi laughed as she took her seat; nearly all the other Councilors were in, and it was a full room. “We’re not going to eat you, my dear.”

“Oh, you say that now,” Siri joked. She moved to the middle of the chamber and bowed to Master Windu. “Greetings, Masters.”

“Padawan Tachi,” he replied with a tired but genuine smile. “It’s a relief to see you again. The Master of Shadows should be here any minute. How’s your hand?” The Master of the Order nodded to the compression wrap immobilizing Siri’s fingers.

Siri shrugged. “A few cracked bones that I mended when I had time, but the tendons are still stiff. I saw a medic at the Chazwa repatriation center, but I’ll report to the Healers once we’re done.”

“My apologies, Masters, Padawan Tachi,” a new voice said. A Weequay woman with extensive braids cascading down her back entered and took up a standing position beside and just behind Master Windu’s seat. The Master of Shadows was the image of perfection, just as Siri remembered.

Siri bowed again. “Master An-chul.”

Master Windu’s face smoothed into his Councilor mask as the doors closed. “Now that we’re all here, Padawan Tachi: you stand before us, declaring the completion of your Trial of Knighthood. For the record, please state the assignment you were issued and whether the objectives were met.”

“Oh, boy. The assignment given to me by Master An-chul was to infiltrate the organization run by the known slave raider Krayn, dismantle it, and take Krayn himself in to face justice, alongside with gathering any data on his business partners. All this was to be done without any sign of Jedi involvement.” She cleared her throat. “All objectives have been met, save one: I was unable to bring Krayn in alive.”

A Councilor she didn't recognise, a male Gran -- where was Master Sifo-Dyas? -- harrumphed. “And how is it you failed this aspect of your trial?”

Siri glanced to Master An-chul for permission before answering, “Because he attacked and attempted to kill me, Master. I was forced to kill him in self-defense.”

“Forced, you say! There is always a choice--”

“Let us hear Tachi’s full report before casting judgment, Hakir,” An-chul said mildly. The other Master grumped but muttered assent.

Siri waited a moment for any further commentary. It was an odd feeling to be standing here, both commanding their attention and subjected to scrutiny. “If I may?”

It took the better part of an hour to present her report, and her mouth had gone unpleasantly dry from talking by the time she was done. She had been right that a lot of the Councilors had not liked hearing that she had hired mercenaries once she’d been in a position to act. Master Piell, Master An-chul, and Master Yoda were the only ones who had accepted that revelation calmly. Siri reached the end of her recitation and removed the holoprojector from its case. “Before anything else, the leader of the mercenary company was kind enough to provide a report of his own. Do you wish to hear it now?”
Master Windu gestured with an open hand. “By all means, Padawan.”

She placed the projector into the waiting slot among the floor tiles and stepped back. There was a pause while the chamber’s systems accessed the message; a life-size hologram of Obi-Wan appeared, unidentifiable in the blank-faced armour.

The recording bowed; the gesture was just the slightest bit sloppy, a little too shallow and perfunctory, and Siri pinched her mouth on a smile at how much effort her friend had made to be unrecognisable. His voice was blurred and flattened from the helmet vox.

“Jedi Masters. I’ve been asked to make a report for your Council; unfortunately I am unable to meet you in person. I hope this will suffice.

“Before I begin, allow me to say that working with your agent was an enlightening and pleasant experience; she handled herself with professionalism and discretion. I am the only one who knows the truth of her mission, and you may rely upon me for complete confidentiality.

“Four months ago, your agent approached me with an offer of employment. I’m given to understand that this is unusual for Jedi, and I made certain to enforce among my people certain standards of etiquette so that our actions might not reflect poorly upon your Order. As per your agent’s suggestion, I assigned one of my people to pose as your agent’s companion and gather intel from inside Krayn’s organization. The rest of my crew operated outside, causing minor problems. We posed as a cartel rising in competition, a ruse which culminated in the theft of Krayn's raiding fleet. We then used his ships to attack his allies, destroying Krayn’s primary business connections and any chance they might slide into the Nar Shaddaa power vacuum. I would like it noted that a great many of the slaves claimed by Krayn have been sold to various buyers; the specific details of these transactions are in the hands of your agent.

“The entirety of our fee was paid from Krayn’s finances; we are also keeping the ships we liberated. No additional acknowledgment is required. If you have additional concerns, I have provided your agent with a comm code that may be used to contact me.”

Siri felt several sets of eyes on her, but the contents of the message were no surprise: she’d helped Obi-Wan write the script and had managed the recorder. Obi-Wan’s disguised image was replaced by recordings of various media covering the aftermath of their handiwork; the media seemed to agree that it was cartel infighting, and an unnamed source from the office of Nar Shaddaa’s king claimed they heard that Krayn had personally upset someone more powerful.

The recording flickered out and the shades over the windows rose slowly, letting the bright mid-morning sunlight back in. Master Windu was leaning on one elbow, his closed fist covering his mouth as he contemplated what they had just heard.

After a moment, Hakir’s querulous voice rose. “Well, I must say—”

“The Master of Shadows, precedence in this case she has, Master Hakir,” Master Yoda said softly.

Master An-chul bowed to him. “Thank you, Master Yoda.” She moved into the center of the circle to stand on Siri’s right. “I see a number of disgruntled faces. No, this is not how your standard Jedi on assignment would handle matters. However, it is how a Shadow on assignment would handle things. Siri Tachi has demonstrated resourcefulness, an ability to build a network of trustworthy allies, good strategic planning, and has endured much Darkness untainted. Despite her inability to complete all objectives, the most important of them were achieved effectively. It is my assessment that Padawan Tachi has passed her Trials of Knighthood.”
“A question, if I may?” Master Piell asked. Siri turned to face him and bowed. The diminutive Jedi studied her for a moment. “You did not clear the use of mercenaries with your handler, and when you were on your way from Nar Shaddaa, you contacted Master Gallia directly rather than your handler. The chain of contact exists for your own safety; I would like to hear your reason for acting around it.”

Siri straightened, feeling her face pinch into a frown. “Under normal circumstances, Master Piell, I would have used it. However I had received absolutely no contact from my handler in months.” She could feel Master An-chul’s astonished stare from behind her. “I was forced to make the decisions on my own, and particularly when trying to take hundreds of people to safety, I knew I would require the voice of someone with more authority to set things in motion.”

“Unorthodox as they were,” Master Windu said, “your decisions were solid. We will confer.”

Master Adi moved to stand on Siri’s other side, exempting herself from the discussion; her position had already been made clear, and she squeezed Siri’s hand briefly. The sense of whispers just beyond hearing filled the room; despite her many years at the Temple, it still made the back of Siri’s neck itch. The Gran Jedi sitting in Master Sifo-Dyas’ seat seemed to be a strong traditionalist: tension built in his general area like heat shimmer. Siri schooled herself to calmness and waited.

After a few minutes, Master Windu cleared his throat. “It is the decision of this Council that Padawan Siri Tachi has passed her Trial of Knighthood with more than satisfactory performance. Master Gallia?”

Adi’s vivid blue eyes glittered as she placed her hands on Siri’s shoulders. “My years training you have been wonderful, exhausting, and frustrating beyond measure. You are so very stubborn, my dear. But you have also made me so proud on more than one occasion. It’s been an honour to train you, and I can release you to serve the Order without reservation.” She smiled ruefully. “I’m sorry you had to remove your braid for your disguise, but it had to be done.”

Siri let herself grin as she reached into another pouch, one that had lain concealed among her belongings for over two years. “I did think of that, Master.” She pressed the long coil of blonde hair, still bearing its beads and cords, the ends tied off neatly, into Adi’s fingers. “I wanted to make sure you could have what you earned.”

Her Master dragged her in for another embrace as pleased surprise rippled through the room. Siri was well aware of the tradition; slicing someone’s braid off with a lightsaber might be impressive and require an incredible level of trust and skill, but it was just a bit too over the top for her. She was going to be a non-traditional Knight; she might as well set the precedent now.

Adi let her go and together they bowed to Master Windu and Master Yoda. Windu grinned and nodded back. “Congratulations, Knight Tachi. We want you to report to the Healers once you leave here. You have a week, plus whatever time the Healers recommend to recover. You’ve certainly earned it.”

The Council had further matters to discuss and dismissed her. Siri made it as far as the anteroom before pulling her comm and sending Bant a message.

A hand brushed her shoulder. “Before you go, Knight Tachi, might I have a word?” the Master of Shadows asked quietly. Siri nodded and followed the woman into the lift and down several floors to An-chul’s office. She introduced Siri to the two Jedi at their desks in the front room, an Ithorian Knight named Burrin and An-chul’s Nautolan Padawan, Glynn; both made jokes about Siri adding to the amount of paperwork they dealt with.
An-chul led the way into her personal office and took a seat behind her desk; she held up a finger in a request for patience as she pressed a few buttons on her console. “Sorry, this room is swept regularly for bugs, but I like to make certain. The most difficult part of being a Shadow is that there is some information we don’t tell the Council until after a matter is dealt with. The issue of your handler going silent is a bigger problem than I let on.

“You were assigned Knight Kvuurics, who was also based on Nar Shaddaa; it was hoped that, if you had an emergency, she would be able to assist you quickly.”

Siri slumped back in the guest’s chair, a sick feeling curdling in her stomach. “So my handler disappearing wasn’t part of my Trial.”

“Force, no, I wouldn’t test you like that. You haven't got the training to address that sort of situation. Kvuurics’s disappearance was noted three months ago and is still under investigation, but due to concerns that your drop was compromised, we couldn't risk using it to get in contact.” An-chul shook her head. “I’m very sorry you had to endure that.”

“I…” Siri sighed. “I want to demand to know why I was left in the dark, but I know why.”

“I'll be honest with you, Siri: there aren't nearly as many of us as I need. I would prefer to send new Shadows out with a partner, but we simply don't have enough people for that.” An-chul’s heavily lined face peaked in a frown. “There just aren't that many Jedi whom we feel could withstand the Darkness of the less civilised parts of the galaxy.”

“That's...that's worrying. Jedi used to be far more active and independent, or so I've read.”

“Indeed. Our numbers are dwindling, and it doesn't feel like happenstance.” The Weequay Jedi gave her a keen look. “Speaking of feelings, how did you decide to trust this mercenary? He had a lot of pretty words to reassure the Council of propriety, but didn't actually say much.”

Siri chewed her lower lip, frowning. “I'm not sure how much I should say. He values his privacy.”

“I'm familiar with the type. But consider that we could make use of such a person’s services in the future.”

Closing her eyes, Siri brushed the Force, seeking guidance. On this matter, however, it seemed there was no wrong choice; the Force was silent. She took a deep breath and hoped Obi-Wan would forgive her. “He's an old friend of mine, Master An-chul. Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

An-chul’s expression of surprise was almost comical. “Kenobi! He disappeared a year and a half ago and we’ve been unable to track him.”

“Good.” She nodded. “He’s in hiding, although he wouldn't say why or from what. I gathered that he felt my life would be in danger if he told me more. He doesn't actually run a mercenary company, they're just people he hired to help me out. I wasn't introduced to anyone beyond the members of his immediate crew.”

The Master of Shadows was drumming her fingers on her desk, looking disgruntled. “Now there's a Jedi I wish Mace had handed over to me rather than ejecting. The plan for this was still yours?”

Siri nodded. “The initial plan. If it had succeeded, we would have been able to bring in Krayn's entire command staff. It failed, mostly because we underestimated how much Krayn’s security chief distrusted Kenobi. The backup plans were a combination of his planning and mine.”

“Fascinating.” An-chul stroked her jaw-ridge thoughtfully. “Would he object if we were to make use
of that comm code?”

The strip of worn 'plast was tucked away in her belt; Siri dug it out with a shrug. “You can always send a preliminary text comm and see what his response is. He has several aliases now; that code is registered to one of them. Any investigations turning up ‘Gav Davine’ or ‘Red Sun’ should be considered connected to him. I doubt he’d ever re-use the names, but we might be able to make use of them.”

“Noted.” An-chul put the ‘plast strip away and favoured Siri with a smile. “Now, unless I’m mistaken, you were going to the Healers?”

Siri grinned back. “Right away, Master.”

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Reformation Year 979.01.23
Kamino

Rain clattered off the metal of his armour, striking between the plates with enough force that it felt like being pelted with gravel. By the time he’d crossed the distance from the Slave I to the entrance, the outer fabric layer had gained another five kilos in water weight. The only things that kept him coming back to this gods-forsaken lake were the paycheck and the revenge.

Well, the legacy may have been part of it, too.

The unrelenting whiteness of the halls was near blinding after the murky deluge outside, but Jango would never submit to the urge to squint. His eyes would adapt in a moment and squinting wouldn’t help that. He paused only long enough for a sharp directed downdraft to whisk the worst of the water into a drain underfoot before making his way along the gracefully curving corridors. He’d been back and forth from Kamino so often, the Kaminiiise had long since stopped sending greeters. The latest progress reports would be on his desk already, anyway.

Bypassing the door that led to his personal quarters, Jango hit the lift and headed down. As much as he wanted to ditch the armour where it could dry properly, as much as he wanted to see his little boy’s smile, some questions needed answering first.

The lounge was mostly empty -- trainers were either on shift or bunked down -- but the man he was looking for was there, sipping caff and scowling at a datapad.

“Latest scores?”

“Someone needs to fire their current coach, the performance since he took over has been abysmal,” the older man groused. He dropped the datapad and rose to give Jango a proper greeting, forearm to forearm before pulling him in for a backslapping embrace, heedless of the damp that seeped into his shirt. “Welcome back, Jag’ika.”

Jango slid into the seat across from him and leaned over the table, catching the older man’s attention immediately. “Ran into someone on my last job. Human, male, ginger with a beard, scar over his left eye, maybe ten years younger than me. Core accent so clean you can taste the polish.” He paused. “And wearing what looks like recent-issue Protector armour. So. What can you tell me about him?”
Cort Davin blinked in surprise, then bared his teeth in a grin.

Chapter End Notes

As someone who regularly dyes my hair crazy colours and hasn't actually seen my own natural hair colour since 2003, I like to think the GFFA has some less-damaging way to colour hair (and remove the tint later).

I was so afraid I wouldn't have anything done this week; some home stuff boiled over a couple weekends ago and threw off not just me but everyone I share an apartment with AND our dog-walker. But it pulled together ^__^
The Coruscant underlevels were brighter than expected -- the glow of myriad signs and streetlights diffused into the clouds of water vapour and smoke, creating an artificial sky. The underside of the upper levels was lost beyond visual range; her Master had once described to her how the buildings became so tall that people built bridges between them, which had later been filled in and become new roads half a kilometer above the old ones. Xiaan had asked Master J’Mikel how often that had happened, how many layers Coruscant had, and he’d admitted that nobody was truly certain anymore.

Despite the underlevels being an artificial cavern system, community thrived here: music blared and echoed from the bars, advertisements snapped and rattled in lightning-fast Basic and Huttese from the shops which never closed, people chattered and laughed on the balcony walks and street corners, cleaning droids argued and scuffled with pests over discarded food waste and shiny bits of junk.

Master J’Mikel stopped to ask a group of people and droids if they’d seen a detachment of Republic Peace Officers in the past hour. The officers hadn’t met them at the scheduled place and time; Master Peerce had gone to find a holoterminal to check in with the local precinct while J’Mikel and Xiaan had stayed near the meeting-place to wait.

Xiaan shivered -- the air was just on the warm side, but the humidity clung to her blue skin and leached body heat away. People had been going missing for weeks -- the odd disappearance here and there barely raised an eyebrow, unfortunately, but there were enough this time that people had started suspecting raider activity. Citizens who would never have considered calling for official assistance were reaching for the emergency holoterminals when their friends and loved ones failed to check in once they got home.

Then the bodies started turning up; not hidden or merely tossed aside, but displayed, like trophies or collections. It was almost as if bringing the police into the matter was what the bad guys wanted.

Something in the nearby alley clinked and rattled. Xiaan started and aimed the beam of her tiny hand-
light down into the shadows; the light gleamed dully off a set of four eyes and the hexapod rodent hissed at the Twi’lek girl before scuttling off behind the overflowing bins. Xiaan blew out her held breath in a sigh of annoyance at herself -- worrying at the creepy details was only making her jumpy. She was with two Jedi Masters who regularly dealt with underworld matters; things would be fine.

Master J’Mikel’s comm buzzed and Xiaan moved closer to be in range as she saw the hologram of Master Peerce appear.

“The patrol Peerce and J’Mikel should meet up with, investigates instead a disturbance nearby, but after arriving, they do not check in.” The Skrilling Master rubbed alongside his cranial ridge in distress. “Judicial sends a team out to check up on them, but Peerce and J’Mikel are closer. Peerce offers to follow up on it.”

J’Mikel shook his striped crest, frowning. “Not alone, Peerce. Wait where you are, we’ll go together.”

“Join Peerce then, a block and a half north of J’Mikel, at the corner southeast.”

Xiaan’s towering Master smiled down at her. “Come, Padawan.”

When they reached the corner fifteen minutes later, however, Peerce was nowhere to be found. Xiaan’s foot struck something as she turned to peer through the neon-lit gloom.

“What's that you have, my Padawan?”

She turned it over in her hands. “Master Peerce’s comm unit, Master.” The screen was fading into sleep mode but she woke it up. The transcript for the other Jedi’s conversation with Judicial showed first, including the coordinates of the disturbance the Peace Officers had been investigating. “Look. Maybe he went ahead anyway?”

J’Mikel ran his spindly, three-fingered hands over the device, contemplating what the Force told him. “I do not think so. Headstrong and eager Master Peerce may be, but not that headstrong.” The Anx Jedi closed his eyes for a moment. “Peerce does not respond to me.” He lowered his reptilian head to Xiaan’s level, speaking softly for her ears alone. “We are being lured. Reach out with the Force, tell me what you sense.”

Xiaan closed her eyes. It was tempting to try to stretch to her limits immediately, but her Master had been teaching her to start small. “Begin with the area immediately around you -- you know what is there already, it is a certainty. Use it to compare certainty with the uncertainty beyond your immediate knowledge.” She took a moment to study the coordinates and set them on the map in her mind. “Master Peerce went towards the place where the police went, but he didn't leave his comm here then.”

“Then that is where we must go. Keep Master Peerce’s comm safe.” Her Master used his own comm to pull a map from the HoloNet. “Silent and swift, now, Padawan.”

The Twi’lek girl followed J’Mikel into the shadows of Coruscant’s underworld, largely unseen by the local denizens, their Force-enhanced steps rustling awnings and refuse on the street like a gentle breeze. The further they went, however, the more Xiaan began to feel like they were being watched.

“Master, I don’t like this.

Nor do I, little one. This is a trap we have no option but to spring.

They were very close now, and Xiaan’s heart thudded with fear. “Something feels wrong, Master.”
J’Mikel slowed their pace to a swift walk. “Stay behind me, Padawan.”

Something bounced off the back of Xiaan’s head and she spun in place with a gasp. The alley behind them was shadowed and filthy but empty. The object that had struck her lay on the ground; she shone her hand-lamp at it and stifled a scream.

The large, blunt-ended severed finger had belonged to Master Peerce.

Ensconced in her secret retreat on Cophrigin V, the Dark Woman awakened from dark and terrible dreams.

Bant met her at the entrance to the Halls of Healing with a tight hug. “I’m so happy you’re home!”

Siri squeezed back, feeling the Mon Cal woman’s presence wrap around her protectively. Force but she had missed this! “It’s so good to be home!”

The soft sound of someone clearing their throat broke the moment. One of the Healer Padawans smiled apologetically. “Healer Basst was alerted you were on your way down, she's ready when you are.”

The Kel Dor Healer was scowling at a datapad as Siri entered. “I have severe concerns regarding what the Council considers reasonable risk and exposure to stress, Knight Tachi. I have their report here, but can you please review it and tell me what's been left out?”

Siri squinted at the clinical, roundabout language in the report. “Ohh, this is going to take a while.”

Healer Basst’s frown deepened. “I was afraid you would say that. I need to know what stressors you experienced in the past two years, including exposure to any drugs or toxins.”

The interview took over an hour, during which the Healer gently scanned Siri for lingering issues. At least she was permitted water, and the Healer asked questions that helped her remember other details. It wasn't fun, but Basst projected a soothing wave through the Force which helped her remain calm. Eventually the attention shifted to Siri’s hand, which the Healer admitted she’d done well to keep immobilized. Siri laughed.

“My hands are important to me, I’d rather have an unnecessary splint than risk damaging it.”

Basst sat back and folded her arms, inscrutable behind her mask and goggles. “Well, all things considered, you appear to be in good health. A bit undernourished, perhaps, but there's no lasting physical damage. We're more concerned with possible psychological issues, given what you were exposed to. I’d like you to have a full interview with a Mind Healer, preferably today?”

“My only other plans involve meditation, food, and sleep. And a proper hot bath.” Nar Shaddaa tap water had been heavy with cleansing chemicals, and soaking in it hadn't been recommended.

The Healer chuckled. “I can sympathise. If you don't mind waiting in the anteroom, I know Bant will
happily keep you company.”

The anteroom was soothing and designed to emulate the Room of a Thousand Fountains, with natural wood paneling, lots of living greenery, and a wall of rounded stones over which water trickled, keeping the air humidified. Small violet cleaner-fish darted through the small pool at the wall’s base, most of it covered with transparisteel flooring. Siri and Bant found a quiet alcove where they could talk without disturbing others.

Bant immediately seized Siri’s hand and tucked in against her side as they talked. There was a lot Siri wasn’t allowed to discuss, but they made the best of it. After the loss of Master Tahl, Siri had worried for Bant -- the Mon Cal girl had seemed crushed, and had only reluctantly accepted Master Fisto’s offer to finish her training. Their rough early days had led to smoother waters, and Bant announced proudly that she’d passed her Healer’s Trials the year before.

“I’m not keeping you from work, am I?”

Bant gave an open-mouthed Mon Cal grin. “No, it’s been a quiet day, and my next meeting isn’t for half an hour.”

Siri hesitated for the barest moment, then quietly told Bant about Obi-Wan.

“He wouldn’t come back?!” Bant whispered. “He sent messages to the rest of us a year ago or so, but nothing since then. Is he...how is he?”

Siri frowned as she recalled their conversation. Her initial thought had been that Obi-Wan was angry at having been dismissed, that he wouldn’t want to come back simply because of the Councilors who had supported the decision.

He’d shaken his head, with that odd, quiet smile she’d never seen him use as a Padawan, and said, “I have attachments now, responsibilities to others. The Council would never approve of my maintaining them. Phel is like a sibling, one of my closest friends, but xe still relies on me for so much. Zoh?” His smile had turned fond, and Siri couldn’t help the little pang of envy that ran through her: Obi-Wan had something in his life that made him truly happy. “She might as well be my daughter. Within an hour of finding her on that ship, I knew I wouldn’t be able to let her go. Feid and Pulkka stay simply because we’re friends and they trust me to take care of them.

“The Jedi counsel so much against attachments, and most think that includes ties of family and friendship.” He’d laughed softly. “I tried so hard to be a perfect Jedi, was constantly told how often I still failed to meet those expectations. I was miserable for it.” Obi-Wan had still been wearing the disguise armour from making his holo-report, but he carried it comfortably, like a second skin. When he leaned back against the corner of the desk, there was a gravity in his casual posture that had seemed...right. “It felt as if I was being asked to give up everything I am, like my own sense of self was too much attachment for me to truly be a Jedi. But out here? With people whom I love dearly? Doing what I want with my life? I feel a sense of peace and balance I never found in the Temple. At one time I thought I knew that feeling, but I suspect that was more hope than reality.”

“He’s...happy. Settled, I guess.” Siri frowned at her hands where they fidgeted with the hem of her tunic. “He has a family now.”

“A family? You mean like... babies?”

Siri giggled at Bant’s wide-eyed, alarmed expression. “No! Just...people he’s taking care of. He’s basically adopted a couple kids.”
“Oh! That does sound very like him,” Bant said, sounding relieved. “We all miss him. Anakin, especially. Did you even get to meet Master Qui-Gon’s new Padawan before you left?”

“Only briefly. I heard people spreading nasty rumours about him and about Master Qui-Gon, though.” The rumours had been ugly, about Qui-Gon throwing Obi-Wan under the metaphorical speeder in favour of the supposed Chosen One, and other less pleasant speculation about what had really happened to cause the Council to kick Obi-Wan out. She’d stepped in to berate people for saying such horrible things when she could, but some of them were Knights who’d remembered too well what had happened with Xanatos and Bruck.

Knights who damn well ought to have known better! She fumed for a moment before releasing her disgust into the Force.

Bant’s wide mouth pinched down at the corners. “Yeah, that was unpleasant. They’ve mostly stopped. Anakin’s a good kid, anyway, he and Garen terrorize the flight hangar staff on a weekly basis.”

“I really want to see Garen. And Luminara--”

“We’ll arrange a party once you're assigned your own quarters, yes? Speaking of which,” Bant said with a sly look, and Siri suppressed a groan -- she knew where this was going. “Any thoughts on whom you’d consider taking as a Padawan?”

“I just got home, Bant! Give me time to sort my head out before I decide to inflict myself on a child!” Her friend was laughing. “You should have seen the look on your face! Garen hasn’t chosen anyone yet, either.”

“I don't even know which younglings are up for consideration. It's been a couple years,” Siri muttered sourly.

To her relief, Healer Basst entered and gestured her through. “You have a choice, Knight Tachi. Healer G’ohn is available, or you can be Padawan Fatim’s Healer Trial.”

“I don't recognise Fatim’s name, are they…?”

“She's come to us from the Corellian Temple, yes.”

Healer G’ohn was a known factor -- but she was prone to prodding sore spots patients weren’t always ready to prod. “I’d be honoured to be Padawan Fatim’s Trial.”

Fatim Sula-hyn was a plump Mirialan woman a year or so older than Siri; the intricate tattoos drew geometric patterns in two lines from her hairline over her eyes to her cheeks. Within five minutes Siri could tell they were going to get along well: Fatim’s presence was soothing but firm, and she understood Siri’s boundaries immediately. “We will have to deal with the stuff you’d rather not have dredged up, but I want you to choose when we do.”

Siri nodded. It was going to hurt, but if she prepared herself ahead of time, it might not be so bad. “There is a slight matter of some things being classified. I’ll talk to the Master of Shadows to see what can be done.”

“Of course.” Fatim smiled. “It's probably fine, the Jedi Shadows would be hard pressed if we weren't able to assist you to the fullest.”

They wrapped up with an agreement to meet again in five days. “From what I can see, you're fit to
return to your duties at any time, but let me know if you have concerns about anything,” Fatim was saying as they passed through the broad, warmly lit hall. Her next words were interrupted by shouting from the entrance. The two women glanced at each other and broke into a run.

In the anteroom, Healer Basst was on her knees, hugging a stone-faced Twi’lek girl who couldn’t have been more than twelve. Two other Healers, including Vokara Che, were arguing with a trio of people in Judicial uniforms.

“--We couldn't notify you immediately because there are procedures--”

“--They're our people, we have a right to know! You had no right to keep her there--”

“--needed her to describe what happened! She's a key witness--”

“--If she were an adult Jedi, yes, but not someone under the age of majority! The least you should have done was commed for one of us--”

Healer Basst handed the Padawan off to Fatim and turned to shut down the argument before the noise disturbed the more delicate patients. Fatim drew Siri and the girl off to the side, out of the way.

“I need to get some things from my office,” she said softly. “This is Knight Tachi. Can you stay with her for a moment? I promise I’ll be right back.”

The Twi’lek girl nodded numbly, and Fatim gave Siri an apologetic half-smile, touching her arm. “I'm sorry, it's not your duty. I’ll be right back.”

Siri frowned with concern at the catatonic child. “I’m going to sit on the cushion over here. Do you want to sit with me?”

The girl nodded, expression unchanged. There were long-dried tear tracks on her cheeks and her eyes were puffy; Siri made sure she drank a cup of water before they sat down. The girl immediately crowded into Siri’s space against her side, and she wrapped her arm around the girl’s narrow shoulders, careful not to put pressure on her lekku. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Xiaan Amersu.”

“Alright, Xiaan. Is there anything I can do for you?”

The girl shook her head. “She killed Master J’Mikel.”

A horrible feeling settled in Siri’s gut; despite Xiaan’s outward calm, her mind was screaming. “Who did?”

“The shadow lady.”

Mace Windu sat in the anteroom of the Halls of Healing, examining the factors playing into the frisson of anxiety running through his core. It didn't bring calm so much as comprehension, but he’d take what he could get.

Who knew what had lured Peerce from where he had been waiting for J’Mikel? The Skrilling Master was known for being impulsive, but he still possessed some common sense.
The official report from the Republic Peace Officers stated that they had arrived to find Padawan Amersu standing catatonic over her slaughtered Master, with Peerce’s remains strung up nearby along with those of the other Judicial detachment, like grisly ornaments. The ten-year old Twi’lek girl had been detained and questioned by herself for hours, in violation of a number of agreements between Judicial and the Order for the treatment of Jedi younglings.

The thought made him furious on the girl’s behalf -- he acknowledged the fact that Judicial had at least followed a policy for dealing with children at crime scenes. Judicial’s methods were reasonable for most sentients, but they didn't know how to deal with a child suffering a brutally severed training bond.

They did their best. The person who failed their duty to investigate policies regarding Jedi is receiving a reprimand and remedial training. It’s done and there’s no point seething over it.

Entering the Halls to see Amersu practically cuddled in Tachi’s lap had been a surprise, until one of the Padawans had returned bearing a blanket and taken charge of the child. He took a moment to roll the memory over in his mind. Tachi hadn’t seemed the most nurturing of people prior to the commencement of her Trial -- although considering certain other Jedi he knew, that was a low bar to clear -- but her experiences had definitely granted her a deeper protective streak than she’d had before. Tachi would likely want to become involved in the matter; the Council would have to weigh her skills against any emotional involvement.

Healer Basst entered, interrupting his musings. “She’s asleep. Physically, she’s fine, but she’ll have some mental scarring if we don't mend the damage carefully. Our Mind Healers advise against sending her back to her quarters alone -- but she still needs familiar surroundings. Pairing her with a Knight or Master who doesn't currently have a Padawan would be the best option.”

Mace gave the Healer a narrow glare. “You're thinking of Knight Tachi.” The young woman had departed after the Padawan had returned; Mace knew Tachi would be assigned her own quarters by now and possibly in the process of moving.

Basst spread her hands. “She would be a familiar face. And it might do Knight Tachi some good.”

“Agree with Healer Basst, I do,” Master Yoda declared as he entered behind her. “Essential personal contact is, if healed the severed bond will be.”

“I was considering whether to let Knight Tachi get involved in the investigation. This would only increase her emotional investment,” Mace protested. Tachi was guaranteed the rest of the week to reacclimate to Temple life; throwing her into a murder investigation wouldn't necessarily help with that, but she wouldn't be the first Knight to willingly give up rest days.

Yoda hummed with a tiny smile and leaned on his gimer stick. “Control, she has already shown. A test, this will be.”

Basst turned on her heel to glare through her goggles at the Grandmaster. “Padawan Amersu’s welfare cannot be used as yet another way to evaluate a Knight’s readiness, Master Yoda!”

The old troll reached up and patted the Healer’s knee reassuringly. “Under observation both will be. Accept your judgment if unsuitable you find this arrangement, we will.”

The bizarre standoff continued a moment longer before Basst nodded in agreement. “Very well, Grandmaster. I will contact Knight Tachi and ask if she is agreeable to this.”
Master Qui-Gon’s expression of surprise at seeing her at his door was priceless. Siri couldn’t hide a grin as she said, “I wish I could take a holo right now.”

“I didn’t realise you’d returned!” He stepped aside to allow her in. “Am I correct in guessing that it’s ‘Knight’ Tachi, now?”

“The Temple rumour network must be slacking off if you didn’t hear already. I’ve been back long enough to make my report to the Council, visit the Healers, and have my stuff sent to my new quarters.” Siri left her boots by the door and followed the Jedi Master into the kitchen, where the kettle was just starting to spout steam.

Master Qui-Gon retrieved a second mug from the cupboard and set about making tea. He’d even remembered Siri’s preferred sweet red variety, and she wondered if Anakin was a tea-drinker. It was difficult not to develop the habit around Master Jinn.

“So to what do I owe the pleasure of a visit?” The corners of Qui-Gon’s eyes crinkled with humour. “I would have thought you’d be catching up with your friends.”

“Everyone has duties for a bit longer.” She frowned at the heat ripples in her cup as she stirred a spoonful of honey in. “I wanted to talk before Anakin gets back from his classes.”

The Jedi Master’s eyes flicked up from his own tea as he blew lightly across the surface. “It’s about Obi-Wan, isn’t it?”

“I...saw him. He helped me. Twice, actually,” she said with a laugh. “I didn’t tell the Council.”

“No?”

“He didn’t want his involvement known.” She hesitated. “I figured someone known for flouting the Council’s authority would appreciate that.”

Qui-Gon gave a snort and put his tea back down on the counter before laughing. “You are right about that. It feels satisfying, doesn’t it?”

“Is that really something we ought to be doing, though? Keeping information from the Council, or only just skirting the limits of the Code, I mean.”

Sighing, Qui-Gon folded his arms on the countertop. “The Council means well, but many of them have not spent enough time outside the Temple. They don’t understand that the Code doesn’t apply evenly to every situation.”

“Obi-Wan claimed you would have set the factions we were dealing with against each other.”

He nodded. “Without knowing what your situation was, if he gave that assessment, he’s likely correct. There are times when the authorities cannot act without making a situation worse. Their procedures would take too long, or they’re flawed in favour of the perpetrators and do nothing to protect the victims. Or,” he added with an arched brow, “the policies regarding procedure are politically biased and provide no benefit to those in need of protection. Regardless, certain situations are best handled by leaving the right information in the right hands and stepping back.”

Siri smirked. “The Council would call that interference beyond the limits of the Order’s purpose.”

“Of course they would,” Qui-Gon snorted. “We’re so tightly bound to the will of the Senate now,
that any Jedi involvement that does not follow precisely what a Senator wishes becomes grounds for censure. You can always trust a politician to have their own best interests at heart, but those rarely align with the best interests of their constituents. The Council is for the most part aware of this, but we have little power to begin even the slightest divestment.”

“There would be screaming in the Senate if anyone proposed that.” She could just imagine the accusations that would be thrown around.

“Before the Ruusan Reformation, the Supreme Chancellor seat was held by a Jedi -- it was thought our ability to read the Force would lead to better compromises. Now we have no representation within the Senate at all.” He sounded disgusted as he set another pot of tea to steep.

“But the Trade Federation, and other groups that represent corporate interests rather than systems, do.”

“You see where the problem lies, then. What was Obi-Wan’s solution to your problem?”

“We invented a competitor and made it look like third-party interference.”

When Qui-Gon had finally stopped laughing, he sighed happily. “The best way to control responses. How is he?”

Siri frowned into her cup, then realised it was empty. “I tried to convince him to come home. He wouldn’t even consider it.”

Qui-Gon nodded and poured more tea for them both. “I would have been greatly surprised if he had. Obi-Wan’s path is taking him somewhere a Jedi cannot walk.”

“What does that mean, though? The Jedi should be able to handle any situation.”

“Perhaps the Jedi of old might have been able to,” he said, shaking his head, “but the Order has become increasingly monastic over the centuries. We’re now meant to study theory without once placing ourselves at risk of testing it. I fear most Jedi now would not be suited to the more free-ranging missions our forebears made without hesitation.”

Siri tapped a fingernail against the side of her cup, listening to the soft *tink* against the enamel. “Master An-chul did say there aren’t nearly enough Jedi capable of Shadow work anymore.”

“What the Shadows do now, many Jedi once undertook on a regular basis.”

“That seems so strange to me.”

Qui-Gon leaned back against the opposite counter edge and folded his arms, scowling at the far wall. “The Order fears the Dark so much, we would rather not risk its touch at all.” He looked at her solemnly from under his brows. “Fear leads to hate.”

Biting her lip, Siri said, “It can’t be that bad, Master Qui-Gon. Can it?”

“Not yet, no. But only because for a thousand years there has been no evidence of the Sith’s continued existence. What was the first thing the Council did when confronted with evidence of the Sith’s return?”

“They turned Obi-Wan out.” A chill ran down her spine. “Did he truly Fall?”

Qui-Gon sighed in resignation. “He did. Not irredeemably so, but the Council could not be swayed.
How did he seem to you?”

“Darkened, but…” She laughed. “You know how he's always trying to help people? It's only gotten worse. He’s going to have a ship full of orphans if he keeps going that way.”

“He used to roll his eyes over my collections of ‘pathetic life-forms’,” Qui-Gon said with a satisfied smirk. “I’m glad to see him embrace the call of the Living Force once in a while.”

Siri’s comm pipped for attention. “Sorry, this is from the Healer--”

“By all means.”

She thumbed the device on, suppressing a delighted grin at being able to say, “Knight Tachi.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Siri. It's nothing related to your case, but we were wondering if you would object to Padawan Amersu staying with you for a while. Being alone right now would not be good for her, but neither would the unfamiliar surroundings in the Healers’ wing, and she does at least know you from earlier.”

Slowly, Siri raised her eyes to meet Qui-Gon’s. The Jedi Master wasn't even trying to hide a broad, mischievous grin. “I suppose that would be acceptable. When should I collect her?”

The relief in the Healer's voice was evident. “After dinner, we’re not going to subject her to the curious stares in the refectory right now.”


He just looked smug and made a gentle shooing gesture.

It was too damn early for a Council summons. Siri blinked blearily and stifled a yawn. Through the transparisteel outer wall of the lift to the Council chambers, dawn was just starting to blush the eastern sky. Xiaan clung to her hand, visibly dragging -- but the Council had requested them both.

With the Padawan staying with her, Siri had chosen to comm Bant to postpone the housewarming party, and as a result hadn’t been able to catch up with anyone other than Garen. She brightened a bit to see a pair of familiar faces waiting in the antechamber. “I wouldn't have thought you'd still be on Coruscant right now?”

Quinlan looked up from the mug of caff he was clutching like a holy relic and grinned. “Hey! We heard you were back!” He and Aayla set their drinks down just long enough for a round of hugs and introductions to Xiaan. The younger Padawan remembered Aayla from the creche, which cheered her up somewhat. The four of them slumped together on one of the couches and talked quietly about inconsequential things until they were summoned to the Council chamber.

Only three members of the Council were in attendance, Ki-Adi’s Padawan leaning against the wall beside the door and blinking sleepily. Healer Basst and Master An-chul were already there, along with a Bith in the red-draped armour of a Judicial officer. The Kel Dor Jedi’s ruddy skin was pale with exhaustion, and Siri broke propriety to ask, “Please tell us you haven't been here all night?”
“A wish I cannot grant.” Basst bowed. “I will let Master Windu explain.”

Master Windu nodded. “This is Officer Anatho.” The Bith nodded to them politely. “We’ll be coordinating with Judicial through them, because this matter extends beyond the Order. You know the bare details already, Knight Tachi, but we need to recap for Knight Vos and Padawan Secura. Padawan Amersu, do you wish to leave while we discuss this?”

The girl’s fingers tightened on Siri’s, but she shook her head. “I can handle it.”

“Very well. Yesterday afternoon, Masters Peerce and J’Mikel -- along with Padawan Amersu -- were in the undercity pursuing leads on a series of homicides. Whoever's behind them takes a perverse pleasure in leaving the bodies on display.” Windu’s straight-face was close to cracking. “Peerce and J’Mikel were separated; both were killed, along with the Judicial officers they were intended to meet with. The difference is that whoever killed our people used a lightsaber in addition to the vibroblade used in other attacks. It may not be the same person, although there are a number of similarities between incidents.”

Xiaan’s grip on Siri’s hand was painful; she dropped to one knee and pulled the girl in for a hug, whispering, “Still okay?” Xiaan nodded silently, and Siri glanced up to let Master Windu know he could continue.

“We know from Padawan Amersu’s memories that it was a humanoid woman, but she was careful to strike from the shadows and disappear the same way. Her identity is unknown.”

There was a soft noise from the back of the room; everyone looked to see the lone Council Padawan reeling back in surprise as a robed human woman literally walked through the closed door into the chamber. She was old enough for her hair to have gone fully silver, falling in soft waves to her shoulders. The woman stopped short in apparent surprise at the number of people already there.

“Well, so much for my intention to surprise you by being in your chair when you arrived, Mace,” she said with a smirk.

Master Ki-Adi recovered first. He crossed the room to clasp her hands between his and bowed in deference. “Master Kuro.”

“Oh, do stop that and give your former Master a proper hug.” Her laugh broke the tension in the room; Siri and Quinlan exchanged an amused glance while Aayla covered a giggle with her hand. Officer Anatho sagged with relief, pressing a long-fingered hand to their chest, and Master Yoda somehow managed to look grumpier than usual.

Master Windu was shaking his head. “You do like to make an entrance, don’t you?”

An’ya Kuro glanced at him, her expression going flat, and she stepped away from Ki-Adi. “It was faster than a shuttle. The Force told me I am needed here immediately.” Her dark eyes locked on Xiaan, who was clinging to Siri’s side, and softened. “I saw death in my dreams.”

The former Master of Shadows stepped up beside Quinlan to face the Council properly as Master Ki-Adi returned to his seat. “You are discussing working in cooperation with Judicial in this matter?”

Mace raised his chin in acknowledgment. “We are.”

“I need to be a part of it.”

The Councilors exchanged glances, communicating silently. At last, Mace nodded. “Very well. Master Kuro, Knight Vos, and Padawan Secura will be coordinating with Officer Anatho. Knight
Tachi, you have only just returned and we will not command you to be part of this, but you are welcome to volunteer; Master An-chul is Officer Anatho’s point of contact.”

Siri controlled a smirk; Master Windu knew her too well. “I would like to volunteer for this, thank you.”

“Then we will release you to begin your investigation. May the Force be with you.”

The Shadows had their own conference room not far from Master An-chul’s office; by the time they arrived, a selection of breakfast foods from the refectory had been set on one end of the table.

An-chul grinned at their surprised reactions. “Eat. People think more clearly when they’re not hungry.” She set the example, selecting a few items and pouring herself a cup of caff, and sat back to examine the others’ interactions.

There was immediate deference for Anatho, even though the options for the Bith were nearly inedible to anyone else. Tachi was assisting little Xiaan, and An-chul hid a satisfied smile behind her mug. When everyone was settled, she gestured for Anatho to take the lead.

Anatho had come prepared with a holofile which they plugged into the projector. [What Master Windu didn't say is that we've been tracking a series of murders for going on two months, and there’s a dozen more disappearances from before that time which we think might be related.]

The map they pulled up showed a time-lapse development, points of colour indicating each incident. [It's been increasing in profile, although they have so far remained in the undercity. We’ve already conducted interviews with the people who last saw the other victims prior to yesterday’s incident, and the victims appear to have been chosen for convenience.]

“Until the Jedi got involved.” An-chul shook her head. “I'm sorry, my friend. We made your team a target.”

Anatho sighed. [The job has its risks, and we accept that. However, we suspect that this has all been for the purpose of attracting the Order’s attention.]

“If that was the case, why wouldn’t they have simply used a lightsaber from the start?” Tachi asked.

Anatho opened their mouth to answer when An’ya leaned forward. “Because it was to get the attention of a specific Jedi. Namely, me. When I said my dreams have been dark, I didn’t just mean yesterday. Yesterday’s was merely the most specific, and allowed me to at last locate the source.”

An-chul met her predecessor's eyes across the table. “I sincerely hope you’re wrong, An’ya.”

“As do I.” The former Master of Shadows glanced at the others. “I fear this is the work of my last Padawan, Aurra Sing.”

Vos made a sound of surprised recognition but gestured for her to continue.

“Aurra left the Order twelve years ago, when she was sixteen. Her intention was to return home, but we don’t know precisely what happened until a few years ago when she started making a name for herself as a bounty hunter. We know she’s responsible for the deaths of several Jedi since then.”
“We spotted her briefly on Tatooine a couple years ago,” Vos said. “Didn’t want to get too close.”


“But why did she leave?” a small voice piped up.

Everyone turned in surprise, having forgotten entirely that Padawan Amersu was sitting quietly beside Tachi. The Twi’lek girl covered her mouth with her hands. “I’m sorry….”

“No, that’s an excellent question, Padawan.” An’ya sighed. “Aurra was a troubled child from a troubled home, and she came to us late. My training methods were...uncompromising, and they had served well for many difficult students. Not so for Aurra, and for that I have only myself to blame. When something didn’t work, I pushed harder rather than asking why. When she struggled to focus, I enforced more discipline rather than seeking an alternative. My pride and unwillingness to concede hurt a vulnerable child, destroyed her trust in the Jedi, and drove her from us.

“And that is why I believe that the deaths of so many here on Coruscant are for the purpose of bringing me here to her. I have been in seclusion for a long time, meditating upon my failure, and she would not have been able to find me otherwise.”

Vos grunted. “So it’s a trap, then. And the only way to spring it is to give her what she wants.”

“Not necessarily.” Tachi had a sly sort of grin on her face. “We give her what she expects to see, then drop what she wants on her head.”

“Oh, great,” muttered Secura. “We get to be the bait again.”

The place where Masters J’Mikel and Peerce had been killed utterly reeked in the Force. Quinlan winced and wished he could pull his senses back in, but the whole point was to look like a massive unsuspecting target. Judicial had done their job, removing the bodies, but he could see where they had been, feel what had been done to them. It turned his stomach, and he spared a moment to check on Aayla. His Padawan looked pale but determined as she sifted through the lingering echoes in the Force.

There had been a building here at one time, built on top of the older surface. Only the duracrete foundation and parts of the walls and supporting superstructure remained, creating irregular shadows among the piles of refuse that had built up in the years since. Some tenacious form of invasive ivy clung to the cracks and corners. It had become a dumping-ground and a squat, but the locals had all fled in the last couple days.

According to the report from Judicial, the Peace Officers had been intercepted by a child begging for help; their parent had been attacked by something. Quinlan could taste it on the back of his tongue: the slow escalation of violence and death intended to snare Peerce’s attention and draw the Jedi Master in. There was something else layered with it, a cloying haze that collected like fog in his mind. Almost like--

“Master!”

The screech and snap of lightsabers connecting brought Quin around. A wiry, pallid woman bore down on Aayla, red-bladed saber hissing. The flare of ions sparking off the blades lit the woman's
savage grin with a hellish glare.

Quinlan threw himself toward them, knowing he was too far away to help. *Of course you are, that was the whole point!*

Sing made a sharp gesture with her off hand, and Quin rolled to avoid a chunk of broken masonry aimed at his head.

Two could play that game: he stretched out through the Force and snagged a filthy sheet left flapping from a line by one of the squatters, flinging it toward Sing like a net. Sing kicked Aayla hard in the stomach, sending her tumbling into a corroded support column, and slashed at the sheet. The severed edges flared and charred, but Quinlan managed to wrap the larger part around Sing’s face.

Snarling curses, the woman didn’t even bother pulling the fabric away. Her blade intercepted his on its way in, and Quin danced out of the way of the return strike. Sing shook the blanket away and charged after him with a hiss.

It was physically painful to be in her presence: Sing was bleeding rage and hatred into the Force around them like an arterial wound. The toxic mess sapped at his energy, acid burning at the edges of his shields.

*Master!*

*No, stay back! Try to make her split her focus!*

Sing snarled as debris pelted at her, bits of broken mortar and shattered glass and anything else Aayla could throw; she tried to maneuver Quin into the path, but Aayla was better than that, shifting the angle.

Until Sing dropped instead of trying to dodge, and he caught half of a brick squarely in the face. Sparks exploded across his vision and Quin threw himself backward as he heard Aayla shriek in alarm.

His sight cleared in time to see Siri appear out of nowhere to deflect Sing’s flying strike at Aayla; the pallid woman flew sideways into a wall from a kick powered by the Force, and Quinlan winced at the alarming *pop* of snapping bone.

Sing picked herself up and pressed back against the wall, the three Jedi blocking her in, sabers in guard position. She sneered at them and rolled her eyes. “Oh, that’s right: you don’t kill people, do you?” she mocked. “Let’s see how solid your convictions really are.” A second lightsaber appeared in her left hand, its blade as red as the first.

The jaundiced, brittle ivy spreading across the ‘crete underfoot flushed dark green and *moved*, coiling snake-like around Sing’s feet. She was gone in an instant, leaping high over their heads; the three Jedi scattered out of reach as she landed behind where they’d been standing. The ivy was visibly growing, long tendrils lashing out toward the bounty hunter.

*“Master Kuro!”* Sing snarled. She sliced the ends off a branch that reached for her, but it kept growing. “Just the woman I’ve been looking for. Quit hiding like a coward and face me!” Devices strapped to her forearms powered up and jets of flame shot out; the burning fuel clung to the leaves and raced along the vines, carbonized bits falling away as the plants charred.

Quin charged forward at the same time as Siri; lightsabers screeched as Sing caught their blades on hers. He caught the grin on Siri’s face as the Force brought them into sync with each other, just as it had a lifetime ago in team spars in the training salle. He would revel in the feeling later; Sing had
come prepared for Master Kuro, and there was an increasing chance that this was going to get someone very dead if they weren’t careful.

Master Kuro made her move when they had Sing turned away from the burning remains of the greenery, walking out of the flames like the myth her targets had named her: the Dark Woman, a silhouette cloaked in night. “Hello Aurra.”

The sweeping foot that took his knees from under him was a surprise; Quin hissed as his kneecap hit a chunk of rubble as he rolled. Sing had thrown Siri back into a pile of rubbish and now turned to face Kurro and her violet and amber blades.

“Finally.” The nasty smile was audible in Sing’s voice. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this.”

Master Kuro sighed. “It’s never too late to come back, Aurra.”

The other woman spat; the saliva hissed as it hit the flames around Master Kuro’s feet. “You assume I ever wanted to be there!” She lunged forward, a solid wave of Force energy extinguishing the burning plants as she attacked.

_We cannot play fairly this time_, Master Kuro had said. It might have been a personal duel, but there were times when the greater plan was more important. Quinlan and Siri joined the fight again, while Aayla stayed out of range, once more using the Force to throw distractions at Sing.

Sing was fast, she was _good_, and even three skilled Jedi barely kept up with her. It was a good thing that their entire goal was to wear her out.

Quinlan caught another boot to the chest and fell back, winded; the stun shot zipped past overhead and caught Sing squarely between the shoulder blades. Even then she wasn’t entirely out: Sing dropped to one knee with a yell of rage. It was Kuro’s lightsaber hilt connecting with Sing’s temple that finally felled her.

Groaning, Quin allowed Officer Anatho to give him a hand up. “Good timing.”

[[Apologies I couldn’t shoot earlier; one of you was always in the way.]] The Bith officer eyed the unconscious woman and shook their head. [[Although perhaps it is for the best I couldn’t.]]

Siri accepted the inhibitor cuffs from Anatho with a wince. “Man, I hate using these things on people.”

“That’s because you know what they feel like,” Master Kuro said grimly. “Officer, our usual procedures are in a grey area. Sing is officially one of ours, however she has also murdered Judicial officers and a number of civilians.”

Anatho turned to summon a group of officers who had arrived with an armoured speeder. [[For now, the Jedi are the best equipped to contain her. That may change, depending on the outcome of her trial.]]

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It was a lovely world. Very...green, pleasantly humid. Unpopulated -- officially, although there were a few small independent settlements of sentients who simply wanted to be left alone -- in a backwater of the Outer Rim off the main trade routes. The nearest systems hadn’t even been named, and it was
less than a day’s travel from his homeworld.

There was nobody to care about it, and nobody to complain about an “independent” industrial operation.

Quarren Senator Tikkes settled in the shade beneath their landed cruiser while his underlings fussed about clearing the underbrush and setting up the diagnostic scanners. Initial surveys had already proven the world to be mineral-rich, but going through the Senate’s Interplanetary Development Committee, he had discovered, would take far too long, and would definitely alert his competitors to his interest in the planet.

He certainly couldn’t have that, now! The fewer people aware of Cophrigin V’s quality, the better.

A commotion at the ship’s entry ramp made him scowl. [[What are you fussing about this time,]] he snapped.

Taddik, the science officer, hurried out, tentacles twitching in frustration. [[One of the scanner teams is failing to report in, Senator. Team two finished their work and went to check, and they too failed to comm in.]]

Unacceptable! Tikkes stalked up the ramp into the ship. [[You’re certain there are no large predators?]]

[[None, sir. It’s possible the area for sensor three has some magnetic disturbance which might be distorting communications, but the sensors’ calibration sequence would have picked it up and advised moving to a more stable area.]]

Tikkes prodded at the holographic map in irritation. Each team had gone a kilometer out into the jungle in order to get the best readings; it couldn’t take that long for them to at least walk back and report equipment failure. [[Taddik, send a security detail out to team three. We can’t expect scientists to remember procedures outside of a lab.]]

When his order went unacknowledged, Tikkes turned to glare at the science officer, but the fluttery little man had vanished. Typical! The entire trip had been plagued with crew who only half understood their jobs. It felt like the universe was mocking him, and the Senator’s skin flushed with ire. Grumbling under his breath, he marched to the cruiser’s bridge to get the comms officer to issue the orders.

The bridge was empty. The Senator stared around in consternation. There should have been four officers on duty plus the captain. Did nobody on this entire ship have a sense of responsibility?! A light was flashing on the comms panel, and he stormed over to accept the transmission.

[[What is it?]]

The voice on the other end said something garbled; it took the Senator a moment to recognise the heavily-accented Basic. “Turn around.”

[[What is this, some sort of prank? I will see the lot of you fired for this indignity!]]

The comm returned a deep, grating laugh which was echoed by someone behind him; Tikkes felt the flesh ripple across the back of his head as he turned. A Trandoshan hunter filled the doorway, a heavy blaster leveled in Tikkes’ direction.

[[I-if this is about money, I can--]]
“Money has been paid,” the comm responded. “Bossk and I have a message to give you: your former business partners send their regards.”

Chapter End Notes

Usually I'm pretty live and let live with the canon stuff that happens before the PT, but in this case, I find Aurra Sing and An'ya Kuro's backstory to be straight up bad writing and inconsistent within itself. I'm also of the opinion that An'ya Kuro should never have been given charge of children to train, but the Jedi Order at this point in time has some serious lapses in judgement, so it is what it is.

If you're unfamiliar with this particular plotline: in the canon, Aurra is hired to dispatch Tikkes, but the Jedi get in the way, saving Tikkes' life. Because Siri, Quinlan and Aayla aren't trapped in their personal hells in this AU, Aurra gets caught before she can respond to the job offer, and there are no Jedi to stop Cradossk & Son from finishing it. This will be important later.
“Please tell us you did not just go out of your way to antagonise Jango Fett.”

Obi-Wan blinked at the greeting. “I didn't antagonise him, Feid. He was just curious.”

He hit the control to seal the ramp and breathed in. Coolant, fuel, incense, Feid’s perfume, Phel’s soap, whatever Pulkka had put together for dinner the night before. He’d been off the Sunflare too long; it felt good to be home.

Feid scowled and followed him through to the lounge. “Yeah, that's more attention than most people want from that man.”

Zohli glanced up from her datapad -- schoolwork, if the holoprojection in front of her was any indication. “I don't understand why it's a bad thing that At’tha got the man’s attention?”

Folding her arms, Feid leaned back against the edge of the counter. “Because Fett has a reputation for being the most effective bounty hunter in the galaxy.”

“Oh.”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “If he's a professional, he's not just going to hunt someone down because they were annoying. I’m sure he's already forgot about me by now, anyway. What was that you just called me, Zoh?”

The girl blushed. “Um. At’tha. It means, like, caretaker. It just felt weird to keep calling you ‘Bastra’ when it's not even your real name?”

“Well, ‘real’ in this case is entirely subjective -- any chosen name is real if you want it to be.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders in a hug, and she leaned in happily. “But thank you, sweetheart. You could have called me ‘Scogar’, you know.”
She shuddered. “You don’t want to know what that means in Zygerrian.”

Feid snorted a laugh and turned to help Obi-Wan secure things for takeoff.

Phel’s voice sounded over the intercom, tinny and flat. “Do we have a destination? Takodana? Lok?”

“Daalang Waystation, first. I want to get clear of Hutt space and take a look at who’s hiring.”

“You got it.”

Money wasn’t going to be a concern for a while -- what they’d sliced from Krayn's accounts and taken from his vault had been split evenly among everyone other than Siri, who had refused payment, and the numbers had been substantial. Perhaps he ought to feel guilty taking credits earned through slavery, but dismantling the operation balanced things fairly evenly. It wouldn't do to slack off, though. Scogar Bastra had a reputation to maintain, and it didn't include tearing down a criminal empire.

The sound of Feid’s blaster clearing its holster brought him around.

“Who the kark are you?”

“Whoa! Easy!” Ulic had his hands up, visibly surprised to find someone other than Obi-Wan and Zohli there.

“How did you get on our ship?!”

“Feid, it's alright.” Obi-Wan held out a placating hand. “He's a friend.”

Zohli was smothering giggles in her hand. Feid gave Ulic a suspicious glare before putting the blaster away. “Some warning would have been nice. Who's this guy?”

Ulic gave a polite bow. “Ulic Qel-Droma. A pleasure to actually meet you, Feid. I’d offer to shake your hand, but I’ve been told it feels unpleasant.”

“Like sticking your hand in a pool of icy pond scum,” Obi-Wan said as he tucked the spice jars back into their rack.

“Yes, thank you, Obi-Wan,” the spirit said with a grimace. “Short version, I’ve actually been here longer than even Deesix. But I’m dead, so I’m not always visible.”

Feid’s expression went flat. “Run that by me again?”

Zoh collapsed laughing on the galley bar, the point of her right ear interrupting the projector and breaking the hologram in half. Obi-Wan shook his head with a wry smile.

“Sometimes the short version is worse. Ulic is a spirit attached to a relic I acquired from a Sith apprentice a while ago,” he clarified.

“Stole. You stole it from a Sith apprentice.”

“If it belongs to you, did he really own it?” Obi-Wan said, waving dismissively. The banter was encouraging Feid to relax, at least; the corner of her mouth twitched upwards. “Ulic has been helping me with self-therapy for a while. I’m sure you remember what a wreck I used to be.”

“No, you're a wreck now, you used to be a disaster,” Feid said. “If you’re a spirit, why’d you hold
“Your hands up like that?”

“Because part of the air exchange system is in the bulkhead behind me and it’s kind of important for you living people.”

Feid glared at him for a moment before folding her arms again, conceding. “Yeah, okay.”

“So what brought you out here initially?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Oh! Right.” Ulic started pacing through the end of the galley island -- likely just to see the expression on Feid’s face. “I’ve been looking into what that monk told us on Jedha, about how the crystal needs to be repaired?”

Feid flashed a questioning look at Obi-Wan. He clarified, “The relic Ulic’s bound to.”

“It’s my former lightsaber crystal.” He shook his head. “I’ve been attached to that thing for four thousand damn years, I know every facet of it, literally. It’s not physically damaged. Which means,” the spirit concluded with a grimace, “that she meant its soul is broken.”

“I don’t understand.” Zohli said. “I thought you were its soul.”

“Spirit. Objects and living things can have souls, spirits are separate manifestations which can be attached to something, but don’t have a body of their own.” Ulic grinned. “I’m a manifestation of the essence of a living being who used to have a soul.”

“That’s still confusing.”

The spirit rubbed the back of his head. “Sorry, kid. Anyway. Kyber crystals are special in that they have souls of their own. They’re not sentient or self-aware, but they’re connected to life through the Force and can sometimes have a will of their own. And if they’re being used by someone they don’t like, they can be kind of...temperamental. Uh. Hhhhi?”

Ulic had finally realized that Pulkka and Phel had wandered in; Phel was leaning against the bulkhead in the corridor, xir expression carefully bland. Pulkka had moved directly into Ulic’s space, her large nose twitching, and the spirit had turned to find himself far closer to her tusks than most people wished to be. She’d had augmentations made to counteract her species’ natural farsightedness -- useful for hunting but a handicap in a spaceship -- but still relied primarily on scent.

“You’re not real. But you’re here anyway.”

Ulic shot a desperate look at Obi-Wan. For his part, Obi-Wan had been covering a massive grin for the past minute and his face was starting to ache.

“Uh. ‘Real’ is subjective?”

Obi-Wan dropped his hand long enough to say, “That’s my line.”

“Hmmmmph.” Pulkka leaned against the wall. “So, crystals that live in the Force?”


Ulic picked up the shards of his dignity and glanced over at Zohli. “Have you studied anything about electromagnetic frequencies yet?” At her nod, he continued, “It’s easiest to think of everything in the Force as having a kind of frequency. Some are compatible, others are not. And they can change or be changed, and let me tell you it is not pleasant to have your frequency forcibly altered. Natural
kyber crystals are not really compatible with the use of the Dark side, so a lot of Dark side users prefer to make synthetic crystals that are already attuned to themselves.”

He gestured in Obi-Wan’s direction. “It's why the Temple on Jedha gave Obi-Wan smoke crystals; they're a little more flexible than the standard. Much rarer, of course. If you're planning to use the Dark occasionally, they're your best choice. If you use the Dark a lot with a natural crystal, it warps the crystal’s frequency and damages it. You can tell when it happens, because the colour changes and you can feel it bleeding into the Force.”

It wasn't new information to Obi-Wan, but everyone else in the room stared at Ulic in horror.

“That's what happened to your crystal,” Phel said, breaking the silence.

Uli’s face pinched uncomfortably. “I’m not a good person, Phel. When I was alive, I was neither good nor sane, and I wish I could say it wasn't my fault. I was young, cocky, and thought I knew everything already, and when I say do as I say not as I do, it’s because I have been there and you do not want to be me.”

“The only part that's changed is that you're no longer young,” Obi-Wan said drily.

The spirit scoffed. “Why did I ask you to steal my crystal again?”

“Sidious.”

“Ah.” Ulic wagged a finger in Obi-Wan’s direction, conceding the point. “So yeah. I forced my high-quality but otherwise normal lightsaber crystal to handle a ton of Dark energy, and the crystal’s frequency got damaged. The good news is, if that's what that monk was talking about, then I know where we need to go to fix it. The bad news is that it's not a pleasant place, and I have no idea what to do once we get there.”

Phel's hand went up. “What's the point of fixing it? And if that means resetting its frequency, what would that do to you?”

“The box I keep the crystal in got stolen a couple days ago by one of Krayn’s people,” Obi-Wan said. “Not for long, and we knew where it was, but--”

“But I already dislike being locally bound to something, and that just made me realize that if it happens again we might not be so lucky,” Ulic finished grimly. “We have a little time to spare right now, might as well make the most of it, right? As for what it might do to me, it'll probably hurt a lot. But I'm willing to accept that risk.”

“Where would we be going?” Feid asked.

Ulic gave a tight, unhappy smile. “There’s a few places that it could be, but everything started on Onderon.”

“That's a pretty planet,” Pulkka said. “What's the unpleasant part?”

“We'll have to find a Sith lord’s tomb.” Ulic rubbed at the branded mark on his forehead. “If we’re unlucky, the owner will still be in residence.”
Feid peered around Bastra’s quarters as he closed the door. “That guy isn't in here is he?”

“Well, that answers that question.” She dropped into the chair at his desk. “Okay, so we’ve had an actual karking ghost onboard you never told me about. What's this ‘insidious’ thing?”

“Sidious.” Bastra sat on a crate that seemed to double as a work surface. “He’s a Sith lord who took an interest in me. I don't know who he really is, other than potentially powerful in the Republic government, but he has a lot of credits to throw around. So far, I’ve been successful in avoiding him.”

Feid stared at him. “A Sith lord. That’s what my parents used to say would get me if I didn’t go to bed on time, Bastra.”

“Ulic was a Sith lord. Technically still is.”

A ghost and a Sith. If it hadn’t been for the pasty-looking human walking through the furniture, she wouldn’t have believed even the first part. “How do you live like this?”

Bastra shook his head and made a gesture with his hand. The datapad sitting on the desk next to her elbow drifted up in the air to shoulder-height. Feid pulled back, eyeing it warily.

“When you’re attuned to the Force...weird things just happen. Constantly. You see things nobody else can see, hear things nobody else can hear. You can defy the laws of physics and probability because they bend to the will of something greater.”

She poked the datapad; it rocked but remained where it was in the air. “You’re doing that?”

He blinked a couple times, a quizzical smile pulling up one side of his mouth, and let the datapad drift back down. “You knew this about me, Feid.”

“Knowing and seeing are two very different things.” Important things first. “You said you took the ghost’s crystal from a Sith apprentice. Is that a different person from this Sidious?”

“Yes. He’s the apprentice to the Sith lord.” He gave a disbelieving laugh. “But he’s also the one who let me know that Sidious had noticed me, and told me to leave.”

“Alright, so he’s kind of on your side. What would happen if the Sith lord caught you?”

“At a guess?” Bastra frowned. “Likely attempt to co-opt me somehow into serving him.”

“How would he do that? Torture?”

Bastra’s expression went flat. “Sith are capable of so much worse than that. Imagine having your thoughts pulled out of your head and replaced with whatever someone else wants you to think. Imagine being tormented by hallucinations until you cannot be certain what’s real and what isn’t. Imagine a poison so virulent it drives you into a paranoid rage that burns for years. Someone used that last one on Ulic once. It’s why he is what he is.”

“He mentioned using the Dark side. I know that’s what Sith use, but what does that mean, exactly?” Sith lords were crazy, right? If Feid’s friend was at risk of losing his shit, she needed to know.

“I'll try not to get too philosophical on you here,” he said with a grin. “The Dark side isn’t a thing so much as it is a distinction. Everything has Light and Dark aspects, and it’s not as simple as dividing
them by concepts like ‘love’ and ‘hate’, because there are nuances in everything. It’s what we do with those emotions that determines their nature. Light aspects are selfless and sharing, Dark aspects are selfish and callous.”

“That’s why Jedi aren’t supposed to own things?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m afraid the current incarnation of the Jedi Order has taken selflessness to extremes, which isn’t necessarily healthy for them. But that’s one reason, yes. It doesn’t mean that owning an object is a Dark thing, but there’s potential Darkness about it: many manufacturers who use sentient beings in their process are guilty of worker exploitation, slavery, and abuse on various levels. Additionally, once one has a thing, one fears to lose it, which can lead to possessive and obsessive behaviours.”

She pulled a face. “How do Jedi think normal people get by without losing our minds?”

“Oh, they understand that those are extreme cases,” Bastra said with a laugh. “The thing is, when you’re as open to the Force as the Jedi are -- as I am, for that matter -- the energy everything absorbs through its manufacture and use becomes palpable. And it’s frighteningly easy to slip into a mindset of just doing something simply because it’s within your power. The entire Order could go out tomorrow and use the Force to make people stop doing horrible things -- they could clean the entire galaxy for the sake of bringing the Light. But enforcing one’s will onto another is a very Dark thing - it destroys personal autonomy. So would they really be bringing the Light -- never mind the extended effects on local and galactic economies something like that would cause -- by doing something so horrible?”

“That’s like...what’s worse, the result or the means?”

He shrugged. “To use the Force in a Dark way to destroy something Dark, does not cause the two to cancel each other out: the Darkness just increases. So the Jedi seek to use the Light to eradicate the Dark, but it’s much harder. It takes longer, it’s less direct, it relies a lot more on negotiation and diplomacy.”

It made a kind of sense -- and explained quite a bit she hadn’t really understood about the Jedi before. “Okay. So if you’re using the Dark side, what does that mean on the small scale?”

Bastra’s smile was tight. “Pulling on the darker emotions generated from seeing the worst the galaxy has to offer, and controlling them so I can still do some good.”

Feid smirked. “But if you’re using Dark to fight Dark--”

He held up a finger. “I’m not a Jedi anymore. And to be perfectly honest, there are some things that a Jedi likely could not do in order to receive the best possible outcome, while still remaining a Jedi. Like how we handled that situation on Nar Shaddaa.”

The smirk became an amused grin. “Are you saying that a Jedi hired a Sith to do the dirty work?”

He stared at her for a moment like a nightbird that had triggered a security light. “Technically? I’m not really Sith, but the comparison works.”

“Okay.” Okay, it made sense. It would have been nice if Bastra had been up-front about it all, but she could see why he’d waited until someone asked.

Feid pulled one foot up onto the chair and hugged her knee, changing the atmosphere of the conversation. “So. What’s this I heard about you and Hondo Ohnaka?”
He groaned and dropped his head into his hands as she cackled. “It’s only a casual thing. We’re just friends.”

“Really. Because from what I overheard, he’s got a massive crush on you.” She squinted; the human’s ears were turning pink and it was too adorable to be legal. “Might want to consider having a chat with him, hmm?”

“Ugh.” He scrubbed his face and ran his hands through his hair. “Are we done here?”

She leaned forward and poked Bastra in the chest lightly. “I want a promise from you that you’ll tell us about stuff like this in the future. We might need it explained, but this crew thing requires communication from the captain. If it affects us -- if there’s even a chance of it affecting us -- we all need to know it.”

They were both thinking of their last trip via Daalang on the Eidolon Hazard with Booster; she could see it in his expression. Bastra sighed and held a hand out for her to clasp. “Agreed. I’m sorry.”

Onderon was a pretty jungle planet with four moons, one of which was habitable and orbiting so close their atmospheres linked and biomaterial passed between them. Zohli glared at the data she’d pulled off the HoloNet, attempting to make sense of it.

“Whatcha scowling at, kiddo?”

She hadn’t noticed Ulic’s appearance in the lounge, but he didn't make noise the way the others did. Zohli poked her datapad so the image translated into a full hologram over the table. “I don’t understand how the planet doesn’t fall apart from the gravitational forces of the moon. Look at it, it's way too close.”

“It nearly did, once. That moon is all that's left of another planet that collided with Onderon back when they were still balls of liquid rock.” The spirit settled next to her on the couch and pointed at something on her screen. “Orbital model is the one you want.”

She selected the option and the hologram turned into an animated partial view of the system, with Onderon as its central focus. “It...wobbles!”

“Dxun is not only tidally locked with Onderon, it’s mutually locked. Have you ever held hands with someone and leaned back to spin in a circle? It's just like that. The planetary system is old even by galactic standards, and it's had a long time to stabilize.” He grinned fondly at a memory. “We once rode flying lizards called drexls from the moon to the planet. Didn't even need pressure suits, let alone rebreathers. That was an experience.”

“Wow. Just because you could?”

“Well, no.” Ulic frowned. “I was a Jedi Padawan, not even Bastra’s age at the time, and we’d been asked to mediate a war. It didn't go well, especially once we discovered the rulers of Onderon were worshiping a dead Sith lord.”

Zohli flipped through the file on her ‘pad, but all it mentioned was something called the Beast Wars. Ulic’s name wasn’t even mentioned. “There's a Cay Qel-Droma here, who were they?”
Ulic looked pained. “My brother. Younger brother. Pretty certain most of the history texts won’t have me mentioned unless you actually look me up. My example wasn’t the best.”

“But hiding the good things you did in history is as bad as hiding the bad things someone good did. At’tha says context is important.”

“And he’s right. But there’s always concerns of simulacra: people trying to replicate the actions of notorious people in order to gain their own notoriety. Having my good deeds brushed over in favour of focusing on the horrible things I did is really no less than I deserve.”

“But isn’t it important to have the lesson that even a good person isn’t safe from becoming bad?”

“It’s there. Just only in my own files.”

Ulic’s entry was sparse but had an intense discussion page attached. The spirit snickered at something he read there.

“What’s so important about Onderon for you? This says you became a Sith lord on Empress Teta.” She squinted hard at the information. “That’s a weird name for a planet.”

“It made sense once. Onderon is where it started. The Sith lord the nobles worshiped appeared and declared that I would help bring the Sith back to prominence. All of his stuff was being moved to Dxun, but I’d rather check the former tomb on Onderon first.” Ulic shook his head in disgust.

“Master Arca commanded everything be moved. I wonder if he had any idea what would actually be done with it. Nadd’s old tomb was a hole in the ground. The new one on Dxun became a bloody temple. Nadd’s influence, no doubt.”

“You don’t like Nadd much.”

Ulic’s laugh was harsh. “Most Sith lords despise each other. We’re all competing, you see. To gather power, influence, knowledge. What one has, another wants.” He folded his arms behind his head and stretched out beside her; one of his legs passed through the base of the table. “Nadd saw something about me. Might have been the future, more likely it was just a weakness he could nudge out of place with a little sliver of doubt and fear. Sith delight in corrupting Jedi, after all. I reacted with defiance, of course, wasn’t careful, and look where I ended up? Sith don’t just give away information when there's nothing to gain from it.”

“And what do you gain from telling me all this? Or from helping At’tha?”

He grinned easily. “The downfall of the only living person who dares claim the title of ‘Sith Lord’ right now. He doesn’t deserve to succeed. Sometimes the payoff is bigger than mere personal power.”

She could feel him watching her as she poked the information cues in the hologram, expanding the detailed data on the star system. “Staring is rude.”

“You didn't tell them the truth earlier. About what ‘At’tha’ really means.”

Zohli blushed. “It does mean ‘caretaker’,” she protested. She snuck a glance at him and relaxed. The ghost’s smile was fond, maybe a little wistful.

“In the broadest sense, sure. I won't tell.”

Zohli nodded her thanks. Bastra had been really hesitant to claim the larger role in her life, even if that was what he’d been doing. Maybe someday he would accept it.
Iziz had changed a lot. Most of the old slave-built towering structures Ulic remembered from four thousand years previous had collapsed and been replaced with lower-lying poured-stone and duracrete, with large transparisteel windows -- no longer a city-fortress built to defend against the drexls invading from the moon, but a modern urban space. Only parts of the old palace remained, held together stubbornly by repeated restorations. It looked right, but there was hardly anything left of the original structure. Even its foundation had been re-laid.

Whatever else Ulic thought of Arca Jeth’s insistence in moving Nadd’s tomb to the moon, he had to admit it had worked: the Darkest thing he could sense on the planet was himself.

Only Zohli and Deesix had opted to accompany them; the others had gone to the local spacer watering hole to find an outbound cargo to Dxun. Kenobi was carrying Ulic’s crystal, close and tight under his shirt, both to keep it safe and to keep it shielded. The risk of being pickpocketed was practically nonexistent now -- with the end of the sieges, the population had started to build outside the city walls. Settlements had popped up across the continent, both agricultural and industrial, and while the population of the capital city had doubled, they were more spread out. The only thing preventing Onderon from becoming an ecumenopolis in its own right were strict laws about development and cohabitation with the migratory Dxun creatures.

What are you smiling about?

He glanced over at Obi-Wan and shook his head. Just thinking that good results can happen.

His friend chuckled. You just have to wait a few thousand years to see the results.

There was no way they would actually be able to enter the palace to gain access to Nadd’s old tomb: they’d entered the city as spacer nobodies, the better to avoid attracting unwanted attention. Fortunately, they wouldn’t have to. Ulic followed the whisper-thin trail, leading them to an older quarter halfway down the side of the hill.

There's an entrance to the old city catacombs here. It's the closest we can get without digging.

The catacomb door had been replaced in recent centuries with a durasteel arch and electronic locks. There was a sense of recent use that made Ulic look closer.

Obi-Wan picked it up at the same time. “People are still burying their dead here?”

Seems that way.

Zohli looked from the map in her hand to the well-kept open lichyard. “It doesn't seem as creepy as I thought it would.”

“It's only a hole full of corpses,” the droid sniped.

The girl sputtered an outraged giggle. “Dee! Rude!”

A voice from behind them asked, “Come to pay your respects to someone?” A brown-skinned older human wearing a patterned silk wrap over his day clothes leaned on a cane, eyeing them curiously. Both legs were clearly cybernetic from the knee down, but he still wore soft leather boots over the metal feet.
They’d already come up with a cover story: asking around about Sith worship would only bring trouble. Obi-Wan smiled at the man. “Genealogical research for a client of mine.”

The older man’s eyes lit with interest. “Horost Thuvin. I'm the caretaker.” He tugged at the wrap. “We maintain a full record of every burial, come with me.”

Ulic grinned as the others followed the man, Obi-Wan describing an awkward situation involving war orphans, adoption, and name changes. It was all an excuse for them to linger nearby with his crystal. He turned and passed through the sealed metal doors.

The absolute dark inside barely registered for him; the Force was quite alive and to those who could see, it lit everything brightly. Echoes of sorrow clung to the walls like cobwebs, wispy and tender. The scariest thing here, other than himself, were the urban pests using the quiet space as a safe haven.

The contemporary use of the catacombs meant the caretakers had helpfully signposted everything; even without the Force, navigating the tunnels would have been easy. They were dry, swept, and the niches in use were walled off with epitaph tablets.

The old back route into the palace tunnels had long since been walled off. Even if he’d wanted to push his way through the duracrete, Ulic knew the old Nadd grave had been filled in. It was the residue he sought; the echoes of the past. He didn't expect much: it had been four thousand years, after all.

It was there, though, just a shred of Nadd’s venom lurking among the stones. It was dormant, and even his light brush couldn't stir it.

There was nothing even close to Ulic’s own sense of self. He sighed. Of course there wasn’t: that would have been too easy. He returned to where the others were getting a genuinely interesting history talk from the caretaker and signaled that he was done.

Ulic had warned him that they would likely need to stop on Dxun, and Obi-Wan had suggested that Feid look for a moon-bound cargo to avoid raising suspicions. She’d managed to get them a supply run to an archaeological operation fortuitously close to the tomb -- which had definitely warped itself into a morbid temple over the years.

What had been a single bunker-like construction had grown into a towering pyramid which dominated the skyline, with several outbuildings below the forest canopy. The looming statues that lined the approach path had become twisted and wizened despite being carved from stone. Everything was wrapped heavily in some sort of dark, leafy vine that didn't seem native to the moon.

The others regarded the site with varying levels of awe, and Zohli took a few holos, but only Phel seemed disturbed by it. “Please tell me we're not going in there?”

Obi-Wan couldn't blame xir: the entire site seethed with the Dark side, but it remained tightly localised, as if aware that further expansion into the jungle would be directly addressed. The archaeological team they were delivering for had been accompanied by a pair of Corellian Temple Jedi, who were clearly there to be guards rather than researchers.

Obi-Wan had kept himself tightly shielded around them.
“You won’t, no. If we’re lucky, I won’t need to go further than the courtyard.”

The researchers gave them leave to wander the grounds, provided they didn’t go into any buildings -- “They’re full of traps that somehow re-arm themselves” -- and as long as they kept R2-K8 with them. Kate’s sensors were ideal for detecting sinkholes and lurking predators, and the researchers had their own small army of specialised astromechs for that same reason.

The older of the Jedi, a wiry Nautolan Master who gave his name as Renni Kerr, stuck unfortunately close to them; Obi-Wan could feel Ulic’s discomfort and growing ire.

“Your young friend can sense this place,” the Jedi remarked quietly as Phel retreated to the Sunflare at the landing platform located over the crest of the hill, exchanging insults with Deesix.

Obi-Wan shrugged. “It is kind of creepy-looking.” He glanced at Kate and tilted his head toward the site down the hill. Phel’s silver-and-yellow R2 unit warbled reluctant agreement and clung close to Obi-Wan’s side as they went.

The Jedi Master followed, and Obi-Wan suppressed a sigh of annoyance.

“Your crewmate is strong with the Force,” Kerr insisted as they passed the first set of outbuildings. A fine mist was beginning to gather over the packed dirt as the sun set and the air cooled. “Have they ever been tested--”

“Slaves don’t get tested by Jedi,” Obi-Wan said shortly. “If you’re a slave, you don’t want to be tested, because you don’t get to go to a Temple. If you’re lucky, you pass unnoticed.”

“The Coruscant Temple might have age limits, but the Corellian Temple will show anyone how to control it, regardless of age.” The Jedi’s hand on his elbow stopped him. “You could benefit from it too. You’re doing something to hide, Captain, I can feel it.”

“Maybe people have their reasons for hiding, Master Jedi.” Obi-Wan disengaged Kerr’s hand from his arm. “I’ve managed for almost twenty-five years. I think I’ll be fine.”

“Overconfidence is a weakness, young man,” the Jedi chided. He was gentle about it, but it still grated on Obi-Wan’s nerves. How had he put up with that for so long?

Ulic’s silent chuckle tickled the back of his mind. You’ve gone native, kid, that’s what’s happened.

“Would you at least allow us to---”

What the Jedi wanted was never explained: the Nautolan’s eyes rolled back in his head and Obi-Wan barely caught him as he collapsed.

Eyes up, kid. We got his attention.

“Wonderful,” Obi-Wan muttered. Kerr would be fine, although he might have a splitting migraine when he awoke.

He carefully set the Jedi on the ground in a position he hoped wouldn’t be too uncomfortable before looking up. The mist had thickened ominously, and a vague form walked out of the shadows clustered at the entrance to the pyramid, gaining more distinct outlines as it approached. By the time it stopped a couple meters away, it was clearly a human man dressed in armour, wearing a displeased expression as he eyed Obi-Wan.

“Who do you think you are? You reek of the Light.”
Obi-Wan bowed and held the pose, head dipped in a gesture of respect. The spirit was Dark -- it was like looking into the Void itself -- but in life he had ruled and commanded millions. That on its own was worthy of a certain level of regard, if not approval. “Lord Nadd. I come to you seeking wisdom.”

The spirit was silent for a long moment, and Obi-Wan fought the urge to glance up. “How interesting. You bring with you one I know. Speak up!”

Ulic’s voice was soft as he made himself visible. “It’s been a long time, my Lord. I feared you might have departed.”

The other spirit scoffed. “I bound my spirit to my relics deliberately, Qel-Droma. Thousands died for it. I would not waste that effort. What does a failure like you have to say for yourself?”

Ulic sneered. “As I recall, you were the one who declared that the future of the Sith lay with me. Bet you feel pretty foolish, huh?”

Nadd’s eyes narrowed to gleaming slits for a long, tense moment before he laughed, harsh and humourless. “Such is the way of the Force. Who is this boy to you?”

“He is my student...and my friend.”

Nadd hissed with disdain. “Friends can betray you.”

“As can students, allies, and lovers,” Ulic countered. “The Jedi of this era eschew emotional attachments as much as your kind once did.”

Nadd made an odd sputtering noise which turned into a genuine laugh that shivered through the Force like a wave of ice crystals. “How ironic. I should like to hear more of this, but you came here with a purpose.”

Obi-Wan glanced to Ulic for permission before tugging the cord bearing Ulic’s crystal from inside his shirt. Nadd’s glowing eyes narrowed as the crystal was revealed, and he tilted his head at Ulic.

“I’m not certain whether you are admirable or pitiable.”

“A little from column A, a little from column B?”

“What happened?”

Ulic shrugged carelessly. “The Jedi happened, as they do. I wish to be free of this binding, yet remain.”

Nadd rumbled in consideration. “And you, little hunter. Are you aware of what it is you carry so close to yourself?”

Obi-Wan nodded. “I am, my Lord. We were told his wish could be fulfilled, but that the crystal would need to be repaired at its origin first. There are so many things that could refer to.”

The other spirit clasped his hands behind his back and regarded them cautiously. “You’re not going to like what I have to tell you.”

Ulic’s lips thinned. “Nevertheless, we need to hear it.”

“To repair the crystal, you must go to where its soul was sundered. However, repairing that would destroy you.” His face twisted in an unfriendly smile. “I assume you were not told of this.”
Obi-Wan’s friend cursed in a language he was unfamiliar with. “Of course they would misunderstand and assume he wished to be rid of me.”

“A good thing you came to me first, then, no? You are the broken part which must be repaired, a fragment sheared from a whole which has not yet joined the Force.” The ancient Sith shook his head. “As you are, you do not have the strength to linger unbound. What you seek is possible, in theory, but it would require re-joining you to the larger whole.”

“Which is entirely Light, and might happily destroy him,” Obi-Wan murmured. “Well, that's less than ideal.”

Ulic sighed. “Is there no other way?”

“Possibly, but it would still require the cooperation of your weaker side,” Nadd sneered. “Sith bind ourselves to our relics and tombs for a very good reason.”

“Is the risk of a relic being lost truly worth it?” Obi-Wan asked.

“A Sith relic cannot be truly lost while the spirit within retains consciousness. There are always weak-minded tools who can be drawn into service,” Nadd said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “You have your answer. Leave. And take that with you; he is far too inquisitive for my liking.”

Obi-Wan bowed politely before kneeling to collect the unconscious Jedi Master and pull him over his shoulder in a rescue carry.

“Oh, and Qel-Droma?”

Obi-Wan and Ulic turned.

“I mocked you for your previous failure, and you mocked my incorrect foresight. Yet...here you are with a corrupted Jedi, training him as a student.” The Sith Lord smirked at Ulic. “Not all prophecies have a time limit. Something to consider.”

The other Jedi, a human Knight named Uell, came running as soon as Obi-Wan left the temple grounds. “Is he alright? What happened? I felt a tremendous presence in the Force, but when we tried to enter the mists, we found ourselves turned around and walking out again!”

Obi-Wan handed the Nautolan Jedi off to the research team’s medical droids. “I don't know,” he lied. “He just collapsed.”

“You were gone for some time,” one of the researchers said. “Can you say where you were when this happened?”

Obi-Wan turned to Kate. “Do you have a projection, dear?” The droid whistled and hooked into the team’s holo-map of the site, synchronising her readouts with theirs.

Knight Uell pulled Obi-Wan aside. “Did you see anything, anything at all? You were gone for nearly an hour--”

“An hour??” His surprise wasn't feigned; it hadn't felt half that long, but the jungle around them was now wrapped in deep shadow and the floodlights had come on.

The young Knight looked at him with deep concern. “Did you also fall, or--”

“Dissociated, I think. I don't recall waking up.” He made a show of checking his clothes for dirt
stains, but they were as clean as when he’d walked off the *Sunflare*.

“This is deeply concerning, Captain, but we’re not equipped to handle this. Master Kerr will need to be returned to the Temple on Corellia as soon as possible. The presence I felt was immensely Dark, and they’ll want to make certain he has no lasting effects. You, as well, I’m afraid.”

That was the last thing he needed right now. Obi-Wan turned. “Kate? Do you have a recording of what happened?”

The droid’s, *[[No, you only asked me to scan for dangerous ground,]]* projected in text over the holomap. He patted her dome reassuringly.

“It’s alright, dear. Can you tell us what you saw?”

Kate booped softly to herself, then provided a timestamped description of their actions. Obi-Wan had apparently stood still over the unconscious Jedi Master, looking towards the pyramid, for three quarters of an hour before picking Kerr up and returning. Their life signs had seemed otherwise normal, and the droid had felt no cause for alarm.

“Dissociation, indeed.” He frowned.

Ulic?

Nadd locked you down so he could gnaw on my ego for a while. Sorry about that.

Obi-Wan pinched the bridge of his nose, struggling to not react too obviously. *He couldn’t have sent me back first?*

Would you have gone?

If you’d said it was alright? Yes.

I’m not so sure I would have. Ulic sounded disgruntled. *He was showing off at me.*

Knight Uell shook their head. “I’m sorry to prevail upon you like this, Captain, but I must request that you go to the Corellian Temple with myself and Master Kerr. We’ll pay you the standard fee for passage, of course, but it’s imperative that we not waste time.”

“Both of you?” Wonderful, just what they needed right now.

“Someone must keep watch on both Kerr and yourself, in case there are future effects from whatever you encountered,” Uell said apologetically. “The sooner, the better; as long as the team here is without Jedi protection, they cannot do their work.”

There was a great deal of material that would need to be shielded or hidden before letting the Jedi onto the *Sunflare*. “If you comm ahead and request replacements, the longest the research will be delayed is a day or two.”

“Oh.” The Knight hesitated. “That’s a good point. Um--”

Obi-Wan projected just the slightest bit of reassurance. “You take care of your business, I’ll go clear the passenger cabin for you. It doubles as storage, I’m afraid,” he added with a wry smile.

Uell hesitated a bit, and Obi-Wan felt the lightest touch as the Jedi probed his intentions. “Very well, Captain. Hopefully Master Kerr will be awake soon.”

Pulkka met Obi-Wan at the *Sunflare’s* ramp. “You smell of cold fire and the birds went silent. What’s going on?”
He hissed softly through his teeth. The next few days were going to be a nightmare. “We had an encounter. Get everyone together, we’re going to Corellia.”

Chapter End Notes

So hey, guess what! I've been working on this for a full year of my life. And we're... three years?... into a thirty-year plotline.

This is going to take for-freakin-EVER.
Reformation Year 979.01.21  
The Sunflare

Jedi Master Renni Kerr wasn't certain what to make of the crew of the *Sunflare*. When the captain had expressed an interest in seeing the Sith pyramid up close, Renni had been so certain the human was hiding something. Waking up an hour later to a frantic Uell and baffled medical droids had only increased his suspicions.

Both Captain Bastra and the agender human, Phel, had felt odd in the Force. Vivid. Perceptive. Bastra himself moved like a spacer, but there was a hint of prediction in his reactions, something ingrained that couldn't be disguised. The two humans *needed* the guidance of the Jedi -- not the Coruscant temple, of course, they were too traditionalist to see how important even basic instruction could be for the average sentient. He had been determined to point them in the direction of the Corellian temple.

After two days spent in close company on their freighter, Renni was less certain. Bastra seemed balanced; mild mannered and pleasant despite being displeased at the turn of events. It wasn't the human’s fault something at the site had taken an interest in him, and he had reluctantly agreed that something might have happened rather than rejecting the notion outright. The younger Phel seemed equally stable, not at all what Renni would have expected from a Force-sensitive former slave. Both humans’ Force presences were deliberately muted; it was only because of Renni’s habit of focusing beyond the obvious that he’d noticed it at all.

Renni paused at the entrance to the lounge. The young captain was seated on the open end of the couch with the Zygerrian child he claimed to have rescued sitting with her back to him between his knees. The parts of a disassembled blaster were spread across a cloth on the floor in front of the girl, and the captain was talking her through cleaning and reassembly while he plaited her short auburn hair close to her scalp. Three rows had already been done, thin turquoise-blue ribbons somehow twined through the strands.

The human barely glanced up. “Come in, Master Kerr, you're not interrupting. The caff is fresh.”

Renni bowed politely. “Thank you, Captain. We appreciate your hospitality.” The crew had even
increased the ship's relative humidity for Renni’s comfort, a gesture which wasn’t strictly necessary but greatly appreciated.

He poured a mug of what he’d discovered the day previous to be quite good caff and leaned on his elbows on the galley island, watching the odd pair for a minute. The young man’s incredible patience in teaching struck Renni as incongruous. Most spacers in his experience would have found this personal level of instruction an unreasonable imposition, but Bastra seemed to take pleasure in it.

At a suitable pause during which Zohli had asked her guardian to not advise her while she worked, Renni said, “I am curious what brought you to Dxun, Captain.”

The human’s eyebrows arched with apparent good humour, although he remained focused on his task. “We were on Onderon and decided it was a good opportunity to see the ruins. I understand you have difficulty finding people to run shipments in.”

“For reasons which might be obvious.”

Zohli glanced up from the part she was cleaning. “You haven't considered droid pilots?”

Renni laughed at the idea. “We couldn't possibly trust the task to a droid, what if it broke down?”

The human's tone was mild, but there was a note of warning in his words. “Our ship is being piloted by two droids at this moment, Master Kerr. I’ve found them to be immensely reliable. Our B1 unit was the only backup I had when I first started working on my own.”

“A droid couldn't possibly make the kinds of moment by moment decisions a sentient pilot can,” he protested. Never mind that their lack of connection to the Force robbed them of any sort of instinct that sentients benefited from.

The captain shrugged. “If you allow them the autonomy to decide how best to fill their function, they do quite well.”

Renni frowned. “You don't seriously…?”

“Deesix hasn't had a memory wipe since I rescued it from the scrap pile.” Bastra's smile was guileless in a way that baffled Renni. “And I listen when it recommends parts and operations systems upgrades. It happens to be an exceptionally good pilot as a result.”

How utterly bewildering. “I'm surprised you put so much trust in machines.”

“Droids were originally created to take on the jobs that were unhealthy for sentients to do, whether it was in hazardous environments or simple repetitive assembly work. If they were bad at their jobs, certain groups like the Trade Federation wouldn't be using them to subjugate entire worlds.”

There was a lot the human wasn't saying, and the weight of it hung heavily on the end of his words. Bastra had clearly been witness to at least one such situation personally. Renni tried once again to get a read of the young man, but his Force presence remained as shuttered as before.

“You feel quite strongly about this, Captain.”

“Self-awareness is self-awareness. Just because it might possess an off switch doesn't make it less real.” The only outward sign of Bastra’s discontent was his scowl, which he aimed in Renni’s direction. “At what point is sentience gauged sufficient for self-determination?”

“Machines have no way to access the Force, Captain,” Renni protested. “They're not alive.”
The captain regarded him silently for a moment. “Do you regard other sentients as lesser simply because they're not conscious of their Force connection? You can't make the Force the sole determiner of a being's worthiness. Or are Jedi really as callous as everyone believes?”

He'd misstepped somewhere in his attempt to engage the young man, but Renni couldn't tell precisely where it had been. “This conversation is quite beyond me, I’m afraid. My specialty is history, not diplomacy.”

The human’s expression was somewhere between annoyance and pity. He returned his gaze to his work, tying off the end of the fourth plait behind the girl's left ear. “Diplomacy has little to do with one’s opinions on sentient rights and slavery, Master Kerr.”

The girl glanced up. “Most of us here on the Sunflare were in servitude at one point or another. It would be hypocritical of us to not consider the rights of others.”

Renni couldn't conceal a frown. “You consider droids to have rights?”

“Ask a droid to tell you honestly if it likes its role and see.” Green eyes regarded him carefully. “From what I’ve heard about the Jedi, you aren't given any more choice in your role than a droid is. They take you before you can even know your family, raise you to see your choice of future as a Jedi this or a Jedi that, and give you no option but to comply or be cut loose without home or connections.” Bastra rested a quelling hand on the girl's shoulder, and she sat back, returning to her work with a ferocious glare. “You're no less slaves than I was, you're just treated better.”

Renni’s mouth hung open in shock. “The Jedi are highly respected, young lady! Our service is to something greater than ourselves.”

“Did you ever consider saying no?”

“Of course not!”

“No, of course not,” she said, shaking her head; the four braids flicked across her shoulders. “Because they told you it was noble when you were a child, and kids don't question adults.” She gave a locking bolt a final twist and held the blaster up to Bastra. “How’d I do?”

The human’s mouth twitched. “I'm glad I didn't give you mine to practice with. I'll give you a hint: three pieces are fitted backwards and two pins are swapped. See if you can figure out which.”

“Darn it!” Zohli set about stripping the weapon again as the human stood and gestured for Renni to follow him to the cockpit.

“Sorry about that, Master Jedi. She feels strongly about such things.”

The B1 unit occupying the pilot’s chair glanced over as they entered; the strings of brightly coloured beads hanging from the back of its dome clicked and skittered. “Three minutes to Corellia.”

The captain nodded and gestured for the droid to move. “Thanks, Dee, I’ll take it from here. Go take a break.”

The B1 got up and lightly slapped the top of the astromech droid that was plugged in behind the copilot's station. “C’mon, short stuff. You owe me a dejarik match.” The astromech hooted at it as they left.

Bastra was chuckling. Renni studied the human carefully as he settled in the copilot's chair; the station was on standby mode, to his relief, and he cradled his mug between his hands. “You
understand Binary.”

“Well enough.” The captain’s touch drifted easily over the controls. “Zoh’s family sold her because she dared to question the rightness of their society.” He glanced over with a sour smile. “I know you want us to stay, but none of us are suited to Temple life.”

“How do you know what Temple life entails?” Renni enquired sharply. The human’s only response was a tight, humourless smile as he brought the ship out of hyperspace.

Zohli and Uell joined them as they were on the final approach run; the Zygerrian child crowded between them to peer over the top of the console at the skyline. Renni smiled at her. “Have you been to Corellia before?”

“Oh, sure. But I’ve never seen a Jedi Temple before.” She leaned forward, careful of the controls, and peered out at the rising city spires.

The captain pointed to the left. “It’s difficult to see because we’re on the incoming flight path right now. Once we reach the air traffic pattern we’ll be turning toward it.”

The girl frowned. “We’re not landing at the spaceport?”

Renni smiled. “The Temples always have places to accommodate smaller spacefaring vessels, and their own hangars. It’s a privilege we share with government offices and certain corporate entities.”

“And the medical services,” Bastra added.

“Indeed. In fact, were it not for the concern over what happened on Dxun, we would likely be obliged to dock at the spaceport and take a shuttle over from there.”

Authorization came through from Coronet City Traffic Control, and the captain brought the ship down and around into the restricted airspace. Zohli whistled softly.

“That’s the Temple? It looks like a fortress.”

What had started thousands of years earlier as a compound had been expanded over the centuries into a close series of blocky towers faced in green ashlar tiles, with open-air passage between them at various levels. It wasn’t nearly so grand as the Coruscant temple, but in the wake of the Coruscant temple’s destruction millennia ago, the Corellian temple’s original designers had been adamant that placing vital chambers in midair was indefensible. Every few years an architectural firm would beg an audience and try to convince the Green Council to let them remodel it into something “more fitting”, only to be turned down gently.

The Jedi on duty at Temple Hangar Control guided them into the main hangar mid-way down the Southwest tower. Renni felt a surge of relief at seeing a familiar face waiting for them, green robes billowing in the repulsorjet downwash.

“Nejaa, my friend!”

The dark-haired human greeted Renni with a broad grin and a firm embrace. “Next time you run off to a dig site, at least tell me the night before so I can give you a proper send off!”

“You proper send offs would floor a gundark. It's a miracle you still have the liver you were born with.” Renni felt Nejaa go still and turned to see the captain helping Uell carry their bags down the ramp. Bastra’s tight smile returned.
“Master Halcyon.”

“Scogar. I thought you were clearing out of Corellian space.”

The younger human shrugged. “Unforeseen circumstances.”

Renni’s tentacles twitched at the tension between the two men. “You know each other?”

Nejaa blew out a sharp breath through his nose. “We’re acquainted.” He glanced back to Renni. “You said you needed to speak to the Mind Healers and have a non-Jedi be scanned?”

“Yes, Captain Bastra and I had an unfortunate encounter with something at the site. I’d prefer not to speak of it openly.” The last thing they needed was to incite a panic and draw the researchers away from Nadd’s tomb. Abandoned Sith sites tended to collect fanatics.

“Of course. Uell, would you mind coming, too? They’ll want to use you as a baseline, since you were there but not involved.”

The building’s external ash-green and bronze hexagonal motif was continued on its interior, and Bastra looked around with interest as they entered. Uell began describing the significance of the designs and art pieces they passed, and Renni took the opportunity to pull Nejaa out of earshot.

“Bastra never said he knew you,” he murmured.

Nejaa nodded. “I’m not surprised. You’re upset, Renni, what’s going on?”

“Did you know the captain is Force-sensitive? I’ve been trying to convince him and another of his crew to let us guide them, but—”

“Renni.” Nejaa’s hand on his arm stopped him. The human Jedi wrapped his arm around Renni’s shoulders and leaned in close, dropping his voice to just above a whisper. “This goes no further, alright? I know Bastra because he was a Coruscant Temple washout.”

“What?!” That did explain the accent and tight shielding, but the thought that someone so capable might have been rejected by the Order utterly floored him.

“Aged out. No Knight nor Master would take him. They sent him to Bandomeer, but his shuttle was waylaid by pirates en route and he never made it there.” Nejaa’s serious green eyes locked with his. “That man has little love for the Order. He knows enough to control himself—”

“What about his crewmember?”

A hint of a smile tugged the corner of Nejaa’s mouth. “I’d be surprised if he wasn’t imparting the knowledge he has to this other person. Bastra may seem feral, but he’s conscientious.”

Renni recalled Bastra’s gentle patience with the Zygerrian girl. The human would certainly have been inclined to teach Phel, and likely would have been a capable instructor. “He didn’t say anything about this.”

“It’s a painful memory for him. That he’s here willingly at all says he recognises the severity of whatever happened on Dxun.” Nejaa’s smile was gentle and sad. “We can’t force him to accept our help, Renni. Be content with knowing that he’s very aware of the risks he takes.”
Whatever Nejaa had said to Master Kerr had set the Nautolan Jedi at ease -- or at least, he was no longer on Obi-Wan’s case. He made a note to thank the man later.

Obi-Wan had done some intensive meditation the night before, with Ulic’s assistance, and had found a couple sections of his memory were fuzzy and indistinct. Ulic insisted that Nadd had merely wanted to tell him off without interjections, but a full half hour seemed rather extreme as far as Sithly mocking was concerned. Obi-Wan held his peace though, knowing he was unlikely to get more out of his friend for the time being.

The Mind Healers were gentle when probing the fuzzy part of his memory. One described it as if his senses had detected things happening, but the information didn't get processed before being stored.

“The good news is there’s no damage to your mind or faculties. But if you interacted with anything during that time, there's no way to find out.”

His actual memories he’d stashed under heavy shields; the Healers wouldn't go deliberately looking for them, but it wouldn't do for one to stumble across that conversation with Nadd by accident.

They were both given a clean bill of health -- Master Kerr received a stern chiding about the consistency of his shields -- and released. Nejaa immediately took charge of Obi-Wan.

“Well, that's some 'unforeseen circumstances' indeed. I thought you were trying to avoid more trouble, kid,” the Jedi grumbled as he led Obi-Wan back to the hangar.

Obi-Wan scoffed. “It's not like I walked in there yelling for the ancient spirits to reveal themselves.” Although that had technically been what he’d done, and Nejaa clearly wasn't buying it.

“As an unaligned Force-sensitive, you're going to draw the attention of things that will want you to pick a side. The majority of them are going to be Dark, because Light entities don't often linger. So maybe you want to avoid Sith ruins? Just a suggestion. You were lucky there were Jedi onsite; worse could have happened.”

“Yes, I saw how effective they were.” He couldn't help the dry tone, and Nejaa stopped and prodded his shoulder.

“Don't. Get cocky. About this. You are not immune, and you are not anywhere near Mastery level. Worse didn't happen this time, because you got lucky. Imagine if it had been Nadd himself. I'm told he’s been seen there.”

It was all Obi-Wan could do to swallow the laughter that bubbled up. “Alright, Nejaa, alright.”

The sharp tang of hyperfuel and the saccharine undercurrent of coolant reached well down the corridor connected to the hangar. Nejaa sighed. “I owe you an apology for last time.”

“Well, I--”

“I was treating you like a padawan. With your skills and experience, you ought to be a Knight, and you damn well knew what you were doing. Moreover, the situation you were in might well have warranted some minor manipulation for any Jedi on official business. I was unnecessarily harsh with you and it wasn't my place. Just...just be careful, alright?” The Jedi Master offered a wan grin. “And don't pretend to sell your lightsaber again! That could have backfired spectacularly.”

Obi-Wan chuckled. “It was a one-time risk I have no intention of trying again.” He was tempted to
show his friend the new blades, currently secured in his quarters onboard the *Sunflare*, but decided against it. The less Nejaa knew, the better, for both of them.

The Jedi Master paused to admire the *Sunflare* as they approached. “2400, huh? Good choice.”

The freighter was easily the largest ship in the hangar. Pulkka and Phel were up on top, tweaking the stabiliser Feid had mentioned was getting wobbly, and Obi-Wan couldn't help a fond smile. “You want to check her out?”

“I would love to.” Nejaa sighed. “But I have a meeting shortly in the opposite tower. Try to avoid trouble, kid?”

He cringed. “How much trouble would we collect if we went looking for an outbound job?”

“Not much; the guys you tangled with last time annoyed one too many gundarks -- mostly thanks to your shenanigans, by the way -- and they're on suspension now. Should be fine if you stick close to the spaceport.”

“That's the plan.”

Nejaa hugged him. “Still worry about you, kid. Especially with that Sith lord out there somewhere.”

“I'll let you know if I find anything solid. Give my regards to Scerra and Valin.”

Pulkka glanced over the side at him as Nejaa returned to the Temple. “Everything good?”

“I'm no more off my stabilisers than I was before. How's that one?” he asked, gesturing to their work.

The Whiphid made an irritated sound. “We can tighten it up, but the threading is wearing out, it’ll need to be replaced soon.”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “Pull the component numbers, we can replace it while we’re here in the middle of civilisation and things are cheap.”

If anyone had asked Deesix to calculate the odds of them leaving Corellia without attracting trouble, the droid would have honestly said a hundred to one. When Bastra announced they were going to the Coronet City spaceport to conduct some ‘normal business, for once’, Dee’s recalculation plummeted to 5,278,567 to one.

Bastra meant well, but nothing that happened around him could ever be classified as ‘normal’.

The spaceport itself was dull, as usual. The computer system and maintenance droids had loads of stories, of course, and Dee spent some time learning who’d been in and left and what kinds of damage they’d had repaired. The aftermath of pirate battles was always a highlight, especially when the ship computers volunteered their replay diagnostics.

It was possibly a good thing a lot of captains never knew how much their ships talked.

The *Sunflare* had a sense of humour and would challenge other logged-in vessels to games of Two Truths And A Lie, which sometimes befuddled more literal-wired systems. Kate had initially been
scandalised when she'd found out, but now the astromech would join in with her own wild tales. She wasn't very good at it, yet, but she was trying and having fun. Dee enjoyed watching, but it knew the *Sunflare* too well and would have had an unfair advantage in joining in.

In addition to the new stabiliser, the ship put in a request for an analysis package upgrade, which Dee marked as a personal recommendation. Regardless of where it came from, the human would take it seriously, but fewer explanations would be needed.

The regular argument between Bastra and Zohli about her remaining with the ship while they went to the cantina to find a client ended differently this time, to everyone else's surprise. It was a rough place any time of the day, and having a child with the group increased Dee’s estimation of the amount of trouble they might find.

What the droid didn't expect was to be appointed Zohli’s watcher -- not to make sure she didn't find trouble, but to get her out of harm’s way if it happened.

“Why me?”

Bastra grinned. “Because knocking a droid out with anything short of an ion shot is pretty much impossible. Especially you, since we moved your switches,” he added, tapping the back of his hand against Deesix’s chest. Early in their association, Bastra had shifted the droid’s power switches into a secured section of its chassis: deactivating Dee now required its active consent.

Zoh latched onto Deesix’s arm gleefully. “We get to stick together!”

“For the most part. The cantina won't let me in.”

“This one will,” Bastra said. “Enough droid operators work the Corellian sector, they have to.”

“Guess I’m out of excuses,” it sighed. From the fond look Bastra gave it, it was clear Dee wasn't fooling the human. But the droid had a reputation to maintain.

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It was a pleasant change to not have to squeeze through the cantina’s door. Whiphids weren’t tall like Wookiees, but they were broad, and many establishments had doors built narrow to dissuade droids from entering. Pulka approved of the Corellian aesthetic of wide, open spaces.

The Starport Cantina was considered *the* primary place for transient spacers to connect and pick up work, and it was easy to see why: the main room was vast, with two separate bars, and enough elbow room that even little Zoh wasn’t at risk of being tripped over. The walls were lined with enclosed booths with audio screens for discussing business, and the private function rooms were accessed from the balcony overhead.

She studied the layout for a moment, filtering through the scents of tabacc smoke, grilled food, a dozen types of alcohol and a hundred different species, before chuffing a laugh. Phel glanced up at her, a questioning look on xir face.

“It’s been years since Feid and I were last here.” She thumped her heel lightly on the industrial metal flooring and was rewarded with a dull *clunk*ing sound without a rattle. “Good to be back.”

Feid’s elbow bumped hers; her friend leaned in close to talk over the ambient noise. “I see a familiar
face to introduce the captain to. You want to get a round of the usuals for us?"

A glance in the direction of Feid’s head-tilt showed Pulkka a Devaronian woman with dark hair shaved at the sides and pulled back to emphasize her vestigial horns. “Gyiris, huh? She's the one who likes Burn-offs, right?”

“Get three, the boss needs to know what suffering tastes like.”

They shared a devious chuckle. “He’ll find some sort of revenge, you know.”

“It’ll be worth it,” Feid grinned.

Pulkka took Phel with her to one of the bars while Feid drew Bastra and the others over to the booth Gyris had occupied. “Double Old Toula, three Burn-offs….” she glanced over at Phel.

“Uh. Single Cri’ik, and is there something nonalcoholic for a kid?”

The Selonian bartender snuffled thoughtfully. “Purple comet?”

Pulkka nodded. “That’ll do.”

Phel’s eyebrows did their funny thing where they seemed to move independently. “What's a purple comet?”

“Fizzy drink. They add a ball of frozen cream that makes it fluffy.” Pulkka patted xir shoulder gently; the human really hadn’t had a good life. “You missed a lot of fun stuff, we shall fix that.”

The bartender’s whiskers stiffening was her first clue of trouble; Pulkka half-turned casually to lean against the bar while they waited. A group dressed in something approximating a uniform had just come up the entrance ramp, obnoxiously boisterous. She glanced at the Selonian, who was shaking up the Burn-off mix while keeping one eye on the group.

“Regulars?”

The Selonian’s lip curled, briefly exposing her sharp teeth. “Frequent parasites. Uvak Mercenaries. Pushing around the local haulers, pressuring them to find jobs elsewhere. Boss doesn’t like ‘em, but they haven’t done anything to warrant a ban. Yet. Watch yourself, sister.”

Most of the group moved off to stake a claim at one of the larger oval tables; they didn’t forcibly shift the group of three already sitting there, but the smaller group exchanged warning looks as they picked up their things and went to another table. The rest of the group bellied up to the bar, casually shoving patrons out of the way. Pulkka heard Phel mutter something under xir breath as the human tucked closer to her, and she squinted harder at the shoulder of the nearest one’s jacket.

It took her a moment too long to recognise the insignia, by which time the dark-haired human man, reeking of stale whiskey and belligerence, was elbowing Phel hard in the ribs.

“Heard you two had a new gig,” Gyiris said with a sharp-toothed grin as Feid slid into the half-circle booth. By prior agreement, Dee had sat down first with Zohli next to it -- the better to keep the preteen safe -- and the droid was eyeing the Devaronian woman beside it with a sceptical air.
Feid chuckled and patted Zohli’s shoulder. “It’s good to find a family again. This is Zoh, the droid’s Dee. Fur-face here is our captain, Bastra.”

“Fur-face. I’ll remember that one later, Feid.” Bastra shook Gyiris’ extended hand as he sat down. “Scogar. Always a pleasure to meet someone else who can put up with this amount of shit.”

Gyiris cackled. “I like him already. What brings you into civilized territory?”

Bastra was good at this: he leaned forward with his elbows on the table, almost but not quite mimicking Gyiris’ pose. “Passenger job. Are you a regular here, or is this a chance meeting?”

The Devaronian drew on the herbal tabacc stick and blew the smoke out of the booth alcove, away from Zohli. “I’m an early galactic antiquities curator at the museum.”

A giggle escaped, and Gyiris glared at Feid. “What, can a lady not decide to go legit?”

“You don’t even have a degree, Gy.” Feid glanced at Bastra, whose expression was an amusing cross between scandalised and fascinated. “Poor kids can’t afford the university, but that didn’t stop her from finding out what classes happened when, sneaking into lecture halls, lying through her teeth to the tutors who said she wasn’t on their rosters—”

“I was determined,” Gyiris said with a shrug. “So what if I don’t have the fancy holo to hang on the wall? I can fake one well enough.”

Zohli’s glass-green eyes were huge. “Does the museum know?”

The Devaronian leaned over to whisper sotto voce, “Yes, and I was confronted with that after they hired me. Said as long as nobody ever finds out, my position is secure. I was the best person to apply for the job, not the most qualified.” She winked and held a finger in front of her smug grin, and Zohli giggled.

Feid twitched an eyebrow in her friend’s direction. “Still surprising to find you slumming it here.”

“Sometimes a lady needs to hire someone with a ship.” Gyiris looked from Feid to Bastra and back. “You seem to be people with a ship, and lucky me, I know I can trust at least two of you.”

Slinging her arm around Bastra’s shoulders, Feid said, “Bastra’s on the level. Probably more than I am.”

“Oh, stop it, Feid, you’re making me blush.”

Gyiris chuckled. “Well– hm.” Under Feid’s arm, Bastra’s shoulders stiffened and his head turned. Gyiris looked past them towards the bar. “That looks like trouble. How about I come by your hangar later and we discuss it?”

At the bar, a mouthy human with Uvak patches on his sleeves was pushing Phel and Pulkka around. Feid’s eyes narrowed. Bastra nodded to Gyiris. “Forty-three Senth. Excuse us a moment. Zoh, Dee, stay here.”

As Feid slid out behind him, she heard Gyiris say, “You hang out here with me, honey, and watch the adults show you how to make enemies and alienate people.”

Bastra insinuated himself between Phel and the mercenary. “Is there a problem here?” His tone was quiet and neutral, but it carried, and they suddenly had the attention of everyone in a ten-meter radius.
Too much attention. Dammit, Bastra, no Force stuff! Feid clenched her teeth as she joined them. There was no way to tell if Bastra could -- or even would -- read her mind, but he seemed to glance at her briefly from the corner of his eye.

The merc eyed the three of them and sneered. “A Whiphid and a Zabrak woman, gotta be Pulkka and Feid. What’s the matter, ladies, even the Hutts wouldn’t hire your muscle?”

Pulkka growled low in her throat and Bastra took a half-step forward. It looked like a defensive posture, with his hands up and open, but Feid knew better. “Now really, there’s no reason we can’t get along--”

“Which means you must be Bastra,” the older human said with a nasty smile. The light in his eyes was ugly. “Heard of you. Corellian with Core airs.” He fluttered his hand like he was holding a fan in front of his face.

Bastra suppressed a laugh into a snort. “Well, we can’t help where we’re raised, now, can we? I was taken to Coruscant, you were left in a zoo, apparently.”

The merc’s pallid features flushed. “I’m surprised these ladies trust you. How does it feel knowing you were the one who put Booster Terrik out of business? If it wasn’t for you wrecking the Hazard--”

Feid’s fist stung -- *dislocated that knuckle again, damn* -- and the spacer reeled back clutching his now-broken nose. “You would know how much damage we took,” she hissed. “You were the *doompa kung who shot us!*”

The spacer cursed, blood streaming down his face, and lunged; Feid kicked him in the gut and followed up with a knee to the head. One of the spacer’s friends swung for her and she ducked, burying her other fist low where it would hurt. Bastra’s elbow brushed by overhead as he finished the job and the second man staggered.

Pulkka’s hooting warned her a moment before the rest of the mercenaries reached them; Bastra’s hand under her arm dragged Feid out of the way of a glass mug aimed for her face. It bounced off her shoulder instead, but she barely felt it. The Whiphid’s massive fist came out of nowhere and smacked the mug from the Aqualish’s fingers; it shattered into glittering, razor-edged cubes on the floor. Pulkka kicked his feet from under him; the Aqualish went down hard and disappeared in the sudden surge of bodies.

Obi-Wan’s head was ringing from a blow to the temple, but he still managed to keep Feid from getting glassed. Someone stumbled into him from behind, tripping over Obi-Wan’s foot, and they took a bar stool and another mercenary down to the floor with them. The mercenary snarled and tried to beat the poor person senseless; Obi-Wan hauled him back by the collar, blocked a flailing reflexive swing, and bounced the man’s head off the bartop.

It was possibly less than a minute but felt much longer when a mild electrical shock made him gasp. A man’s amplified voice roared, “*Break it up, you lot!*” and then there were people in CorSec uniforms pushing through the fight, applying minor charged jolts to the ones who wouldn’t back down.
He was surprised to see a number of the other patrons who’d been nearby witnesses had joined in their defense; considering the shared glances he’d seen, it might have been an opportunity to take some skin back.

The spacer who’d picked on Phel to start with was still angling for Feid; Obi-Wan was joined by one of the spacer’s companions in separating them.

“You think I didn’t do the research on who hired you?” Feid was snarling. Obi-Wan propped his hands on her shoulders and pressed his forehead against hers to break her sight line.

“Feid, stop. Breathe.” She seethed but met his eyes, and he nodded. “I get it. I get it. But this isn’t the time.”

She rasped something vile under her breath in Huttese and reached up to squeeze his hand. “It wasn’t your fault. We know you didn’t--”

He couldn’t help a smile. “You don’t have to defend me. Anyone who gives a damn knows better.”

Heaving a breath, she leaned back against the bar, and he felt the tension drain away. “Yeah. Yeah.”

She was still glaring daggers past him, and Obi-Wan turned to see the older spacer being shoved down into a chair by a younger man in the same brown flightsuit uniform. Similar black hair and pale eyes, but they definitely weren’t related. The first spacer’s face had some spectacular bruises forming, and the other man was pressing a wet chiller cube against his shattered nose, saying, “You deserved that one, Shrike. Now hold that there.” His accent had as much Coruscant precision as Obi-Wan’s, and Obi-Wan bit down on a grin.

“I do’t fuckid’ deed it,” the older one slurred. The younger shook his head.

“Yes, you fucking do, now hold it there.” He glanced over and nodded to Obi-Wan. “I’d apologise for my friend’s behaviour, but it isn’t really my job.”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “I wouldn't expect it of you.”

The other man’s lips thinned as he heard the implied insult, but he held a hand out. “Cavik Toth. You were the Hazard’s pilot, then? Not bad. Got a few rough edges to polish off.”

Feid growled behind him, and Obi-Wan offered his most guileless smile as he shook Toth’s hand. “Oh, were you there, too?”

The other man shrugged. “It was a job. Nothing personal, Captain.”

“Oh, it never is.” The smile was starting to hurt, and Obi-Wan could have cheered when two CorSec officers in street clothes moved in to separate them. “Take care of yourself, Toth. It was lovely to meet you.”

“Well, come on, come on,” the older of the officers muttered, and Obi-Wan felt a jolt of recognition.

“It's...Rostek, right?”

The stocky Corellian grunted. “Rostek Horn, yeah. You got anyone else with you?” They collected Pulkka and Phel -- who had been lurking around the bar’s curve, protecting their drinks -- and rejoined Deesix and Zohli. Feid’s friend Gyiris accepted her drink with a nod.

“You need me here, officers?”
The younger CorSec officer shook his head. “We’ll need a statement, but you weren’t involved. Officer Cheyne--” he pointed to a short human woman who was taking notes from the bartender--“will take care of you.”

Gyiris raised her glass to Obi-Wan. “I’ll call on you later, Captain.” She knocked the tumbler of steaming acid-green liquid back in one go and left the empty glass on the table.

The two officers sat on the outside ends of the curved booth, blocking their group in. Rostek pulled a small holorecorder out and placed it in the middle of the table. “Bar fight at the Starport Cantina, eighteen-fifty, twenty-first of first, nine seventy-nine. Officers Rostek Horn and Tor Jiro witnessing.” He sounded bored as he questioned each of them in turn, and Obi-Wan wondered how frequent an occurrence it was.

Horn wrapped up the questioning by requesting a copy of Dee’s memory of the incident, which the droid provided, turned the recorder off, and stretched with a sigh. “This was not how I wanted my evening off to go, kids.”

A grin tugged at the corner of Obi-Wan’s mouth. “I did think the CorSec response was a bit fast.”

“Oh, the bartender buzzed as soon as the Uvaks showed up. The owner’s been looking for a solid excuse to ban them.” He eyed Obi-Wan, Feid, and Pulkka in turn. “As a witnessing CorSec officer, I’m required by law to inform you that your involvement in this little fracas constitutes a disruption of the peace, and future incidents will earn you arrest and a day in the drunk tank to cool off.” The roguish smirk reappeared. “As a CorSec officer who’s had to deal with these guys skating the limits too often, I have to say it was cathartic to see someone finally decorate Shrike’s face with their fist.”

Feid smirked viciously. “There’s more where that came from.” She was massaging and flexing her right palm fiercely, and Obi-Wan suspected she’d dislocated something again.

“I don’t doubt it, but please don’t make me have to do my job.”

The younger officer, a solidly built man a few years older than Obi-Wan with a thick crop of dark hair shaved around the back and sides, shook his head. “You really shouldn’t encourage them, sir. We’re supposed to maintain neutrality.”

“We’re all human, Tor, we’re allowed to acknowledge our personal feelings. It’s letting our prejudices influence our work that we have to watch out for.”

“Still, telling someone you just questioned--”

Rostek frowned. “This isn’t the time, Jiro.” He leaned across to shake Obi-Wan’s hand. “Good to see you again, kid. Keep your nose clean.” His eye fell on the green drink Feid had placed in front of Obi-Wan; its surface was giving off little wisps of steam. “And don’t drink that, if you value your guts.”

The officers left, and Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at Feid. She smirked and lifted her own drink, winking before throwing it back.

It smelled sweetly fruity, but with a strong underlying tang. Trusting in the Force to help process whatever was in it, Obi-Wan followed Feid’s example. The meiloorun liqueur clung to his tongue and throat, coating them against a follow-up searing acid burn that made his eyes water. He coughed and breathed through his nose -- which turned out to be a mistake as the fumes clawed their way into his sinuses -- and coughed again. “Ugh. What the fuck, Feid?”

She and Pulkka cackled at his expression. “I couldn't suffer Gyiris’ abuse alone.”
“Gyiris isn’t even here anymore, you utter wretch!” he rasped. He coughed again and sniffed hard, trying to clear the lingering burn. Deesix muttered something that made Zohli snort bubbles into the ridiculously fluffy drink in her hands.

“Well, we couldn’t just let it go to waste.”

“Oh, yes, we could!”

The Selonian bartender gestured him over as they were on their way out. “Hundred-credit charge for every person involved in a fight. Not that I really want to charge you, but--”

Obi-Wan shook his head and ran his chip over the paypoint, transferring three hundred credits. “It covers damages, and it’s a good deterrent. Fair’s fair.”

“Thanks, Captain. You and your crew come back any time!”

They were on the pedestrian walkway heading back to the spaceport when someone called his name; Obi-Wan turned to see Horn’s younger associate hurrying behind them. He waved for the others to go on ahead.

“Officer?”

“Hey.” The man sighed. “I’m sorry for losing my cool earlier. This wasn’t a massive deal, but I made it one--”

Obi-Wan laughed and held up a hand. “Whoa, slow down. You didn’t--”

“Nah, I shouldn’t have questioned Rostek in front of you guys, that was out of line.”

“Have you apologised to Rostek yet?”

Jiro snorted. “Of course I have. It’s just been a tough month, you know? Anyway--”

Obi-Wan tilted his head. There was something about the other man that told him not to let the conversation end there. “Do you need to talk about it?”

“Well, I--” Jiro broke off, frowning. “It’s not like you know anything about CorSec--”

“I know it has serious corruption issues. I know the previous Sub-Commissioner was indicted for embezzling funds and making deals with three of the local gangs to overlook their excesses if they took on an offworld cartel that was trying to set up off Treasure Ship Row.” Zohli had lingered and now sidled up to Obi-Wan while he spoke and put her arm around his waist, leaning into his side; he wrapped his arm around her shoulders and squeezed gently.

Officer Jiro seemed taken aback. He glanced around quickly and hissed, “How do you even know that?”

Obi-Wan winked. “Let’s just say Rostek and I have friends in common.”

Jiro’s expression opened dramatically. “Oh, you were the guy at the sabacc game. With the Weequay friend and the--! Horn wouldn’t tell me your names. Probably for a good reason, huh?” He sighed. “I keep wondering if this is really worth it. I wanted to help people, but this...this isn’t helping.”

Obi-Wan’s lips twitched in amusement. “You were aptly named. Tor means ‘justice’ in Mando’a,” he clarified at the man’s confused look.
“Oh.” Jiro shrugged. “Dad was a bucket-head. He wanted us to follow the traditional ways and Mom was having none of it. They split, she brought us here. I can’t say I regret not being a warrior like he wanted.”

“It’s not a life for everyone, true.” Obi-Wan studied him closely. “There are other options, you know. The New Mandalorians follow a non-violent code.”

“New Mandalorians, huh?” Jiro’s eyes flicked to Zohli, then to where the rest of their crew had gone. “You’ve spent time with them?”

“Long enough.” He grinned. “Worked with their Head of Security a time.”

Jiro’s lopsided smile was cautious. “You think they’d have a place for a disaffected security officer?”

Zohli said, “It can’t hurt to ask, can it?”

“Sometimes it can. Especially if your boss sees you’re looking for work elsewhere.” Jiro squinted at Obi-Wan. “You know who I could contact?”

“Ethyne Matsuuri.” Obi-Wan grinned. “If you do, tell her Kenobi sends his regards.”

Zohli waited until they were almost back to the hangar before asking, “Was that the right thing to do? I mean, he has a job here.”

Obi-Wan squeezed her hand gently. “Sometimes, people feel stuck where they are. It makes them unhappy, discontent, they feel like there’s only one road left. They need someone else to point out that there are other options, other places to go, if they just take a little risk.” Obi-Wan laughed and looked down at her fondly. “I’ve had several people do that for me. I don’t regret where it’s led me so far, and if I can pass the favour on to another, it’s worth it.”

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“Caliiga. What’s the word?”

“Well.” The Sith acolyte leaned back in her chair and propped a foot on the edge of the control panel. “It’s not good. Either Krayn’s second in command was on the take from the start, or -- more likely -- her new boyfriend was a plant from this Red Sun group. He may even have been directly in charge, or have hired them. It’s difficult to say.”

Tuuz hummed. “Details, please.”

“The second in command, human woman by the name of Zora. Disappeared after the attack on the conference room. Her body isn’t among the ones stashed at the local morgue awaiting identification and pickup, at least, so I’m assuming she’s still alive. Her boyfriend has likewise disappeared.”

On the other end of the holo, Tuuz frowned and leaned forward with his elbows on the desk. “How was Krayn killed?”

“They dropped a ship -- one of the ones they stole from him, for extra irony -- past the airspace security and blew the top floor apart. Krayn and at least one other seem to have survived long enough to get shot in the back by Red Sun forces arriving to mop things up. The details are vague, since the security cams in the room were destroyed by cannon-fire.”
“Interesting. What have you got on Zora and her friend?”

“Krayn’s security guy didn’t like Zora’s boy, he had a huge file on him. Name’s Gav Davine. Deven? I can’t tell how to pronounce that. Human, early-mid twenties, dark hair, missing an eye. Looks like someone shoved him face-first through a window.” She tapped a couple keys, sharing the dossier page with Tuuz’s screen. “Didn’t make any fuss about starting from the bottom of the pile, despite Zora dragging him into bed the first night they met.”

“Was that normal behaviour for her?”

“Yeah, looks like. Zora clawed her way up from nothing, and doesn’t seem to have been trying for the position she got. Not ambitious, just damn competent. Red hair, early twenties, started with them mid-’76. Got attention after a dust-up on Concord Dawn later that year, where she saved the then-second, Wookiee named Gaarhaka, from being torn apart by a Jedi plant among the Protectors.”

Tuuz spun his chair lazily the way he usually did when mulling something over. It was an annoying trait, but Caliiga couldn’t throw anything at him via the holo. “Since when did Jedi give a shit about things in the Mandalorian sector?”

“Last known interference was when they assigned a Knight-Padawan pair to watch over the baby Duchess about a decade ago. Looks like this was less about Mandalore and more about shutting down the Concord Dawn operation.”

Tuuz paused his spinning and his eyes narrowed at something outside the range of the cams. “Maybe. Might not even have been a Jedi thing. That Kenobi kid you were tracking down was in Mandalore space, right?”

“You think it might have been him?”

“The timing is right. Mandalore tabloids kicked up a fuss over him not being seen for a few days right before he went to visit our friend Tyranus.”

“Okay, so the lady can hold her own against a fallen Jedi, but disappears from Red Sun’s body count. Maybe she really was on the take the whole time.” There are no coincidences in the Force. “In the meantime, the Red Sun has also vanished. No mention of them anywhere. Either these guys have a base hidden somewhere in the karking Maw, or there’s something else going on. Over a hundred people don’t just appear out of nowhere. There isn’t anything unusual in the moon’s Customs records for that time.”

“It’s Nar Shaddaa. They could have bought their invisibility.”

“Or they’re based on Nar Shaddaa, and hide among the general population.”

“A little far-fetched, isn’t that? How would a group like that get their wealth, fund their activities? There’s no--”

Tuuz’s jaw dropped at the same moment a chill ran down Caliiga’s spine. They locked eyes across light years through the holo-emitters. “The Hutts.”
Trials

Chapter Summary

Aurra Sing faces justice.

The Padawans face a group of younglings.

Chapter Notes

Much love to norcum, saneronthelinside, jynx, and cuzosu for last-minute beta'ing while I was on a flight, because my time management sucks and I got sucked into the Imperial Agent plotline in SWTOR this week. I regret nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 979.01.28
Coruscant

As a twenty-five thousand-year institution, the Republic had had plenty of time to perfect the art of the public tribunal. The chamber was deliberately dark, spotlights pouring shafts of painfully white light down onto the head of the accused while the jury, witnesses, and triumvirate of judges remained in comfortable dimness above eye level.

This was not a trial determining guilt: responsibility had already been confirmed. This was a spectacle to issue punishment.

Aurra’s stained clothes had been confiscated with her gear, and she’d been offered a simple grey jumpsuit to wear. It hung poorly on her bony frame. Her hair was matted from being laid on and shifted around while she was unconscious, but she couldn’t brush it with her hands cuffed in front of her. Her broken ribs had been given basic treatment, but with the roar of adrenaline faded, she ached. Bruises, strained muscles, a twisted ankle she hadn’t noticed. Her head throbbed dully, a combination of the stun shot, the inhibitor cuffs securing her wrists, and that Jedi bitch’s last strike to her head. The concussion had been treated, too; the Republic’s pathetic attempt at showing mercy, probably in hopes that she might regret her actions and express remorse.

You couldn’t take remorse to the bank.

They had given her four guards. Even bound as she was, Aurra could probably take them all out in less than two minutes, but none of them carried gate access keys. Or weapons she could steal. They were thorough, damn them. Even if she killed the guards, she’d find herself trapped in one of the multiple chambers of the passage from the holding cells to the Judicial chamber. They’d probably pump the place full of gas to knock her out.

No, her best chance was to wait until after this farce of a trial. Prison would be far more lax.
Unless they turned her over to the Jedi.

The guards prodded her forward onto a circular platform, chained the inhibitor cuffs to a loop in the floor, and stepped back, leaving her standing alone as the platform drifted forward over a seemingly abyssal drop. It wasn't actually that far -- the dark paint job did a lot to make the shadows look deeper, but anyone who could see beyond human visual range could tell where the floor was.

“Aurra Sing. You stand accused of fifteen counts of murder of Republic citizens, and twenty-three more which you have....” Whoever was talking cleared their throat uncomfortably. “For which you have claimed responsibility, to the point of providing details and locations of the victims whose bodies had not yet been discovered.”

She smirked and with careful deliberation sat down on the platform.

There was a long, disapproving silence, punctuated by the sounds of the jury and witnesses stifling reactions to Aurra’s rudeness.

“Your guilt has been confirmed and is not in question, only the manner in which you will atone for these crimes.”

If they had been in a civilised setting, this would be the part where she would take a drink while making uncomfortable eye contact. She settled instead for staring half-lidded at the place where she knew the judges were sitting.

Another platform drifted forward to a point slightly in front and to the right of hers. The Mon Calamari perched on it straightened the sash they wore proclaiming them the Speaker of the Jury.

“Your Honours, members of the Jury, and esteemed witnesses. The accused, Aurra Sing, has not only declined an advocate but has in her official statement declared a complete lack of concern for her fate. The jury has therefore made its decision based upon the circumstances and severity of her crimes. The accused’s most grievous offense is toward the citizens of the Republic. While it is acknowledged that she is able to use the Force, and that her capture required the skills of several Jedi Knights and Masters, her attack upon two Jedi Masters was one of opportunity rather than premeditation. Her assault upon the citizens of the Lower Twelve-Twenty-Third District of Coruscant was deliberate, premeditated, and intended to cause escalating terror among the population.

“The jury recognises that there is precedent for execution in such a case, as referenced from Judicial Inquest Four Oh Eight Fifty-Two, Twenty-One Thirty-Six. However, it was felt that execution would not allow the accused the opportunity for reform.”

Translation: death would be too kind. She bit back a laugh -- into a box, it was.

“It is therefore the recommendation of this jury that the accused be incarcerated in the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center, under--”

The Speaker was drowned out by a rumble of dissent from the gallery. The Judges signaled for silence, and the Speaker’s hand went up.

“Please. While it is normally for the Jedi to restrain and control such criminals, the accused’s crimes are not against the Jedi. Force inhibitors will be made available for use, and the accused shall be kept in the high security ward, until it is determined that she has earned the right to her freedom.”

Unlikely. Aurra doubted she would be there even half that long. Once the focus on her was gone, no amount of security would be foolproof.
The triumvirate signaled a moment for deliberation and activated the privacy screen, and the room filled with the soft hum of quiet conversation among the onlookers. It was only a few minutes before the Judges signaled their concurrence.

“The recommendation of the jury has been considered and accepted. It is the decision of this court that Aurra Sing be placed in custody of the Republic Judiciary Central Detention Center for rehabilitation, until assessed fit to return to society.”

She couldn’t help snickering at the idea of ever having been part of “society”. These cloud-headed fools had such a narrow concept of how the galaxy really worked.

The platform returned to its place and the guards unchained her cuffs from the floor. One of them made the mistake of trying to grab her under the arm to make her stand; she lunged forward, driving her shoulder into his armored gut and sending him reeling backwards off the platform. He landed with a satisfying thud on the floor below, but to judge from his wheezing he’d survived the trip.

Her shoulder was going to bruise, but it was worth it. She nearly folded, cackling at the flurry of panic from the people in the gallery above. Maybe that had been a bit of overkill, but the guards would be certain not to touch her again.

“What’s got you looking so down?”

A’Sharad looked up from his datapad. His friends were spread around Master Qui-Gon’s sitting room. Even though there were a number of spaces in the Temple where they could sit and talk, Jinn’s quarters had quickly become the favoured location for playing games, browsing the HoloNet, or watching Anakin fuss with yet another of his pet MSE droids as the kid tweaked with its systems. A’Sharad still couldn’t understand why the droids let him do that, although it didn’t seem to harm them in any way.

He turned the datapad so Etain could see the article he was reading.

She frowned. “Aurra Sing? Where do I know that name from?”

“She’s a bounty hunter,” Anakin explained distractedly. “She worked for the Hutts sometimes.” He made a face. “She wasn’t very nice.”

Kseli made a garbled, choking-cat noise A’Sharad had come to recognise as a laugh. “Anyone who works for the Hutts can’t be considered nice,” the Aleena padawan said. She shifted the MSE between her hands so Anakin could reach a particular place inside its carapace. “That sort of environment will infect anyone after a while.”

“Not gonna argue that.” A’Sharad had seen too much of the Hutts’ excesses on Tatooine. “I dunno if Sing ever had a nice bone in her body.” He turned the datapad off and leaned back against the front of Master Qui-Gon’s ratty old couch, eyes tracing the subtle pattern of the ceiling plaster. “I watched her kill my Dad.”

The others went uncomfortably silent, until Anakin dropped something that clattered on the low table and swore in Huttese as he scrabbled to catch it. Que-Mars gasped in mock outrage. “Does your Master know you use that kind of language?” the Weequay boy asked, clutching his chest.
Anakin snorted as he retrieved the bit. “As long as I don't use it in public, Qui-Gon doesn't mind.” He glanced at A’Sharad. “She really did that? Why?”

He shrugged, scowling. “The Hutts were trying to use the settlers to push us out of our land. Dad was doing a good job uniting the tribes to stand against them and their mercenaries. So Jabba hired Sing to kill him.”

Etain’s hand rested on his for a moment. “You have some dark feelings about it, A’Sharad.”

“I…” He shook his head. “There are Raider laws I wish I could follow, but they don’t exist on Core worlds -- or at least, I would be in as much trouble for acting on them here as Sing is for just randomly killing people. Core politics doesn’t see them as being any different. If I had happened across her anywhere but here, I would have been within my rights to kill her. But would that be the Jedi thing to do? Probably not.”

The Twi’lek girl who’d been sitting curled around a cuddly toy tooka in the corner of the couch unfolded and stood. Xiaan was quiet -- not in the shy way, but in the recovering from trauma way, and A’Sharad sympatihised with her situation. The tooka toy had been a gift from the group of them when they’d started inviting her to spend time in their company a few days earlier. Knight Tachi hadn’t yet chosen Xiaan as her padawan, but it was only a matter of time.

“When I’m feeling really bad, I go to the créche and spend time with the Initiates.” She looked at him with serious blue eyes. “Maybe it would help?”

A’Sharad, Etain, and Que-Mars exchanged glances; Anakin and Kseli remained focused on the droid, but Anakin said, “Two more minutes.”

They made an odd group: A’Sharad was the eldest at eighteen Standard, but Anakin had hit another growth spurt and was nearly the same height. Kseli was only a year younger than him, but her people's short stature put the girl only a bit taller than Master Yoda. Despite their disparity in ages, the six of them had bonded tightly purely by dint of having few other friends. Until they’d been Knighted and swept off on their own work for the Order, Bant and Garen had spent time with the group as well.

An Arconan Master whom A’Sharad didn’t recognise smiled as they entered. “Padawan Amersu! Are you here for a visit?”

The girl bowed. “Yes, Master Parrie. My friends here wish to visit, as well.”

Master Parrie’s eyes literally glowed with pleasure. “I wish more Padawans would visit. Clawmouse clan has finished their lessons for the day -- and they’re not painting this time,” she added with a chuckle.

Xiaan laughed, a rare sound. “That’s a relief! I was finding bits of purple everywhere after the last time!”

The créche always seemed to exist in a permanent state of controlled chaos. A’Sharad had been inside twice before: once on his introductory tour of the temple with Master Ki-Adi, and once when he’d found a lost Initiate crying in a corridor. He couldn't blame them for getting lost, the temple was a huge place, and a lot of the hallways looked the same, if you hadn't figured out the landmarks.

Xiaan, Kseli, Etain and Que-Mars were immediately dragged into a game that looked like it involved two groups trying to catch a ball, but half of the younglings couldn’t remember who was on whose team, and would Force-toss the ball to their friends on the opposite team instead. Anakin and
A’Sharad, head and shoulders taller than everyone else, were regarded with caution.

A pink-faced Iktochi girl, her growing horns still pliant and pale, tugged A’Sharad’s hand. “My name’s Chimeeru. Do you read?”

He dropped to one knee to put himself at her level. “Of course I do.” Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Anakin going over to an Initiate who was having trouble with a toy droid of some sort. Abandoned to the mercies of a six-year old. Thanks, kid.

Chimeeru pressed a datapad into his hand and tugged him over to a squishy chair in the corner where a couple other Initiates were waiting with hopeful eyes. “None of us is as good at doing the voices as Master Parrie, but she’s busy right now. We need someone to do the voices right.”

_Uh oh._ That was a trap, but he was already caught in it. “Okay, ‘Captain Len and the Pirate King.’ I don’t know this book, what do they sound like?”

The younglings coached him through it -- there were a _lot_ of interruptions that tested his patience -- and a thirty-page holo-story took the rest of the time until a soft bell announced dinner in the refectory. But Xiaan had been right: the happy energy in the room -- and having to constantly check for munchkins sneaking up on him -- helped A’Sharad focus his thoughts elsewhere for a while.

He and the others helped Master Parrie herd the younglings toward the refectory, Chimeeru clinging to A’Sharad’s left hand and a Togruta girl in deep magenta robes holding his right.

Chimeeru had been quiet on the walk down the hall; at the door to the refectory, she stopped and tugged his sleeve. “Shar. You feel like desert.”

He smiled. “Well, I’m from the desert.”

She frowned up at him, her golden-brown eyes pinched. “But you shouldn’t go back.”

“No?”

The Togruta girl grabbed her friend's hand impatiently. “Come _on_, Chimee! There’s malla fruit tonight!”

Chimeeru was still focused on A’Sharad, pulling his arm until he knelt at her level. “You go, ‘Soka, I’ll catch up.”

The Togruta stuck her tongue out playfully. “Maybe I’ll _eat it all_ before you do!” She scurried into the queue forming at the front of the room.

Chimeeru wrapped her arms around A’Sharad’s neck in a hug. “I dreamed of you in the red desert,” she whispered. “It’s not good for you. You were angry, and things were burning.”

Swallowing hard, A’Sharad hugged her back. “I’ll try to remember that, Chimee.”

She clung for a moment. “You’ll be back.”

He laughed softly. “Oh I will, huh?”

She let him go and the smile she gave him was massive and brilliant. “In three years. I’ll be waiting for you!” Chimeeru turned before he could say anything else and skipped away to join Ahsoka.

Stunned, A’Sharad watched the Initiate go. He rubbed the back of his head and winced at the realisation that his hair was child-tousled, the neat braid a fraying mess. Pulling the tie from the end,
he set about re-plaiting his hair while trying to collect his thoughts.

“Kids say the darnedest things, don’t they?” a deep, amused voice said from his left.

Startled, he turned and felt the blood drain from his face. “Master Windu!” Half the plait fell apart as he straightened. “Sorry, sir, I’m not blocking the door, am I?”

The Head of the Order chuckled warmly. “Not at all. I caught the end of that. Thinks she’s going to be your Padawan, hmm?”

Torn between manners and not looking a complete mess, A’Sharad finished dealing with his hair and tied the end off. “Apparently so. She told me I shouldn’t go back to Tatooine, though. It’s ‘bad’ for me.”

Master Windu nodded in consideration. “Well. We’ll keep that in mind. The future is always in motion, but Iktochi have the gift of telepathy, and she might be referring to something else.”

“Yes, sir.”

Master Windu tilted his head in the direction of the dinner queue. “Looks like your friends are waiting. Have a good evening, Padawan.”

“Thank you, Master!” A’Sharad hurried to catch up with the others, wide-eyed. Etain had grabbed a tray for him when she’d noticed him being held up by Chimeeru. Peeling open the leaf that had wrapped a steamed dumpling of some sort, he glanced around the table. “Well, that was weird.”

Xiaan gave him one of her rare smiles. “You made a friend already?”

“I think so.” He grinned back and swallowed a mouthful of rice. “That was a good idea. Thanks, Xiaan.”

Etain frowned. “Where’d Anakin go?” The younger boy had been with them when they left the crèche, but he was nowhere to be seen when A’Sharad glanced around.

“Said he was having dinner with Master Qui-Gon tonight,” Kseni said, licking sauce off her rounded claws.

“Oh right, it's Eighthday. I forgot.” Etain blushed.

A’Sharad frowned. Anakin wasn’t in the Temple at all, that he could sense. He and Master Qui-Gon spent dinner together once a week, but they were secretive about where they went. There was nothing inherently wrong with that, but it was different. Everything between them seemed fine, at least; with Anakin’s thirteenth year looming, they were being assessed for field missions, and the younger Padawan was impatient to get to work.

“Betcha they go to Dex’s.” Que-Mars was rolling his eyes, but there was a note of envy in his voice. Dex’s Diner wasn’t known for its health food or balanced diet, and the idea of having something unhealthy and comforting to eat was enough to make them all grumble.

“He’d better not be having ice cream without us--” Etain started, but Kseli shushed her.

“Ss-st! Over there.”

Making an extreme effort to not look like they were staring, the group watched one of Anakin’s mouse droids whirr its way into the refectory and circle the room once before smacking into the side
of Master Windu’s foot with a squeal that, A’Sharad only knew from association with Anakin, was as creatively offensive as an MSE could manage. Master Windu stared after the droid in baffled consternation as it whirled and darted away, still spewing commentary about the Head of the Order’s cleaning habits.

On the other side of the room, five Padawans nearly collapsed trying to keep from laughing aloud.

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Turning the signs off and sealing the workshop door was still a novel experience. Shmi often found herself marveling at the keys to the space she owned -- owned! Hers and no one else’s -- fascinated that something so small could mean so much.

With the assistance of the repatriation group, she had applied for and won a grant to open a repair shop, capitalising on skills she had learned the hard way on Tatooine. She still needed Anakin’s help with some of the more troublesome cases, particularly corrupted programming, but the classes she took after hours were swiftly catching her up. She would need to hire an actual assistant soon, at the rate things were going.

[[Lady Shmi? Excuse me, Lady?]]

The plaintive young voice brought her around. Two Rodian girls from the diaspora enclave stood shifting their feet shyly, mesh bags clutched in their hands. Shmi sighed.

“Tiran, is that actual salvage, or did you net a droid again?”

The older girl looked offended. [[It’s real, Lady Shmi! Look!]]

A cursory peek inside the bags showed a pile of wiring and some internal components, not too badly corroded to be restored, if there was nothing else wrong with them. Shmi nodded.

“Alright, I’ll buy them, but you have to come back in the morning before school. I have to close early today. No, shush. Whining won’t help. I have family visiting tonight.”

Tiran’s little sister, a bare year younger than Anakin and suffering a badly hidden crush, perked up and blushed a deeper shade of green. [[Could we, um--?]]

[[Raaji, that’s rude!]] Tiran scolded. [[We’ll be back bright and early, Lady Shmi!] They hurried away up the street and Shmi watched them go, wondering if Tiran would be interested in a job once she finished her basic education. The girl hadn’t expressed an interest in attending a secondary school yet, so an apprenticeship was the next best option for her.

And maybe with regular pay, Tiran and Raaji wouldn't feel the need to scrounge the lower levels for scraps. It was risky down there.

Another key unlocked the door to her home -- her home, and she still marveled at that, too. It was pleasant with open spaces, split into three levels with the kitchen overlooking the lounge and the bedrooms on the floor above. Most of the furniture had been donated or purchased from reclaimers, and the styles were a chaotic blend that gave it a cosy feeling.

She paused on her way up the stairs to check the plants in the windows -- potted herbs that did well with the solar-wave interior lights necessary this far down the Coruscant stacks -- and plucked a few
leaves as she did. The pot on the cooker released the tantalizing aroma of roasted nerf when she lifted the lid to add the whole leaves and a packet of vegetables she’d pre-chopped to the liquid at the bottom. It was more than she usually made for herself and Kitster, but three guests required more.

The front door hissing open announced Kitster’s return. “You’ll never believe what I got on the way back!”

She leaned over the half-wall to look down into the lounge, where the teenager was brandishing a truly astonishing decorated pastry. “Kitster Chanchani Banai, please tell me that didn’t cost your week’s wages.”

He laughed and bounced up the steps to hand it to her. It weighed significantly more than she had thought it would for something so fluffy. “Nope, I told Appadaki it was family night and he was like, well, it would be a shame if this pallie tart went stale. Half price!”

“So, only half your week’s wages,” Shmi teased. No wonder it was heavy: the flaky crust was probably stuffed to bursting with fruit and cream. She slid it into the cooling unit to keep the filling stable and shooed Kitster upstairs to change from his work uniform and shower -- the smell of tabacc smoke from the tapcafe always clung to his hair.

Anakin arrived first with Qui-Gon, her son bearing a food-storage container. “It's something Etain taught me to make,” he said shyly as he hugged her. At almost thirteen years old, he was rapidly nearing her height. “It's probably not anything like as good--”

“Nonsense,” Shmi said fondly, handing him a cup of water. “Did you taste it first?” The water wasn’t a necessity on a planet like Coruscant, but the tradition of greeting visitors with refreshment was one Shmi felt shouldn't be lost.

Anakin blushed, and Master Jinn chuckled as he accepted his own cup. “He might have nibbled a bit more than he intended to.”

“Well, then I’m sure it's fine.”

It appeared to be a salad of some sort, made from a mixture of edible succulent threads, sprouted beans, and strings of something that turned out to be a kind of tuber, coated in a thin sauce of something that tasted faintly nutty, a little sour, and carried a wonderful afterburn of spice. Shmi wrested a promise from Anakin to send her the recipe later.

Kitster had just emerged, dressed more comfortably and no longer smelling of smoke, when the door chime rang. Anakin frowned when Shmi asked him to see who it was.

“Are we expecting someone else, Mom?”

Shmi merely smiled and handed him another cup of water.

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Being careful not to spill the water -- he was unhappy to admit that his coordination had become terrible -- Anakin went down the short entry hall and keyed the door open. His jaw dropped when he saw who was waiting there, a mischievous smile on her face and a bottle of something green in her hands.
“Padmé?!?”

The Naboo Queen was dressed entirely normally for this level of Coruscant. Her bodyguards were nowhere in sight, but Anakin only had to try a little in order to sense their watchful presence in the street outside. He accepted the bottle and offered her the handmade clay cup.

She accepted it graciously. “As soon as I knew I’d be on Coruscant this week, I commed your mother. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah, it has!” He blinked as he realised they were nearly the same height -- Padmé was still taller, but not by much. “You got shorter!”

She laughed and hung her cloak on one of the hooks on the wall. His mom came forward to offer Padmé a hug while Anakin checked the bottle’s storage instructions and put it in the chiller. As soon as he realised who Padmé was, Kitster’s spine went rigid and he nearly knocked his own cup over as he put it down.

“Your Highness--!”

Padmé shook her head with a smile and offered her hand. “Today, I’m just Padmé. It’s wonderful to see you again, Kitster.” Anakin swallowed a laugh as Kitster’s ears turned red.

Qui-Gon accepted a hug with good grace and then came up to the kitchen. “I’ll help your mother, Anakin. Go spend time with your friends.”

He chewed the inside of his lip. Not that he didn't really, really want to catch up with Padmé, but....

“It's supposed to be family duty--”

The Jedi Master’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “Then do yours by entertaining the guest.”

It couldn't have been Anakin's imagination that his mom glanced at Qui-Gon with approval as she bustled around with dishes. He closed his mouth on what he'd been about to say next and wordlessly brought a sweating carafe of juice down to the drinks service on the low table between the mismatched couches.

It wasn't the first time he’d caught one or both of the adults looking at each other; he just hadn't figured it out when he was younger. The idea of his mom and Qui-Gon liking each other didn't particularly disturb him: his master was already pretty much part of the family. It was how the Jedi seemed determined to enforce a lack of emotional attachments that made him concerned.

Sure, Qui-Gon wasn’t much for following the rules that closely. But if the Order found out about Anakin’s mom -- after three years, it seemed they still didn't know she still had a place in Anakin's life, but the longer it went on, the riskier that got -- they might insist on the visits stopping, or do something else to ensure she was cut off from them. Anakin resolved to discuss it with Qui-Gon. Later, though.

Padmé was rolling her eyes, telling Kitster about what politics had brought her back to Coruscant. “-- And the Chancellor insisted that it wasn't necessary, but our new Senator had never encountered a situation like this before and wanted my input. And besides,” she added with a conspiratorial wink, “I'll take any excuse to get out of the throne room for a couple weeks.”

“What's going on?” Anakin asked as he refilled their cups with the tart, pale purple juice.

“Naboo’s representatives sit on the Senate Repatriation Committee,” Padmé explained. “Someone
recently liberated a large number of slaves from Nar Shaddaa, and provided information on where a
great deal more were located on Kessel, and the Committee is trying to work out how to help them.
Or if the Republic even *can* help them,” she finished sourly.

Anakin sat down on the opposite couch and tucked a foot under himself. Three years ago, he’d been
dismayed at Qui-Gon’s insistence that they hadn’t come to Tatooine to free slaves -- *any* slaves.
Knowing now that there was a balance the Jedi -- the entire Republic -- walked with regard to
ending slavery practices and economic disruption, didn’t lessen the sting any. As a child he’d had
visions of Jedi wading in, lightsabers swinging, and the slave owners just doing what the Jedi said to,
because it was *the right thing*, and didn't everyone want to do the right thing? But people were more
concerned about doing the right thing *for themselves* first, he’d learned, and too often the politicians
were more concerned with their own bank accounts and maintaining their seats than fixing the
 glaring issues.

*Because those glaring issues are what their seats are built on.*

He shook his head and dismissed the bitter thought. “What’s the problem, exactly?”

Padmé wrapped her hands around her cup, frowning. “Too many important people have business
ties with Kessel and they're hesitant to upset the mine owners.”

Kitster was scowling. “It's a glitterstim mine. Glit isn’t good for anything other than getting people
hooked on a nasty habit.”

“It's also a Republic prison,” she sighed. “It's a bad operation--”

“Why do people have business ties to a prison?” Anakin struggled to push away the outrage. “Never
mind the mines there that are separate, because no politician would admit to working with those, but
what business does a prison have making money? It's there to rehabilitate people, or if that isn't
possible, keep them out of public society.”

“Some call it ‘repaying their debt to society’. ” From the sour tone of Padmé’s voice, it was clear
what she thought of that.

“So, because someone did something wrong, they can be used by someone else as a slave? That’s
fair?” His jaw was hurting from being clenched so tightly.

*Padawan.*

Qui-Gon’s mental voice  was mild, but it brought him back to his senses. Anakin breathed deeply,
held it, let it out, envisioning the anger going with it. He held up a hand as Padmé started to speak.

“I’m sorry. I know you have no power over that. It sounds like an excuse from people who only see
other sentients as things to use.”

Padmé sighed. “For what it’s worth, I agree with you. We have a number of doctors and a couple
Jedi Mind Healers who have come forward with studies indicating better ways to treat and
rehabilitate prisoners, and it's nothing new. There’s a proposal several thousand years old in the
records deploring the state of incarceration and servitude.”

Qui-Gon leaned over the half-wall from the kitchen. “Studies have indicated marked long term
benefits if we turn the system around. But too many would prefer to lock prisoners up and lose the
key, or get a source of cheap labour from them. Would you care to lighten the mood and join us?”

Dinner was much more cheerful. Kitster had some hilarious stories about the colourful types who
frequented the tapcafe. The list of banned customers sounded like a comedy act.

“Why do they call him Giani Three Legs?” Anakin asked.

Kitster scowled. “I asked that, too, ‘cus he’s full human. The serving girl I asked just started laughing and said she’d explain when I’m older.”

The two adults at the table exchanged wide-eyed looks and Kitster snorted. “I bet you're gonna say the same thing, too.”

“Yes!” Shmi said, blushing. “Absolutely not until you're older, although I dare say you’ll figure it out for yourselves eventually!”

He was almost curious enough to consider checking the HoloNet later, but that definitely sounded like a search term Anakin might regret. He focused instead on enjoying the time spent with his odd extended family.

Only one person was missing. Anakin wondered where Obi-Wan was, if he was alright. He owed the older boy -- although Obi-Wan would be nearly twenty-four now -- for reminding Qui-Gon of his mom’s needs. It was possible Shmi might have gained her freedom some other way without Obi-Wan’s intervention, but as Qui-Gon had said before, there was little point in fretting over what might have been. This was now, and everyone but Obi-Wan was here.

Anakin wondered what he was doing now.

Prison was about what one might expect. Boring bare walls, one side entirely open with a transparent force field that provided zero privacy. Aurra was permitted two hours outside every day, with access to an open duracrete yard and sonic showers. As someone who identified as female, she’d been housed among other women, and contact with other-gendered prisoners was fiercely restricted.

It was remarkably peaceful, although there had been the incident on the third day where a gang of five women had accosted her in the showers to lay down the ground rules. She had laid all but one out on the duracrete in various states of consciousness and said simply to leave her alone and she wouldn't cause trouble.

The security droids only cared about prisoners trying to leave.

A week and a half into her stay, she was cuffed and brought out to one of the interview rooms. She used the opportunity to gauge the level of security she’d have to deal with. It wasn't encouraging but she’d broken into tougher places.

The person waiting for her was not the besuited stiff she’d expected. Under the enveloping dark robes was, she guessed, a human male of middling age. He remained standing while she was shoved into a chair and shackled to the floor; there was just enough give to rest her hands on the table but not enough to cross her legs comfortably.

The guards departed, and the man clasped his hands behind him. “Hello, Lady Sing. I'm sorry our initial meeting is less than cordial.”

She smirked. “It was never going to be. You're Caliga’s boss.”
He seemed taken aback by her theft of his grandstand moment. “Correct. I am Lord Sidious. You have done work for me in the past, although I used an alias—”

“Of course you did. You set up this little charade in the underlevels.” She sneered. “I can’t say I’m impressed with how that ended.”

“A minor oversight,” the Sith said with a wave of his hand. “There is an opportunity here which we might take advantage of. You were trained by the Jedi and the Sennex. I am here to offer you the training of the Sith.”

She stared into the darkness of his cowl; more than shadow concealed his face, but his eyes gleamed a sickly yellow. It was a neat trick.

Aurra sat back in her chair. What might have been a casual pose was spoiled by the binders on her wrists. “Interesting proposition. What’s in it for me?”

Sidious chuckled. “Eight years. Regular training, where you have some relative freedom. And when those eight years are up, we unleash you upon the galaxy.”

She considered the offer. Siddy would undoubtedly try to use her as a pawn rather than a free agent. However, having more power at her disposal would give her a better chance of slipping any leash he tried to use.

To wait here in this hole biding time, or take a guaranteed exit? It wasn’t much of a choice, and the Sith knew it.

“Alright, Lord Sidious. You have a deal.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a short interlude this time.

I re-watched the part of The Clone Wars where Ahsoka is on trial and immediately saw fifteen ways Aurra could escape from that setup -- clearly intended for compliant prisoners, which she definitely is not. Assume Aurra's trial does not take place in the same location.
Neophyte

Chapter Summary

Previously: After delivering Jedi Master Renni Kerr and Knight Uell to the Corellian Temple, the crew of the Sunflare met Feid and Pulkka’s friend Gyiris, were offered a job, and had an unfortunate encounter with Garris Shrike and Cavik Toth of the Uvak Mercenaries.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, Iunara, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 979.02.07
The Sunflare

Meditation was different when he was leading Phel through it. As Ulic had done with Obi-Wan at the start, Obi-Wan hovered at the fringes of Phel’s mind, giving xir little nudges and suggestions as needed. Phel had finally managed enough control to send thoughts while they worked -- xe had been struggling with it for months, determined to at least acquire the skill, if not master it.

In truth, it was more than Obi-Wan had suspected Phel of being capable of doing, and they were equally thrilled at xir advancement.

Phel’s history was as unfortunately dark as Obi-Wan had suspected; it had taken weeks of work for his friend’s natural shielding to recognise him as a friendly presence and let him in. By mutual agreement, outside of their meditation sessions, they never discussed what Obi-Wan saw, and they did their meditation in Phel’s quarters for privacy’s sake.

Phel’s mind didn’t trust Ulic at all, which the spirit said was probably for the best.

Your shields just look so much neater than mine. Mine just looks like I piled rocks everywhere. The communication was less words and more jumbled impressions and images, but the meaning was clear.

A smile twitched the corner of Obi-Wan’s mouth. Because I spent years cleaning mine up and strengthening them deliberately. Eventually we can get a start on yours, but first you have to feel comfortable enough to dismantle what you have. The foundations need to be reinforced before you can build better walls.

Isn't that, like...really risky?

Not with someone helping you.
Obi-Wan felt a nudge from Ulic and pulled himself out of the trance. Phel wiped the tears from xir eyes with one hand and sniffed, smiling shakily at Obi-Wan as he squeezed xir other hand gently. “Take a break, I’ll go deal with the flying.”

Pulkka cleared out of the pilot’s seat for him as he entered the cockpit.

“Where’s Zohli? It’s suspiciously quiet.”

In the copilot’s seat, Feid barked a laugh. “Secondary cargo, playing with that trainer setup again. Ulic’s supervising.”

“I wasn’t worried until you said that.”

His friend grinned. “She’s getting good with it. We should have a free-for-all day and see how she handles it.”

“Good idea. Targeting is one thing, combat stress is a whole different story.” Obi-Wan reached forward and hit the button alerting anyone not in the cockpit that return to realspace would be happening shortly. “If she ignores that and gets flattened against the forward bulkhead, it’ll be a lesson learned.”

Pulkka whuffled in amusement and left to make sure things were secure. Feid rubbed at her broken horn. “You sure we can trust this contact of yours?”

For a moment he considered saying yes. But it had been months, and there was no telling whether their secure channel had been compromised. “I want to. But I don’t know if we can.”

“Shoulda checked those coordinates with Nym.”

“I did. As far as he knows, it’s empty space. Good spot for a quiet meetup.”

“Or a trap.”

They were heading up the Corellian Run, to a spot somewhere between Christophsis and Savareen. Obi-Wan’s course had them running roughly parallel to the route and approaching from a low angle. “It’s not like we’re out in dead space, at least.” The hyperspace alarm went off, and they dropped the ship back into realspace.

It took Obi-Wan a moment to recognise what he was seeing; he felt himself go pale even as his hands shot toward the nav panel. “Ohkarkinghells--”

Feid cursed. “Please tell me you programmed in an escape route!”

Above and to their right, barely visible except as a pattern of running lights against the blackness of space, loomed a truly massive Trade Federation battleship. Kate squealed and numbers began scrolling up the nav screen as the droid searched frantically for a fast destination.

“It’s not like we’re out in dead space, at least.” The hyperspace alarm went off, and they dropped the ship back into realspace.

“I wish. The nearest mapped gravity well is Christophsis!”

“Of course it kriffin’ is,” Feid gritted sourly. ”Hang on!” An alarm warbled as her evasive turn became a steep climb. “Aannnd that’s a target lock. Is this a bad time to say I told you so?”
- Ten days earlier -

Gyiris had turned out to be something of a combination con artist and political activist. The next day, she’d had a dozen crates of varying sizes delivered to their hangar, each containing a priceless Dantooinan artifact thousands of years old. She had created meticulous replicas of each piece, and the museum she worked for never knew the difference.

“When you reach the system, plug this chip in; the message will auto-send. They’ll direct you from there.” She’d handed Obi-Wan the chip, then turned to hug Feid and Pulkka. “You don’t know how much I appreciate this.”

The Whiphid had laughed. “The sooner the evidence is gone from your hands….”

“Exactly!”

Zohli and Phel were both confused.

“So, she stole art from a museum and is sending it back to where it came from?” Zohli twisted the fresh piercing in her left ear, and Phel slapped her hand lightly.

“Gonna get infected if you keep doing that.”

“It itches!”

“Put some bacta on it,” Obi-Wan said as he helped Feid shift one of the larger crates onto the lift.

“Gonna get infected if you keep doing that.”

“Put some bacta on it,” Obi-Wan said as he helped Feid shift one of the larger crates onto the lift.

“It's called ‘repatriation’: returning items that were originally stolen.”

“But if the museum finds out, can’t they demand everything back?”

Feid grinned. “They could. It would lead to an ugly legal fight, because under Republic law these things should never have been taken from Dantooine, but they were taken before those laws were updated to cover items like these. They’re incidental relics: not anything of religious or artistic significance. The museum has claim primarily through insurance registry. So if they find out, they’ll likely get an insurance payout. Maybe they’d keep the copies, I’m no mind-reader.”

The three of them looked at Obi-Wan. He snorted and gestured for Zoh to hit the control to lower the freight lift. “I’d have to know whose mind to read.”

Pulkka and Deesix met them on the ground and took charge of the crate. The droid motioned sharply with its thumb to a nervous-looking group of people at the hangar entrance. “The welcoming party is here.”

“Wonderful,” Obi-Wan muttered. “That’s the last of them, anyway. Do try to behave yourself.”

“Three years I’ve known you and you never let me have any fun.”

“I let you stun me that one time.”

The droid scoffed. “It wasn’t that much fun.”

A scrawny older human at the front of the group cleared his throat as Obi-Wan approached. “Captain Bastra?”

Obi-Wan bowed and offered the datapad Gyiris had included. “Director Havha. I’ve been instructed to wait until you’ve examined the contents properly; I understand this will need to be done in a lab.”
The man’s relief was plainly visible, and some of the tension went out of the group. “I'm glad you understand, Captain. We would love to make a bigger production around the return of the items—”

“I quite understand.” A celebration of any sort might alert the museum on Corellia that it had lost some parts of its collection. “We're on contract until you have confirmed satisfaction. Please take all the time you need,” Obi-Wan added with just enough of a mischievous grin to let them know he was joking. The group relaxed, chuckling. Two of them joined their director in looking over the contents of the datapad, while the rest moved to bring a speeder with a covered cargo bed through.

The feeling of Kate nudging the back of his leg made Obi-Wan pause. “What is it?”

The droid bleeped softly before rolling back up the ramp. He caught Feid’s attention. “Can you manage here? Kate says there’s a message on the comm.”

“It can't wait?”

He shook his head. “It's from a contact I marked as high priority. I’ll be right back.”

Kate was already tucked back into her usual spot in the cockpit when he got there; Obi-Wan patted her dome as he took a seat. “Thank you, dear. Got your recorder on?”

She chirped an excited affirmative. He grinned and played the message.

A flat, tone-nullified voice stated the confirmation code Obi-Wan had set up with Qui-Gon and Kardin Lo years previous. “My apologies for not issuing a text message; comm devices append too much identifying data to the packets. We require a meeting in person at soonest convenience. Coordinates and access code to follow, encryption protocol thesh-twelve.” The voice provided a long list of numbers and then a shorter aurenumeric which Obi-Wan noted down on his datapad and then ran through the encryption.

“I will remain at the location one Standard week from message date.” The comm squeaked as the message scrambled itself into binary garbage, and Obi-Wan studied the coordinates.

“Blast, that's almost directly on the opposite side of the galaxy from here.”

Ulic, drifting invisible in case one of their guests looked up, muttered, Ten days is barely enough time for anything. You're lucky you're wrapping this one up.

Which is why I’m optimistic it isn't a trap, Obi-Wan replied. There wouldn't be such a tight time schedule if it were.

You hope.

Kate warbled a question and he shook his head. “Outside estimate is seven days’ travel, plus however long it takes the archaeologists to verify authenticity on our cargo. Hopefully not the full three days. Let's get a start on calculating the best route and shave that transit time down.”

The droid asked if it was really necessary to follow the message’s instructions; after all, the identifying information could have been coerced or stolen. Obi-Wan sighed.

“It could have been. But if we don't go and it is Lo, I run the risk of not learning the information that got him into trouble. It's because of me that he’s involved, and I owe him at least that much. If it’s a trap, I'm sure we’ll be able to evade it.” Kate whistled and he laughed. “Well, between me, you, Feid, and the Sunflare, I’m sure we’ll be fine.”
Now

Kate spared a moment from recalculating course to grumble at Feid. Despite the need to focus, Obi-Wan snorted. “You can't say you told me so, because it was Kate who said that.”

“Less semantics more getting us out of here?” Feid grunted.

The comms squealed and then a mechanical voice demanded, “Unidentified light freighter, please provide identity and access code.”

“Access code?!” Obi-Wan dragged his datapad from under its retainment strap and toggled the comm. “This is Corellian light freighter Sunflare, Captain Bastra speaking. Access code is esk-trill-dorn-three-eight-two-seven.”

There was a tense pause and then the voice returned, “Access code confirmed. Disable engines and prepare for tractor beam to dock. Welcome to Outland Transit Station, Captain Bastra.”

Feid and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. A scuffle in the corridor announced the arrival of Zohli, Phel, Dee and Pulkka, the latter of whom was shedding furiously.

“What was that about?!”

Without taking his eyes from the Lucrehulk -class shape growing in the viewport, Obi-Wan asked, “Ever hear of an Outland Transit Station?”

“Sure. Out on the edge of Hutt space, got blown up a couple years back.” Pulkka leaned between the pilot and copilot seats. “Check out the lights on the side. Looks like they rebuilt.”

Now that they were closer, the word Outland II could be seen picked out in garish orange and pink holograms on the outer curve of the Lucrehulk ’s hull. Feid snorted. “Your contact stinks at communication, Bastra. I swear that took a decade off my life.”

“Likely he didn't want the location to be known to anyone reading my comms. Particularly not if the owners have enemies.” Obi-Wan reached for the controls, accepting the station’s docking procedure instructions as the tractor beam drew them into the hangar. The exterior of the station was still mostly lost in shadow, but inside the hangar, the multiple platform levels were brightly lit and a riot of colour.

Dee made a sound that was suspiciously close to a giggle. “This is not what a Lucrehulk looks like on the inside. It's been completely cored and rebuilt. I wonder where they found it.”

The tractor set the Sunflare down on a platform mid-way down the outer wall, and Obi-Wan waved in acknowledgement to the person waiting for them. “I’ll go see what the welcoming committee has to say. Anyone else?”

Ulic declined. The others followed him out onto the platform. Their greeter was a Mirialan man who wore something approximating a uniform with a sunny yellow scarf coiled and pinned around his hair, flanked by a pair of repainted standard-model B1 droids. To Obi-Wan’s left, Deesix tilted its head. “Huh.”
The man smiled at them. “Welcome to Outland II. We... assume you’ve never been here before?”

Obi-Wan and Feid exchanged an wry glance. He laughed. “I’ve only seen these ships in the hands of people who wanted to shoot me.”

“Understandable!” The man handed over a datacard. “We have some basic rules here, but the most important ones are: pay for what you break, no harassing the staff, no stealing from the staff or vendors. If you’re here in pursuit of a bounty, keep the property damage to an absolute minimum; we do have security cameras around, appropriate parties will be billed.” He chuckled. “Really, we just don’t want to have to rebuild again.”

“I quite understand.” Obi-Wan slipped the datacard into his ‘pad; the first file that opened was a map. “I’m supposed to be meeting someone here, where would be the best place to find them?”

“You had an access code. Whoever gave you that code has been notified of your arrival and will find you.” The man bowed and left, trailed by the two B1s.

Turning to the others, Obi-Wan said, “Who wants to come explore?”

At the exact same moment, Phel and Zohli said, “I’m hungry!”

“For something other than my cooking, you mean,” Pulkka said with a laugh. “Let’s see that map.”

The living space lined the inner walls of the *Lucrehulk* ’s arc, with walkways crossing from one side to the other and mass-transit cars passing through at various levels. Music blared from shopfronts and restaurants and vivid hologram signs blinked welcomingly along the balcony walkways. Zohli stared around wide-eyed and said, “It’s like Nar Shaddaa. In a can.”

They found a tapcafe that permitted droids about a quarter of the way around and a few levels up. Kate and Deesix happily took advantage of the power and network connections at their table. Phel watched them curiously. “I don’t know how you can just plug yourself into a strange connection like that.”

Deesix snorted. “You connect your datapad to strange networks all the time.”

“It’s not my head, though.”

“Do you keep your security programs up to date?”

Phel gave Dee a glare of professional affront. “I’m a slicer. Of course I do.”

The droid shrugged. “We have security programs, too.”

Phel sat back and sipped xir drink, looking thoughtful.

Pulkka was almost giddy. “After the original went up, we wondered if they’d rebuild. The paranoia is a new thing, but probably warranted.”

“What happened to the last one?” Zohli asked. She was fidgeting with one of her earrings again, and Obi-Wan flicked his own ear to let her know what she was doing; Zoh sighed and moved both hands to grip her cup.

Feid shrugged and leaned back in her chair. “We didn’t know at first, took a while for word to get around. The owner of the place, Toydarian named Rozatta, is a hotshot infomonger. Got messed up pretty bad by a bounty hunter with a grudge against one of her regular clients. Nearly killed her, set
the whole station to blow just to get at the one rival. I hadn’t heard anything for a long time, kinda thought she was getting out of the business.”

“Infomonger, huh?” Obi-Wan rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I doubt I could afford her rates, but that’s something to keep in mind.”

A B1 painted in an array of vivid greens with the Outland logo on its shoulder approached their table. “Kenobi?”

The others’ chatter dimmed and Obi-Wan nodded. “That’s me.”

The droid bowed politely. “Your associate wishes to meet with you. They request that you come alone. If you will follow me?”

The group exchanged glances; Obi-Wan caught Phel’s eye and tapped his temple. If things went badly, they could find him. “Of course.” He finished his drink and followed the droid out. “Is this a common procedure?”

“People who come here often have personal safety concerns.” The droid tilted its head at him. “Where did your B1 come from?”

“A scrap pile.”

“No restraining bolt, I see.” It sounded distinctly envious.

He shook his head. “Dee and I made a deal, we trust each other.”

The droid rolled its shoulders. “It’s easier to do that when it’s just one of us. We’ve already had one incident where a droid was reprogrammed; the restraining bolts are supposed to make it more difficult to disable us.”

“Really?”

“Well, they also make us easier to track—”

“No, I mean... someone tried to reprogram a droid here?”

“Planted a bomb in it and told it to find a guest. Of course, we caught it before it got to the target, but it still happened.”

“One of the first things I did for Dee was move its power switch and access port to an internal location.” Deesix had been extremely concerned about being co-opted, and Obi-Wan was beginning to appreciate the droid’s reasoning.

The Outland droid paused and stared at him. “That’s... an interesting idea. I might pass that along.” It led him onto one of the transit cars and they grabbed the loops hanging from the ceiling as the car moved off. “It’s good to see more of us outside the Trade Federation. Almost all of us here were blown into space when this ship was ventilated during a battle. Salvage crews picked us up, and since the chain of command was broken, we made a new choice.”

Obi-Wan nodded. “Do you like the work?”

The droid snickered. “It beats getting shot at planetside. Next stop is ours.”

The transit car dropped them off in what was clearly a more corporate region: quieter, less garish, and full of offices and conference spaces. The droid led him to a small conference room. “I’ll wait
out here to take you back once you’re done.”

“Much appreciated.”

The room was comfortably-appointed with carpeting, deeply padded chairs around a matte-black holotable, and abstract art on the pale grey walls. Waiting for him was a thin, fretful-looking Muun who stood as he entered.

“You are Kenobi?”

Obi-Wan bowed politely -- more than politely -- and said, “I am. I must say it’s an absolute relief to see you’re well, Esquire Lo. After the security protocols went active, I feared the worst.”

The Muun smiled thinly and gestured for him to sit. “Your concern is appreciated. It was a very near thing, indeed.” He resumed his seat while Obi-Wan claimed the chair opposite. “When I looked into the initiator codes for the accounts you specified, I encountered heavy security and then an assault upon my residence. I do not know the who of my pursuer, but I know they are very well connected. I apologise for taking so very long to contact you, but I had to erase my trail.”

“No, I quite understand.”

“Once I depart this station, I will go into hiding.” His smile gained a distinctly unhappy twist. “If you hear from me after this, you may assume something has gone very wrong indeed.” Lo leaned to one side and picked up a hard-sided, shielded case from beneath the table, the sort used to carry frequency-sensitive materials. “I wish to leave you the totality of my findings. I took the time to assemble a full datacron; the number of datacards required would have weighed significantly more.”

Obi-Wan allowed his awe to show on his face. “You have beyond doubt proven your worth, Esquire. I can’t thank you enough for the service you have provided, or the risks you’ve endured.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a credit chip. “I believe this should cover the remainder of your fee.” The amount included a hefty bonus, courtesy of Krayn’s misappropriated finances.

Esquire Lo inspected the balance and his brow arched the slightest bit. “It does, indeed.” He stood and bowed to Obi-Wan. “It has been a pleasure, Kenobi. May your investments be favourable.”

Obi-Wan waited five minutes -- long enough for Lo to disappear into the larger population -- and took the opportunity to inspect the datacron. It was a voice-activated cube just barely small enough to hold in one hand, its sides crafted of delicate-looking electrum filigree panels over amber glass that glowed faintly from within. He put it away and commed Feid.

“All good, boss?”

“All good. Can you have Kate meet me at the Sunflare? I’ve a priceless package I’d rather not carry around, nor leave unattended.”

“Will do.”

The case went into the secured storage in Obi-Wan’s quarters. Kate muttered unhappily about being left on guard duty; he patted her dome with a fond smile.
“I know, dear, but there’s only so much Ulic can do. I do appreciate that you’re here.”

The spirit affected a languid stretch. “Yeah, because I don’t really know how effective simply scaring someone is going to be. You expect someone to try for that?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “I hope not, but I did just pass about a thousand sentients carrying something significant-looking over my shoulder. And the contents have nearly got people killed already. I’d rather not take the chance.”

He had chosen to take the long way from the hangar so he could stop into a shop he’d seen and purchase a few small gifts for the others. On his way out, a surge of intense emotion -- frustration, anger, dismay, fear -- on the opposite side of the concourse caught his attention. In the staff corridor between shops, a Bothan was talking urgently with a humanoid in armour. Obi-Wan lingered over the racks of trinkets, watching from the corner of his eye as the Bothan grew increasingly agitated. The armoured person shook their head almost contemptuously, said something inaudible from Obi-Wan’s position, and left. The Bothan slumped against the wall, amber-brown fur in disarray.

With a sigh, Obi-Wan crossed the crowded footbridge.

“Pardon my intrusion, but you seem upset.”

The Bothan startled. “Don’t sneak up on people like that!” they snapped. “Upset is putting it mildly, but unless you’re offering to help--”

He offered a wry smile. “I might be, but I’d have to know what has you so perturbed, first.”

The Bothan pushed away from the wall and gave him a long, appraising look. “Well...maybe. You look like you can handle yourself in a fight.” They tugged a leatherette folder from inside their jacket and showed him the official holographic seal. “Aga Gùl’juri, Bothawui Systems Authority.”

“You're a long way from home, Officer.”

Gùl’juri sighed in frustration. “That's exactly the problem. My jurisdiction allows me to investigate but not act. I've been tracking someone who's wanted for some rather extreme crimes on my homeworld. The station's owner has a declared neutral stance, so the security here can't apprehend him for me.”

Obi-Wan frowned, considering the matter. “And that mercenary you were speaking to seemed unwilling to help.”

“They're all unwilling.” Gùl’juri’s fur rippled. “The criminal is a bounty hunter. The collateral damage he left behind him was unacceptable. Four people in medical, one of whom might never wake up, after interrogating them for information they didn't have. Excessive property damage, including a charge of suspected arson. But nobody wants to be the one to say they took another hunter! I thought they would even apprehend their own, but maybe the guilds’ reputation isn't what it used to be.”

The Force was silent on the matter. Obi-Wan chose to dig a little deeper. “May I know some more details?”

The Bothan handed over a datapad. The information displayed showed a head-and-shoulders image of a human man both in armour and minus helmet. Youngish -- possibly only a few years Obi-Wan’s senior -- with a narrow face and close-cropped brown hair which was marred by a long ugly scar running from behind his left ear to his crown. The armour was unremarkable save for some interesting designs painted in blue on the matte-grey shell. The name given was Hadrel Needa, with
a long list of aliases.

It made Obi-Wan ponder what his own file must look like by now.

The details of what he was wanted for on Bothawui made Obi-Wan’s mouth go dry. Needa was a nasty piece of work who enjoyed playing with his food, it seemed. “This... wouldn't be a task I’m familiar with. What would be involved?”

The officer took his caution in stride. “All you would need to do is find him and knock him out -- easier said than done, I know, but it really is that basic. I can stretch my jurisdiction enough to provide you with the supplies to bring him back in one piece.”

“And security wouldn't have a problem with this?” The last thing Obi-Wan needed was to be banned from a place that seemed incredibly useful. He had already been considering what it would cost to rent one of their available apartment spaces.

“Not if you have the right documentation. I’d give you a contract stating what I’ve hired you to do and why.” Gul’juri quirked a wry smile. “The rules here are pretty lax, unlike some worlds where you would have to work clandestinely.”

Obi-Wan squinted at them. “You seem to know an awful lot about all this.”

“Firstly, I’ve been doing this job for a decade. It's not the first time I’ve needed to contract a third party.” They shrugged. “Secondly, bounty hunting is largely police work anyway. There's no end to judicial fugitives someone will pay money to bring to justice. Legal jurisdictions exist for a very good reason, but it’s a big galaxy and there are a lot of places for criminals to hide where they're otherwise untouchable.”

Obi-Wan looked back to the file in his hand. This was a bounty hunting job he was looking at -- likely a simple one, but the Order had always held a narrow view of such activity. True, a lot of hunters used less than diplomatic methods to get their jobs done, but how different was it really from some of the work he had done with Qui-Gon in their seven years together?

The difference was that there was a financial reward, and he could see how capturing sentients for money could be construed as putting greed over the good of others. How greedy was it really, if one had operating expenses to cover?

“You seem hesitant.”

Obi-Wan gave a soft laugh. “I have associates who might have opinions on this. And there is a concern that the guilds would take a narrow view of some non-guilded mercenary doing their job.”

Gul’juri smirked and accepted the datapad back. “Well, the guilds don't take on anyone who hasn't already built a reputation. And you can ask your associates for their thoughts, of course. Let me give you my comm code, you can contact me if you make a decision.”

The others had found a quiet lounge area full of carefully maintained plants. Obi-Wan handed out the things he’d bought -- small, traditionally made toys -- and told them about Officer Gul’juri.

“That sort of situation happens every day. There's no reason to assume they’re not on the level,” Pulkka said absently, distracted by the hand-carved wooden skill toy Obi-Wan had bought her. The interlocked pieces had slipped apart in the hands of the demonstrator, but remained stubbornly linked no matter what the Whiphid did. She was grinning happily and had given him a bone-creaking hug in thanks.
Feid added, “The pay’s usually decent; not spectacular, since it’s just collecting rubbish, but decent.” She made the synthetic crystal sphere he’d bought her dance across the back of her hand, looking thoughtful. Internal faceting in the sphere’s structure caught the light in mesmerising glimmers. “Might be a bit higher since the target’s career. And it’s not like this would hurt your reputation if you can do it. How’s your extra senses feeling about it?”

“Neutral. Which doesn't make the choice easier, but at least I know it's not something I should avoid at all costs.” Obi-Wan wrapped an arm around Zohli’s shoulders when she leaned into him. The set of shiny magnetic stones the size of a finger joint had delighted her, but once he’d mentioned the potential job, she had set them aside. “Yes, sweetheart?”

She made an uncertain noise. “It sounds dangerous.”

“All jobs are potentially dangerous,” he said with a smile. “What we do every day is risky on its own. Just because flying through space is normal it doesn't make it less so.”

“But what if he shoots you?”

Obi-Wan kissed her temple gently. “That's what armour is for, love.” The Protector-issue vambraces alone had enough surprises that he might not even have to take that risk. But the neural disruptor wouldn’t work through Needa’s armour.

“Would you need backup?” Phel asked. Xe tugged lightly on the carved blocks on their elastic string, twisting them into new configurations. “Criff, I’m gonna be distracted by this thing for weeks.”

“Possibly, but I think in this case Dee might be better.”

The droid’s head came up. “Seriously?”

Obi-Wan shrugged. “The place is already swarming with B1s. Maybe you look a little different, but at a glance?”

Deesix touched the beads hanging from the back of its head. “We should remove these, then. Just for a bit.”

“So, are we doing this?” Feid asked. At Obi-Wan’s nod, she put the sphere down. “Okay, there’s stuff you need to take into account. Like, most hunters wait for their targets to be alone, so there’s less mess. This guy’s a hunter, himself, so you’re not going to catch him alone. He’s probably got either friends or hired guards, and he’s going to stay in public spaces.”

“He has to sleep sometime.”

“Yeah. Probably aboard his ship -- if he has one -- with all his custom security and a lot of friends, or in a high-level suite full of more guards. Probably have friends watching either physically or via remote around the surrounding halls.” She grinned, baring sharp teeth, and added, “Basically, think of how you would behave if you were totally paranoid that your double was coming to catch you.”

“Hmm. So if we want to keep the collateral down, we need to learn his habits.” He chuckled. “Too bad there isn’t enough time to pull a Red Sun and infiltrate his retinue.”

Pulkka made a noncommittal noise. “You might be able to, but without a thousand goons to get lost among, you’re going to be watched too carefully.”

Phel nudged Obi-Wan with xir elbow. “He’s good at avoiding notice when he has to.”
“That might not be enough, particularly if I have to carry an unconscious man out with me.” Obi-Wan grinned. “No, the problem with all this is that it’s predictable. Let’s be unpredictable.”

Gul’juri was happy to hear that he’d decided to accept the contract. Obi-Wan tried to decline the additional equipment the Bothan offered -- stun cuffs, sedatives, and a dreadful-looking body-bag with suspensor plates set in the ends for carrying an unconscious or dead humanoid with minimal effort -- but Gul’juri insisted. “Just in case. I know you’re confident in yourself, but things have a way of going sour quickly.”

The bag compressed tightly into a flexible roll, which Obi-Wan gave to Dee. The other items he attached to his belt. Once the contract had been accepted -- and Feid had been correct about the payout -- Phel had hooked into Outland’s computer system, searching out Needa and his crew. Feid, Pulkka, and Zohli lingered around Phel, providing cover, while Obi-Wan and Dee went for a walk.

“Well, he's got a ship,” Phel reported softly. “Has some guards there but he hasn't been back to it for a week or so. Guessing he’s renting space here. Looking up the residents list.”

Enough other sentients were wearing full-face helmets that going masked wouldn't have set Obi-Wan apart, but if this trick was going to work, he would need to look as harmless as possible. The subvocal pickup taped to his throat pulled at the skin, but it was better than a visible commset. “It’s the middle of the day, I doubt he’s in his quarters.”

“You’d be right. He's not even trying to hide.” Phel hesitated. “Are you absolutely sure about this? Needa seems really confident in being untouchable.”

“Intimidation tactics to deter non-professionals. He already thinks nobody from the guilds will come after him.”

“Yeah, did you stop to wonder why that might be?”

“You think it’s a trap?” Deesix muttered beside him.

“I think it’s a test.”

The droid’s head turned so fast, the strings of beads whipped around its neck joint. “A test?”

“A test?” Feid asked.

“Not necessarily for me. It’s just a feeling.”

Needa and four bodyguards had occupied a table in one of the cantinas on a lower level. Obi-Wan leaned on the bar with a drink cupped in his hands and let his eyes half-close, reading the flow of the room. “He has more friends here. I count eleven total, seven of them are being subtle about it,” he murmured. Dealing with them was going to be tricky, but he had the time to settle in and do it right.

“Don't take stupid risks, Bastra. I’d rather not be the one to have to pick your bits off the floor.”

Needa himself was an unpleasant amoral blotch in the Force, strong-willed enough that suggestion probably wouldn't work on him. Obi-Wan had already dismissed that possibility -- simply asking the man to do the right thing and cooperate would run afoul of the mindset that his behaviour was
justified. He pulled lightly on the Force, wrapping an air of harmlessness around himself. “I’m going to say hello.”

“Oh, shit,” someone muttered; likely Phel.

The outermost of Needa’s four guards stood up from the table as Obi-Wan approached, drink in hand. The bounty hunter made a good show of appearing relaxed, but Obi-Wan could feel the tension tighten like a spring.

“What do you want?”

Obi-Wan shrugged and took a sip from his drink. “Just wondering what it is about you that has the rest of the guilds spooked.” Over his earpiece he heard Feid hiss a breath through her teeth.

Needa stared at him for a moment before smirking. “You’re the best they could get? They must be really desperate. Or someone hates you. Go away, kid, before you get yourself hurt.”

Daring a bit more, Obi-Wan settled on the stool on the outer side of the table. One of the guards, a massive human in full armour, clamped a heavy hand on his shoulder; Obi-Wan ignored it. “What I don’t understand is why. You’re a shitty person, there must be no end of people in the Guild who’d be happy to put you out of their misery,” he said. It was a struggle to make it sound like he was discussing weather and not insulting someone who was clearly aiming a blaster at him from under the table. “What do you have on them, Needa?”

“You think that Protector armour is gonna save you, kid? I’ll give you three seconds to fuck off before you get a live demonstration.”

In other parts of the cantina, seven people quietly dozed off and slumped at their tables. Obi-Wan shrugged. “Or maybe it’s as simple as nobody wanting to give you the satisfaction of being hunted, yourself. But I have no skin in that game. It would be much less trouble for you if you came quietly—”

The Force clenched and Obi-Wan shoved sideways with the foot he’d braced on the floor; the stool screeched on the tile. The blaster bolt buried itself in the table behind him and someone shrilled in surprise. The four guards around him staggered and dropped, clutching at the sedative darts Deesix had fired with a droid’s speed and precision between the plates of their armour. Needa took a disruptor shot from Obi-Wan’s vambrace full in the face and collapsed in the booth, the blaster clattering from his nerveless fingers.

The conversation around them had gone dead silent; only the sound system, playing innocuously bouncy music, carried on. Obi-Wan stood, shaking his head and knowing all eyes were on him as Deesix sauntered over, slinging its needle gun and drawing the modified blaster strapped to its leg. “You just had to be difficult about things.”

People turned back to their own business and the sound returned to normal levels. With the droid watching the room, Obi-Wan snapped the stun cuffs around the bounty hunter’s wrists behind his back, divested him of an alarming array of hidden tools and weapons, and rolled the man off the bench seat into the bag. It really was a horrible piece of equipment, but it did lighten the load considerably. Needa’s gear went into a spare satchel Obi-Wan had carried, and between himself and Dee they dragged the bounty hunter out of the cantina before his remaining guards woke up.

A security droid arriving to investigate merely nodded when they showed Obi-Wan’s contract. “Thank you for keeping the mess to a minimum.”
Needa was beginning to stir in the bag when they met Gul’juri at the designated hangar platform. The Bothan barely blinked as they handed over the remainder of the payment. “Nice doing business with you, Bastra. We appreciate it.”

Obi-Wan watched Gul’juri drag the writhing captive and bag full of weapons to the waiting ship. “Calculation, Dee. Was that worth it?”

“You're asking me? Our operating costs were just about nothing, the payment isn't anything to sneer at even split five ways—”

“Five? You get some of this too, you know.”

Dee was silent for a moment. “I... didn't expect that. Thank you. The biggest question is: who's going to come after you for doing that?”

“Hmm.” Obi-Wan grimaced. “I really hope there wasn't some blackmail of guild members involved. Too late to ask now.”

“Actually, it isn’t.” Phel said. There was a note of smugness in xir voice that caught Obi-Wan’s attention. “While you were delivering Needa, I took the biometrics you scanned and hacked his account. There were a few time-sensitive messages pending, so Zoh helped me cancel the orders and send them back to the people they named.”

Obi-Wan stopped dead in the concourse; someone swore at him as they brushed past. “Please tell me you didn't actually look at the attached files.”

“Nope, just the messages. I like living.”

He chuckled and Deesix muttered something, shaking its head as they started walking again. “You had Zoh help you?”

“Yeah, thought it would help her feel useful.”

Obi-Wan sighed happily. “I love you guys. We’ll be back soon.”

---

Ulic was waiting for them when they returned to the Sunflare, leaning against the support piston for the boarding ramp with his arms folded and looking deeply satisfied with himself. Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows at the Sith. "You look like you have a story to tell."

The spirit smirked. "After you dropped off that case, someone tried to break in. I had a little fun with his mind before Kate zapped him and he ran."

Feid's eyes narrowed. "'Fun with his mind'?"

Ulic shrugged. "Those who aren't good at shielding are highly susceptible to suggestion. A little hallucination never hurt anyone. But I did find out that he just wanted to know what was in the box."

"Ugh." Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. "Some people let curiosity get the better of them. But it's a good thing they didn't, because that information is incredibly valuable. Thanks, Ulic."

"No problem." The spirit arched a brow and reappeared at the top of the ramp as they boarded. "I
sense a lot of tense emotions clinging to you, though. Have a good time?"

The others exchanged a glance and Deesix gave an electronic snort. "You would have loved it."

Ulic hummed thoughtfully. "I did feel someone using the Force a bit ago. Sounds like you have your own story."

Chuckling, Obi-Wan said, "It’s probably not nearly as good as yours. Let me set course back to Takodana and we’ll tell you all about it."

[A young man walks foolishly up to a table full of mercenaries, goads them into attacking him, and walks away with one in stun cuffs.]


[The young man on the bar stool shoves himself out of the way of a blaster shot that would have been maiming at the very least.]


[Two humans seated at a table, looking at each other but their attention on the booth in sector six, close their eyes and droop onto the table. One’s hand slips and knocks her drink over to pool around her companion’s face.]

The pink Toydarian cackled, replayed the holorecording from the security cams again, and cackled some more. She reached over and pressed a button on her desk; the summoned protocol droid arrived a moment later.

"What can I do for you, Madame Rozatta?"

"Has the damage from the altercation starting at fifteen-twenty in Chalmun’s been calculated?"

The droid gave a prim little bow. "It has, Madame."

Roz curled her lips around her tusks in a grin. "Good. Bill it to the account of Hadrel Needa-- He’s still got a suite reserved, yeah?"

"I believe so, Madame. The cost shall be levied accordingly."

"Do we have an ID on the unknown human and his droid yet?"

"I’m not entirely sure, Madame. I shall check with Security."

The droid left and Roz leaned back in her chair. "Replay holorecord, half-speed." It was such a short burst of violence, tracking what actually happened was difficult. She giggled to herself. "Jango is just gonna love this."

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so. Just an FYI, my RL work is picking up, which I'm super happy about because paychecks are awesome, but it does mean that I'm switching to a 3-week update schedule here so that I have time to do my stuff and live on the side xD

This is the point where there are so many characters to follow, the summary is switching to recap format to make it a little easier to follow. Hoo boy.
Malice

Chapter Summary

Tasked with hunting down an increasingly elusive Obi-Wan Kenobi, Sith Acolyte Caliiga has been recalled to Coruscant by her master, Darth Sidious.

While visiting Outland Transit Station, Obi-Wan accepted a bounty commission from a Bothan officer, taking the bounty hunter Hadrel Needa into custody when no member of the Bounty Hunters' Guilds would.

Near-fatally wounded in his fight with the Jedi on Naboo, Maul's recovery has been slow and agonizing. Despite assistance from an unexpected ally, the Sith struggles against his broken body and mind.

Meanwhile on Serenno, Count Dooku finds himself increasingly isolated despite his involvement in galactic affairs. His former padawan, Qui-Gon Jinn, has extended a hand in friendship, but it's only a matter of time before Lord Sidious discovers their friendship....

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, DragonHoardsBooks, Junara, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 979.02.08
Coruscant

Watching Lord Sidious manipulate the Senate was like watching an artist at work. Clad in the unobtrusive grey uniform of one of the Supreme Chancellor's junior aides, Caliiga stood straight-backed on one side of the Speaker's Podium and listened with carefully-masked awe as his puppets in the Senate supported ideas they thought were their own.

It was so subtle, and she pushed down a surge of envy. Her Lord had been working on many of them for years, not by Force manipulation but by making himself a friendly and trustworthy ally: a sympathetic ear and an encouraging hand.

That he viewed every one of them as inferior and saw them only as tools to be used never once revealed itself in his interactions. It wasn't even hatred: he simply cared only for how they fit into his plans. Her Lord Sidious was cold and calculating, and Caliiga knew she could never hope to match him.

She still cared too much.
On the other side of the podium, dressed in another aide’s suit, Sectus caught her eye. The young human was another of Lord Sidious’ Acolytes, one who showed aptitude in covert assignments. He had evaded the notice of the Jedi on his homeworld of Alderaan by exercising unconscious skill in seeming unimportant, but Lord Sidious had not been so easily blinded. A career thief, Sectus had eagerly reached for the offer of more -- and an easy route off the streets.

The skinny redhead had a good eye for detail and patterns. Caliiga followed his glance to the Naboo pod, where the representatives’ postures were too rigid to match their polite interest in Lott Dod’s complaining. Their new senator, Horace Vancil, was smiling in a strained sort of way that didn’t reach his eyes.

*That system is going to be trouble.*

Even after a decade of experience it was difficult to resist a grin. Her eyebrow might have twitched. *Again, you mean?*

Sectus gave the mental equivalent of a scoff. *You’d think they had a personal issue with the Trade Federation.*

*I can't possibly imagine why that might be.*

“--remind you that the interests the Republic holds in Hutt space serve as oversight to monitor their activities! This motion to press sanctions is nothing short of ostracism when the opposite is needed!”

The junior senator from Dac, a young Quarren named Tundra Dowmeia who was struggling to cover for the missing Senator Tikkes, signaled for permission to speak. The gleeful anticipation of her Master washed through Caliiga’s bond with him. Lord Sidious had expended tremendous effort posing as a kindly mentor to a number of junior senators and aides aspiring to promotion in rank; it was terrifying how easily manipulated the idealistic ones could be.

“The Chair recognizes the representative from Dac.”

“Thank you, Supreme Chancellor. Forgive my ignorance, Senator Dod, but if the Hutts have been increasing their illegal slave trade despite the Republic using its interests as oversight, perhaps mere oversight is not enough.” Dowmeia bowed, the sarcasm blistering in his politeness. “The fact that we had absolutely no knowledge of this until a number of citizens were freed indicates that any supposed oversight is, in fact, entirely ineffective if not outright fictional.”

The representative from Nal Hutta roared without waiting for recognition from the Chair, the poor protocol droid struggling to keep up with Tarbolla’s outrage at the suggestion that they had anything to do with a rogue operation on the moon.

It was clever to lead the Senate to blame Krayn’s activity on the Hutts; if the T’Surr slaver had been alive for questioning, the ruse might have failed. But Red Sun’s actions had conveniently ensured there were no potential counterarguments.

Lord Sidious allowed the heated debate to carry for a minute before signaling for silence. “As a matter of interplanetary regulation, the Chair moves for the formation of a committee to investigate whether sanctions are warranted. All in favour?”

The vote was overwhelmingly in favour of a committee. Lord Sidious’ ability to put matters in the right hands, without the other parties being aware of it, was terrifying. How much personal manipulation was even involved? Blank-faced, Calliga collected the final tally record on the datapad she carried. Tarbolla was apoplectic and demanding a seat on the committee, as were Lott Dod and
Vancil. Bail Organa threw his own hat in, unsurprisingly -- he was going to run out of hats at this rate, when did he even have time to attend all his committee meetings? -- followed quickly by Dowmeia. Eight other representatives volunteered, with no dissention, which was surprising -- even Tarbolla’s insistence went unchallenged, possibly because the other Senators knew if the Hutt was blocked from involvement due to bias, it would lead to bigger problems down the line.

The meeting lasted another hour, but Lord Sidious was chuckling almost silently to himself as they returned to his office afterward. The sound raised the hair on the back of Caliiga’s neck and she struggled to not let it show in her expression as she handed him the datapad.

Her Master examined the meeting’s record with satisfaction while she and Sectus stood at attention in front of his desk. The solid furniture between them was little comfort.

“I see the new Dac Senator is much more compliant,” he murmured. “How unfortunate Senator Tikkes disappeared so suddenly, but Dowmeia seems to be filling his role well.”

Caliiga and Sectus exchanged a glance from the corners of their eyes. Sectus’ mission to sponsor Tikkes’ resentful former business partners to hire a bounty hunter had been dull, and the younger Acolyte had grumbled about the Quarren spice dealers for days afterwards. It was a shame Sing had been unavailable, but Cradossk and Bossk had taken the offer with predatory glee.

“Caliiga. Contact the Hutt Council apologizing for this dreadful turn of events; the Senate does as it wills, sometimes. Lord Sidious would be most happy to assist in any way, in exchange for any information they have on this Red Sun group.”

She bowed. “Yes, my Lord. What if they claim to know nothing?”

Lord Sidious glanced up from the datapad. Shed of his kindly-uncle illusion, his features were pallid and beginning to show signs of corruption. His yellow eyes glittered like molten durasteel. “Then they get nothing.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

The Force spread out before him, below him, like a vast ocean with no shore, dull beneath the overcast. If he dipped his fingers into those waters, he could create ripples that might carry for light years, for millennia.

Try as he might, he could not quite break the surface.

With a growl, Sheyvan opened his eyes. “It's no use!”

“Anger will get things done. Impatience will not.” The Sith spirit appeared to be seated lotus fashion across from him, the crimson wisps of his scarf and robes trailing into smoke.

He scrubbed at his eyes. “My Lord told me I would be his Hand, promised to teach me, and yet the Acolytes receive more of his attention. What is the point to leaving me to flounder?”

The Twi’lek spirit smiled as his red-rimmed eyes opened, glowing amber in the dimness. “To struggle against one’s limitations is the ultimate battle. You have your passion, child, but you must temper it. You wield it like a club when you should be thinking of it like a blade.”
He frowned at Lord Pyrra. “What am I doing wrong?”

“You are an assassin. Do assassins seek to be known to the world?”

“No.”

“No indeed. The ripples you cause are the result of someone else’s will; you are merely the tool, a ripple yourself. Do it again.” Pyrra bared pointed teeth at him in challenge. “Do it better.”

After a moment of staring Pyrra down -- he would never win such a contest, spirits had no physical need to blink -- the human resettled himself on the cushion and reached for that meditative state once more.

He hadn't known the identity of the cloaked man who had hired him to remove a series of political entities. Sometimes the instructions had been precise to the point of madness, other times Sheyvan had been free to choose his methods. It was only after his most recent success that Lord Sidious had revealed that the jobs had been tests of Sheyvan’s skill, and that the Sith Lord had a use for him in the future.

Sheyvan was no fool: he knew that if he turned the offer down, he wouldn't be leaving that room alive. To be the Hand of a Sith Lord -- a step above the Acolytes, a step below the Apprentice -- was to wield immense power with little personal cost. He could not train with the Apprentice -- Tyranus wasn't meant to know of Sheyvan’s existence -- but it seemed his Lord intended for Sheyvan to find his own way to power through mere meditation.

*Peace is a lie: there is only Passion.*

Pyrra had revealed himself to Sheyvan some two weeks into his frustrating stay in Lord Sidious’ residence on Coruscant. Most of the library was unintelligible to him; he had initially taken the spirit for a hired curator when he had appeared and offered to teach Sheyvan the language. The Sith spirit had been quick to correct his mistake, and the young man had fled, spending three days in fear and denial before mentally berating himself and returning to accept his offer.

The spirit was right: Sheyvan had passion in his determination to overcome this obstacle, in his determination to not fail the man who had offered him the chance to shape history.

*Through Passion, I gain Strength.*

True, yes, but untempered strength was energy wasted. Sheyvan sought to hone his desires, focusing on his goals; not to shatter the surface of the water but to pierce it so finely his presence might pass undetected. As a professional assassin should.

*Through Strength, I gain Power.*

Power did not have to mean brute force. Sheyvan reached for the surface of that shifting, endless sea. After all, had he not learned years before that the softest touch in just the right place could claim a life?

*Through Power, I gain Victory.*

The surface resisted, as it always did. Impatience bubbled up, threatened to crack his focus; Sheyvan seized it, examined it. More Passion, of course. Passion could be used. He layered it, not like weights behind his touch, but along an increasingly sharp edge, honed to molecular fineness. The Force was there; he had always been able to hear it, to let it guide his reactions, but he hadn’t known what it was before Lord Sidious had revealed himself.
Sheyvan would no longer be merely moved.

Through Victory, my Chains are broken.

The surface parted beneath the infinitesimal point of his contact; with barely a ripple, Sheyvan's mind breached the barrier. The rush of sensation, of sudden, all-encompassing awareness, threatened to overwhelm him; distantly he felt Pyrra’s touch, burning like Ilum ice, holding him steady. Unashamed to need that support, he leaned on it, grounding himself against the disorientation.

There was so much beyond himself; he wanted to touch it all. It would be a dreadful error, though: touching anything before he was ready would be akin to an infant attempting to pet a small animal, clumsy, uncoordinated, and very much noticeable.

He let Pyrra guide him back and opened his eyes. “The Force will free me,” he whispered, and the spirit nodded.

“Learn to read it before anything else. The Force will not free you of its own accord: you must bend it to your will.”

The chime from the comm on his desk interrupted them. The spirit shrugged. “Remember what you have learned here,” he said, and vanished. Wincing at the numbness in his right foot, Sheyvan crossed the room and accepted the call.

The cowled form of his new Master appeared above the projector. “My Hand. Your service is required.”

He bowed respectfully. “What is your will, my Lord?”

“It has been brought to my attention that one of my tools has been compromised. He knows too much and must not be permitted the opportunity to speak.”

The image above the projector changed to a Judicial dossier on a known bounty hunter. Sheyvan studied the data as Lord Sidious continued, “He is in the hands of Bothawui Systems Authority, having been apprehended yesterday. The measures taken to make him an undesirable target have failed.”

“Is someone investigating that?”

“Yes. That is not your concern at this time. Eliminate Hadrel Needa and all files and reports in the BSA and Judicial systems of conversations he had with their officers. Tuuz will help you. Make it appear that he has escaped custody and make him vanish.”

“And those officers?”

“Are toothless without their evidence.” A thin smile was just visible under that enveloping hood. “I appreciate your urge for bloodshed, but too many bodies will raise more questions.”

“Of course, my Lord.” Sheyvan bowed again, already running through the checklist of things he would need. “I will depart immediately.”

Crimson blades shrieked and flared as they clashed. A second overhead cut skimmed past as he
slipped to the side and spun, slamming a Force-enhanced kick into the training droid’s side. The
droid struck sparks off the floor as it skidded, fighting momentum and its own internal gyros to right
itself.

Maul smelled singed fabric and knew he had almost been too slow. His strength was returning, but
his reflexes still faltered.

The training droid threw itself at him again, eerily silent. His old training droid, Deenine, might have
provided feedback or a challenge, but this one hadn't been given so much as a personality package
let alone a voice. Despite that, it was an expensive machine, its limbs and carapace armoured with
lightsaber-resistant beskar his Lord had stripped from the aftermath of the Mandalorian massacre on
Galidraan. It might have seemed a foolish waste of the metal, but for the fact that Lord Sidious
disdained to allow his acolytes to train at anything less than full power.

He wondered what had become of Deenine’s successor during the long, isolated convalescence that
had left him weakened and thin. The only company he’d had were occasional visits from his Master -
dispassionately checking his progress -- and something he still couldn't define as more than a
hallucination of an old enemy. When he’d recovered enough to return to training, the droid was
gone.

Acolyte. After three years, the demotion still burned his soul. His failure on Naboo had caused his
Lord to choose a new Apprentice, and Maul knew there was little chance of being able to reclaim the
title in his current condition. He would have to win it back with Dooku’s corpse, and the fallen Jedi
was still a formidable fighter.

Rage sent fire down his limbs, granting a burst of energy, and he fought the machine back across the
training room until it ran out of floor and hit the wall. Flames caught and guttered as the tips of their
blades carved loops through the wood paneling; only chemical treatment prevented the surface from
catching fire.

It should have been like this on Naboo, that cocky Jedi Master trapped with nowhere to go but
down.

Disappointing, Apprentice.

It was Kenobi.

You had one task, and you let some pathetic Jedi Padawan defeat you.

I felt him Fall. I thought he would be overwhelmed. I never thought--

Did I not train you to be better than this?

It’s my fault.

Yes. You are not worthy of the title of Darth.

Half-blinded with rage and frustration, Maul twisted the droid’s head from its neck joint with a
scream and flung it away. The droid went into standby mode, the blade in its hand shutting down.
The Sith leaned into the wall, breath coming in harsh gasps through his clenched teeth.

Your work with Kenobi is your only redeeming grace. Until you have completed the task you failed,
you may join the other acolytes. I will find another to take your place.
“I will finish it!” he roared, hammering his fist into the wall. The charred wood panel splintered under the impact, and the sharp pain of slivers digging into the side of his palm cleared some of the red haze from his vision. He would finish the work, and then he would come for Tyranus’ head.

Maul sagged, forehead pressed to the wall, smelling sweat and blood, carbon and aged wood. The vision he’d had of Kenobi in his cell half a year previous had brought his goals so much closer. Whether real or hallucination, the energy that had flooded Maul’s overtaxed body had been real, and he hadn’t been so foolish as to not use it all before his Lord had returned to investigate. Maul had skinned the truth, claimed a dream had enraged him so much his connection to the Force had flared. His Master had punished him severely, although he’d left the newly healed flesh alone.

His hand throbbed. Maul staggered back, hooked the lightsaber hilt to his belt, and took a seat on one of the sideline benches to pry the splinters from his skin.

“You know, I don't think the droid was meant to withstand that level of punishment.”

Maul glanced up from his bloody work to see a human woman, tall with glossy brown hair pinned in formal knots over her ears, her senate aide uniform jacket hanging open. She bent to collect the droid’s severed head, examining the warped metal of its neck.

“At least the joint itself wasn't beskar, just the gorget,” she added, glancing cautiously at him.

“Hmm. Our Lord might take the cost of replacement out of my hide, if it had been,” he said. The smile that pulled the corner of his mouth wasn't heartfelt.

She tossed the metal head aside -- it bounced off the floor with a clang -- and moved to sit beside him. He couldn't help watching her, envious. Her grace, her height, the cultivated air of intent in every move. Their Master never failed to remind her that she had been born male, but to Maul she had always been Caliiga: beautiful and deadly and perfect.

“You're doing much better since I saw you last.”

He laughed. “That was nearly two years ago. They wouldn't say where he sent you.”

Caliiga snorted. “I doubt he told anyone, and I had contact only with Tuuz. He had me trying to track down Kenobi, then someone triggered a slicing alert, then some new cartel pops up out of nowhere on Nar Shaddaa and disrupts the deal with Krayn. I could complain about being pulled off one task onto another and being interrupted, but the Jedi kid covered his tracks too well.”

Maul almost didn't process the rest of what she’d said; his mind caught on Kenobi and worried over it. “What does he want Kenobi for?”

“Same reason he wants anyone with strong Force abilities? The kid got kicked out of the Order -- good job, by the way.” She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “He went to Tyranus, if you can believe it, but something tipped him off that our Lord was interested and he ran. Found a hole to hide in and pulled it in after him.”

“Something.” The last piece of wood was in deep. Maul gave up on using his fingernails and used the Force to pry it out.

She shook her head and reached into the breast pocket of her jacket. “Wasn't Tyranus, they never had opportunity to talk where they weren't monitored.” The handkerchief she offered him was wrapped around a couple of single-use bacta packets. “Don't maim yourself, dear.”

He wiped the blood from his hand silently. In such a small amount, the bacta’s smell likely wouldn't
be noticed by their Lord; Maul gave in and applied a bit to the meat of his palm. If nothing else, it would prevent any infection from the old wood. “I saw him.”

“Who, Tyranus?”

“Kenobi.”

She went dead still beside him and whispered, “When?”

Keeping his head down to focus on his hand, his voice equally low so as not to carry in the open space, Maul murmured, “Some months ago. He appeared out of nowhere in my cell. Gave me the strength to heal myself and disappeared. The holocams show nothing in the room for that time.”

“A vision?”

He shook his head. “Maybe. But what I felt was real.”

Caliiga’s stare was intense. “How did he look?”

“Heathy. He’s not struggling to survive.” It left a bitter taste in his mouth, and Maul let the resentment settle in his gut. The man who had nearly killed him, who hadn't finished the job and left Maul to his Master’s untender ministrations, had been cast from his Order but found an easy life. “He’s scarred, but the eye’s been replaced. Rough body armour, like a mercenary. Smelled of caff, coolant, exchanged air. Other people.” A smirk twitched his lips briefly. “He has a ship and a crew, and it’s a big galaxy. You’ll have a hard time finding him.”

“Damn it,” she muttered. “Did he say anything?”

Maul frowned. “He was… concerned for me. Foolish Jedi.”

“Concerned?”

“Hmn. He seemed distressed at our ways, said… it doesn’t have to be like that.” He squeezed his eyes shut. “I felt the Darkness in him, Caliiga. He has… tamed it, somehow. I don’t understand.”

Caliiga rubbed her forehead between her eyebrows, looking pained. “No wonder our Master wants him. But he has me running around Nar Shaddaa instead, trying to track down some other potential Force user who disrupted his work and murdered Krayn. We think he’s being backed by the Hutts -- they have the motive, at least; the deal with Krayn was bad for their hold on the moon. But the Hutts are insisting they never heard of Davine or Red Sun until Krayn’s group was torn to pieces. Either they’re lying or it's only a few of them, or even one single Hutt running a shadow cartel and being intensely crafty about it.”

“Could it be a third party instead?”

“We considered that, but the scale of the operation to remove Krayn would have cost an incredible amount of money. The only third party with a stake in things was the Colicoids, but the fallout burned their bridges to Nar Shaddaa, when they were clearly after control of the moon’s processing facilities. They’ve withdrawn to Kessel and doubled down on expanding the facility there instead.”

“The Jedi?” When she snorted, Maul added, “Or the Republic. Judicial has its operatives.”

“And we know exactly where they are and what their assignments have been. The Jedi had an operative in there, but we cut them off from their support.”
“Could this Davine be the Jedi? You mentioned the possibility of him using the Force.”

She frowned. “It's possible… but would a Jedi severed from their support be likely to turn to the Hutts? More likely the Hutts would use them and then try to capture and possibly sell them. There's no evidence of a fight like that—”

“Inside Krayn’s compound, at least. If the trap was sprung afterwards?”

Caliiga swore. “Then they have a captive Force user… or a willing one, if the Jedi’s agent changed sides. Which is unlikely, but possible.”

“We don't know who their agent was?”

She shook her head, sighing. “It was a Padawan on their Trial. They could have Fallen and decided not to return to the Jedi. We likely wouldn't find out about it if that was the case. They're really closed about the ones they lose.”

“Unless the lost ones make a lot of noise.” They exchanged a glance, clearly thinking of Xanatos. Their Lord had come so close to gaining another Acolyte, and then duCrion had decided to make a mess of things and got himself killed in the process. Kenobi had been involved in that one too. Why did everything come back to Kenobi?

He voiced the comment and Caliiga laughed bitterly. “The Force moves against us. He’s a pawn, nothing more.”

“You don't think the Force is with us?”

“I think the Force doesn't care.” She glared at nothing, her warm brown eyes yet untainted by use of the Dark side. “There isn't a time in written history where the Force was not in a state of conflict between Light and Dark. It wouldn't be the Force if things settled to stagnance, and it favours action over complacency. We act. The Jedi sit back and think they’ve won, but someone needs to be pushing back. Right now, that's Kenobi. Maybe it will get him killed.” She smirked. “That would be a relief.”

Maul shook his head and stood carefully, crossing to the severed droid’s head. “Would the Force direct a tainted Jedi to act on behalf of the Light? That makes no sense.” The break in the neck joint was a mess; he was going to have a rough time repairing it, and it was his own fault.

“Sure it does, if it's a Jedi who seeks redemption. Most of their Fallen figure if the Order has given up on them, they'll give up on the Order. But that isn’t the sort of personality our spies in Tyranus’ household reported.”

“Hm.” He used the Force to lift the rest of the droid’s body. “I wish you the best of luck, Sister.”

“Need help with that?”

“No. I damaged it; I’ll fix it.”

His Master was most displeased with him. Not that Sheev Palpatine would deign to say as much. The man let his presence, the oppressive weight of mood filling the room, do the scolding.
“You must have an excess of free time, my Apprentice, for you to spend so much of it traveling to Coruscant.”

Yan Dooku clenched his teeth against a grimace. Of course his Lord would have noticed his occasional visits to the capital world. “I have been requested to personally attend meetings with our allies.” It was even true. That he’d spared an extra day each time to visit with his former padawan, to relax and discuss matters other than work, did not need to be mentioned.

“Indeed.” Sidious’ expression was sour. “You could not save yourself precious time and use holocommunication instead?”

“I was under the impression our security was of utmost importance.”

It was a convenient excuse, and Sidious’ raised eyebrows said as much. Dooku kept his face bland, revealing nothing.

“Your time is too valuable to waste, my Apprentice. You will attend such meetings via holo in the future, unless direct action is required. Your next assignment is to move forward with the plans for Ryloth. I trust you can handle this task?”

Yan allowed himself to bristle at the implied slight. As a Jedi, he might have released his indignance into the Force; now he harbored it, allowing it to feed his determination. “Of course, my Master.”

“Good,” Sidious purred. “And now, my Apprentice, I have something for you. Call it a project.”

He led Dooku to the lift. It descended, well past the main level of Sidious’ private residence. There were deep labyrinthine levels beneath the main building, constructed by a hundred generations of Bane’s descendents to be their hidden fortress on Coruscant. When the door slid open, the air was cold enough for their breath to condense in small clouds. Refrigerated, Dooku realised -- they were still above true surface level, and even the worst of Coruscant's slums wasn't this cold.

The room looked as if it had previously been a laboratory -- which explained the chill -- but become little more than storage for temperature-sensitive items. Frost bloomed in glossy patterns across exposed metal and glass.

Sidious rested a hand on the control panel of a stasis coffin and switched the hover function on. As it powered up, sluggish in the cold, he explained, “My Master sought the key to unlocking immortality. One such method -- the one that came closest to success -- was cloning. Of course, he wouldn’t simply subject himself to the process untested. There were a number of failures before he found the way to transfer one’s dying -- in this case, deceased -- consciousness to the new body. But this, too, was a failure. The subject suffers amnesia, and its power in the Force is negligible.”

Dooku listened with growing horror. A Force user, cloned, killed, and reanimated? It was monstrous. “What…. What do you wish me to do with it?”

Sidious’ smile was thin and poisonous. “You will take it back to Serenno, awaken it from its stasis -- it’s been some ten years or so, you will have your work cut out for you -- and see if you cannot salvage something useful from it.”

His pallid hand wiped a wide swath of caked ice from the transparisteel lid, and Yan Dooku found himself staring at the time-frozen features of Xanatos duCrion.

Chapter End Notes
So, uh. Yeah :D

Update: This chapter has had minor edits since it was released.
Update part 2: There's a scene which occurs between this chapter and the next; you can find it here.
Infiltration

Chapter Summary

Previously:

Quinlan Vos and his Padawan, Aayla Secura, aided Master Kuro and Siri Tachi in apprehending the notorious bounty hunter Aurra Sing in the depths of Coruscant's undercity.

Recalled to Coruscant, Sith Acolyte Caliga awaits new orders from her master, Darth Sidious.

On the far-flung Outland Transit Station, Obi-Wan and his crew successfully fulfilled their first bounty contract.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, DragonHoardsBooks, Junara, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 979.12.30
Coruscant

Yearsend Night was an evening for parties, alcohol, presents, and fireworks. Most Republic citizens spent the day cleaning their homes and putting lights in their windows and then going out to watch the sun set and rise with their closest friends.

Most Republic citizens did not spend Yearsend Night creeping through a dusty abandoned lift shaft with an acquaintance they had only known before though the HoloNet.

Pamah hooked her toes under the lip of a cross-beam to steady herself and played the beam of her head-lamp over the wall, pushing her hair out of her eyes. “Think I found it,” she whispered into the headset comm. “Jayken, what do you think?”

The response had a three-second delay due to range; their Aleena friend was patched in from Ord Mantell. “Yeah, that’s got to be it. Triangulated depth reads about right. Is it sealed?”

Pamah ran her hands around the edges of the grate, testing. “It’s hinged on the bottom. How you doing up top, Bara?”

One of the guide-ropes connected to her harness thrummed as he plucked it; the beam of her light didn’t reach high enough up the abandoned shaft to illuminate the other human’s perch. “It’s hot up here; at least one of these ducts is connected to something running.”
“Yeah. There’s a lot of lost technology down here. Lock the rig down, I’m gonna DIY this.”

It only took a few minutes to find the magnetic seal-points and polarise them; the grate swung down easily to rest against the wall below. The opening beyond was large enough for a standard maintenance droid; she slithered through and unclipped her harness, using a heavy magnet to secure the ropes. Barahir appeared a few minutes later, following the route of Pamah’s rig down. The pipe was cramped, barely tall enough for either of them to sit with their heads tilted against the ceiling. The young man fished his datapad out and they leaned over to view the readout.

Barahir scowled. “Jayk, do we have schematics for this building?”

“Negative, I haven’t been able to find anything for those coordinates, other than ‘industrial complex circa 500 pre-Reformation’.”

“Fantastic,” Pamah muttered.

They had spent the better part of three years trying to nail this location down. The Ghost Node -- so called because it was seen rarely, vanished quickly, and you had to be looking in the right place to spot it -- had become a legend among slicers, a databank that nobody had successfully cracked. Slicers who tried during its rare moments of connection to the HoloNet had reported their hardware fried and software scrambled by some of the most intense security ever reported. Even the biggest corporations in the Republic didn’t carry shielding that virulent, and some speculated it was a piece of lingering ancient tech.

Pamah thought the speculations of it being Rakata tech were ridiculous. That didn’t mean she wasn’t curious about what it was hiding.

She’d met Barahir, Jayken, Lurali, and Em-Toh through one of the HoloNet chat boards where more experienced slicers talked shop and exchanged information. The Ghost Node had snagged her fancy years earlier, when she’d been a wide-eyed schoolkid pushing the boundaries of legality by peeking into open databanks’ back doors. The idea of a databank that secure was like wafting the scent of candy floss into a roomful of toddlers: irresistible. Together they had worked out a system to pin down the Node’s actual physical location in the galaxy, first by tracing what it connected to, then by measuring localised data traffic in the rare moments it was online. The schedule was inconsistent -- frustrating, but every time they got a little bit closer.

Several other slicers thought they were crazy and chasing shadows -- or likely to get themselves hurt if they finally found it. Three slicers who had claimed their gear got fried by the Node’s security had later vanished.

Pamah stuck one of her magnetic tracking beacons to the top of the pipe and made sure her datapad picked it up. “You ready for this?”

Barahir’s grin was a little manic, his eyes wide in the reflected light. “Ten years ready!”

Lurali and Em-Toh signaled their own excitement from Corellia and Zeltros. Jayken made a final calculation of their coordinates. “I’ve never been to Coruscant, how many levels down are you?”

“We’re down where the sun doesn’t shine, Jayk.”

Pamah snorted. “Literally.”

It took another hour of crawling and occasionally sliding through the old ventilation ducts before they reached an active security grid. Barahir hooked a blind box into the network and let it run, the dumb system drifting invisibly on the currents of the security network.
“Oh, that's nasty. Self-contained network, default set to lethal.”

The two of them exchanged a glance. They’d known the Ghost Node might be locked behind heavy security, but most places had theirs at least dialed back to disabling. If they tripped any alarms….

Em-Toh’s voice whispered through their comms, “Is it isolating?”

Pamah squinted at the readout. “Unfortunately, yes.” If she and Barahir got through the first screen, their communications would be blocked: they’d still be able to hear each other, but the three outside the grid would not.

“Pamah, set your spare ‘pad to accept this packet. Let it run and once it's ready, hook it into the grid.”

“Em, that might set it off.” The data was already loading into her ‘pad, a rider program of some sort.

“Not if I did my job right,” the Zeltron woman said. The smug grin was audible in her voice even across light years. “Once you get that hooked in, leave it there. Might be some additional comms delay while the program sorts packets, but it’ll bridge the grid.”

“And once we have a bridge,” Lurali added, “we can get you through the grid.”

“Em-Toh, you little genius,” Pamah said, grinning as she watched the rider program turn the security grid into a receiver. “I owe you drinks. Several of them.”

“Promises, promises.”

The three other slicers got to work convincing the security grid that this one vent hatch was still sealed while Barahir and Pamah kept tense eyes on the blind box. As soon as they got the hatch open, Pamah popped the latch plate off, pulled four particular wires, stripped them and twisted them together. Even if the slicers’ crack fell apart, the opening would read as secured. She finished off by wrapping the bare wires with nonconductive tape while Barahir investigated the room they’d found.

“Looks like storage,” he whispered. “Lot of crates, cases of… stuff. I don’t recognise the language on the labels. Dusty, might not have been touched in centuries. Found the door, though.”

“Watch us have stumbled into a museum basement,” Pamah muttered. There was barely any room to walk; she followed Barahir as he climbed carefully across the tops of the cases.

“If it weren’t for that security grid, I might think you’re right,” Jayken said. “Take some holos of the labels, maybe we can translate.”

The room’s door was unsealed, the corridor beyond lit only with dull red emergency lights. They followed Jayken’s map one way, then another, moving deeper into the complex. Pamah left tracker beads at each turn, like breadcrumbs to lead them back out.

“You need to find a way to go left… oh that's too far, is there no door?”

“Cross corridor ahead,” she whispered. “I can't believe there's no additional security down here.”

“Still want to discount my hypothesis that it's abandoned?” Lurali teased.

“Yes, because abandoned tech has a pattern, and the Node doesn't,” Barahir replied. “And that looks like a door.”

Inset deeply into the wall, the door was triple-wide, like a freight hatch; a secure entry panel was set
into one side. Cracking the door code was child’s play -- it had both a number pad and handprint scanner, and the buffer memory contained the last registered entries.

The technology was recent, and Pamah skimmed the access logs. “Definitely not abandoned, someone was here five days ago.”

“That coincides with the last time we saw the Node.” Em-Toh paused and then gave a nervous giggle. “You think they have someone actually plug it into the HoloNet manually?”

“That would explain it disappearing.”

The lights in the room came up as their entry was detected; it was cool but with a dryness that suggested the air-conditioning was barely able to keep it under control. The crisp tang of warm electronics settled on the back of her tongue as Pamah stared around. “Gods, you guys. You ought to see this,” she murmured reverently. She raised her datapad to snap a couple holos with the built-in cam.

The room was filled from wall to wall with data-storage banks, some ancient, others recent. The rows were set close with barely enough room for an average humanoid to pass between them. From the door, an open space split the room in half, with a large data terminal squarely in the center; a heavy rope of cables snaked down from the ceiling to connect into the back of the desk-sized terminal.

Pamah and Barahir exchanged a glance. Which of them would be the first to try to access what felt like a shrine?

Barahir grinned and waved her forward. “Go on. I’ll keep my ears open here.”

The terminal woke up with the tap of a button; she plugged her datapad in and set it to chewing through the access codes. Whoever had secured the thing knew their business, but it wasn’t enough to counter five slicers and the best programs they had ever built.

The login screen cleared and Pamah found herself staring at a truly massive database. Some of the file dates went back centuries. No wonder it had an entire room full of networked systems. “Bara, what do you think?”

He peered over her shoulder and gave a low whistle. “Grab five at random, one for each of us?”

She pulled the oldest, the most recent, and three more of varying dates, saving them onto separate datacards. Barahir accepted one, securing it into the inside pocket of his vest. “C’mon, let’s get out of here. This place is giving me the creeps.”

The rhythmic tapping of his stylus on the desk was the only sound in the room. The poor guard who’d reported the intrusion that morning stood pale and trembling to one side, looking like he expected to be strangled at any moment.

Tuuz’s lips pinched furiously as he reviewed the security holocams again. Two unauthorized humans wandering around the lower levels of the compound in the dead of night, and none of the Sith in residence had noticed. How had they not noticed?
This was as much on him as the others. “Relax, Arrys, it's not your fault. Get Na’tuán down here to run the analysis on what they were looking at. You an’ me are going down to the server level to figure out how they got in.”

The door opened when Quinlan buzzed for entry. The Twi’lek Jedi behind the desk smiled halfheartedly at him. “Knight Vos, thank you for coming. I apologise for the short notice—”

“No need,” Quin said. “You're Quartermaster K’lerrin?”

The young woman’s green features flushed dark. “Assistant Quartermaster K’lerrin. I’ve been assigned to audit the Temple’s room assignments and I found a few whose residents seem to have gone missing. You're on file as the psychometrist in residence -- the others are on assignment--” She seemed embarrassed at having to ask.

He nodded readily as he took a seat. “And you're hoping maybe I can tell if they're still alive?”

K’lerrin’s eyes got huge. “Oh, I hope they are! I was more hoping you might find clues to their whereabouts so I can contact them.”

Quinlan resisted the urge to roll his eyes. A lot of people, even Jedi, misunderstood how psychometry actually worked. “I doubt I can get that much. They must have left comm codes?”

“They did, but either they’ve lost the devices or they're out of range.” She handed him a datapad.

There were fifteen names on the list, a few he recognised. Thirteen were still registered as On Assignment even though the tasks had been issued years ago. The other two had signed shuttles out from the Temple hangar and then vanished. Quinlan frowned.

“These people have been missing for years. The Council hasn't investigated at all?”

The Assistant Quartermaster started to wring her hands but caught herself and pressed her palms flat against the surface of the desk. “I don't know. But their assignments don't seem to have been followed up.”

He parsed through the information she’d dug up; at least K’lerrin had thought to check all the angles before calling him in. A last resort. “Commed Master Windu about the open assignments?”

“I left a message with his assistant. He’s very busy.”

“I bet,” Quin muttered. “Well. Like I said, it's unlikely I can find anyone simply by handling their things, but I might be able to see if they're still alive. Maybe some decided to leave the Order and don't want to be contacted.”

The young woman seemed aghast at the thought, but allowed it as a possibility. She collected a set of security keys which would override the door locks. “If you’ll come with me, we’ll try Knight Darrol’s quarters first.”

The rest of the afternoon was predictably depressing. All of the Knights or Masters missing on assignment were most definitely not coming back. Handling their personal effects made Quinlan feel hollow inside. The first of the Masters who had simply disappeared, Sifo-Dyas, was also
unquestionably deceased, and there was something burningly cold clinging to the man’s absence.

“Please, please tell me you’re going to have all of these investigated. Especially this one,” he begged, putting the dusty teacup back in its dust-free circle on the table. The dregs of tea had long since dried into a crust in the bottom.

K’lerrin looked grim. “I certainly hope they will be.”

The last room they went to had been abandoned the longest. The air inside smelled stale with a hit of rotted food. Quin closed his eyes, following his senses into the living room. There was a small, semi-precious stone in a dish on the desk, its surface grooved with carved patterns; a worry-stone or something else the Jedi Master had handled frequently. The man’s sense was faded but not gone even after so long; the items in Master Sifo-Dyas’ quarters had held less.

He rolled the stone in his palm with his thumb, feeling the soothing texture against his skin and letting his mind accept what it found.

A sense of sudden epiphany: surprise and anticipation. Urgency tempered with patience; the last of Ky Narec’s emotions before his departure. Quin pushed through them, seeking their anchor point.

The Assistant Quartermaster looked like she’d been holding her breath when his eyes finally opened. She gave him a look tinged with desperation. “Well?”

With a sigh and a smile, Quinlan put the stone back in its place. “We have some research to do. But Master Narec is definitely still alive.”

Tuuz was already there, kneeling before their Lord’s throne, when Caliiga was summoned. The atmosphere in the stark black chamber was charged with fear and anger, and she used the few moments it took to cross the walkway from the turbolift to consider the situation. The Twi’lek acolyte was humbling himself, chin tucked toward his chest, but their Lord was on his feet and prowling across the dais with an air of disquiet. Caliiga took a position to Tuuz’s right and went to one knee, but kept her back straight.

“What is your bidding, my Master?”

Their Lord continued his pacing, barely sparing her a glance. “My boy. There has been… an intrusion. Our databank was accessed last night by two unauthorized humans.”

She took a moment to process that, letting his rudeness pass. “But the databank wasn't connected last night--”

“They walked in,” Tuuz hissed. Keeping his head down, he held a hand out to her and dropped something dense into her palm. “It’s a tracing beacon, short range, passive. They came in through the ventilation via a disused lift shaft, likely used these to keep from getting lost.”

A chill ran down her spine as she turned the thing over in her hand. The magnetic base was the heaviest part; there was a small, hand-soldered chip and receiver literally glued to one side. “There were five Sith here last night. I felt nothing.”

“Which is the only reason you are both still alive,” their Lord bit out. “The intruders did not know
where they were or what they found. However, they accessed files directly from the databank and made copies.”

Caliiga handed the beacon back to Tuuz and bowed her head. “I will find them, my Lord.”

“Yes. You will. Tuuz will help you.” Lord Sidious turned his back on them. “Eliminate them.”

She and Tuuz backed up three paces and bowed before leaving. As soon as the doors closed behind them, Tuuz motioned her to follow. In his office, one of their security staff huddled in the spare chair, looking pale and ill; the man started to get up but Tuuz waved him back.

“The good news is that our Lord was here last night and also missed sensing this, so we all get to live.”

He threw himself into his work chair behind the desk; Caliiga leaned against the wall, watching as he pulled up a series of holocam recordings. Two humans -- youngish, early twenties, a man and a woman -- wandered the lower level corridors, following something on their datapads. “They hooked their comms into our security field, getting guidance from outside. Single signal, but it splits at the first connection, so we know there’s at least four of them.”

“Possibly more,” the guard stammered. “Na’tuán is filtering through the signal history for the audio frequencies. We might not be able to find where the others are--”

“Leave that to me,” Tuuz said. He paused the holo and pointed. “Right here, the cams got a good shot of the man’s face. We don’t have much on the woman, her hair is largely in the way, but I’ve got the compiler piecing together what was captured into a profile.”

Caliiga’s eyes narrowed as she studied the frozen holo. Medium-dark skin, round features, shaggy pale hair that was likely artificially lightened. The woman beside him was nearly the same height and seemed likewise dark-skinned, with jaw-length dark hair cut to partially obscure her face. “How does anyone see through their hair like that?”

“You’re asking me?” Tuuz grinned. “It’s a fashion trend with mid-level young adults right now. We have a match on the man: Barahir s’Mari. Alderaanian citizen. Student at one of the universities.” He handed a datapad over and she skimmed the information. “Nobody among his known associates matches the woman, so we’re at a loss how they hooked up for this.”

“Could someone have hired them?” She copied the information to her own datapad and handed Tuuz’s back.

The Twi’lek shrugged and leaned back in his chair, twisting it from side to side on its mount. “It’s possible, but given the utter lack of any sense of things being amiss last night, we’re guessing they thought the place was abandoned.”

She scowled at the holo. “They’re slicers, right? Subverted the security field, home-built electronic breadcrumbs, somehow got through the door without setting off an alarm--”

“They pulled the security panel memory buffer and copied it,” the guard mumbled. He sounded miserable.

“The last person through was…?”

“Me, a few days ago. I connected the databank to the HoloNet as requested, then disconnected it on command, like usual.”
Tuuz flicked his stylus at the guard; it bounced off the human’s forehead before returning to Tuuz’s hand. “Not your fault, Arrys. We don’t have a policy for clearing the buffer every time. Because how would anyone get past our security to use it?” he finished sourly. “Nope, this is on me, it’s on Caliga, it’s on everyone who was able to notice something out of the ordinary but missed it. The Boss missed it, too. Because these two kids—” he stabbed the end of the stylus into the hologram—“didn’t think there was anything to be scared of around here. We may need to start having an acolyte on active security duty at all times. But for right now, we’re tracking down where that outside signal was routed from, and we’re tracking down Mister s’Mari, and we’re figuring out how they organized this.”

The guard straightened, his jaw set. “I want to help. I still feel responsible, even if it wasn’t directly because of me.”

Caliiga squinted at him. “Alright, then. You’re coming with me when I pay s’Mari a visit. We can Good Officer/Bad Officer this thing.” They would still have to kill the kid, but maybe they could get more information out of him first.

---

Takodana was so pretty. Zohli finished rolling the legs of her coverall up to her knees and let her bare feet dangle off the rock into the water, enjoying the cool contrast to the warm air. Bastra liked to bring them back here between jobs, and she knew it was mostly for her benefit -- her human guardian didn't want her to spend her entire childhood on a ship. She didn't really see what the big deal was, but at least on the planet she could find some actual privacy.

“Hey, kid.”

Well. Mostly. She rolled her eyes at the ghost guy -- Deesix had nicknamed Ulic ‘Spooky’ and the spirit acted like he hated it, but never asked them to stop. “Can't a girl find some actual peace and quiet for once?”

The ghost snorted and seated himself next to her, looking extremely overdressed in his robe and armour. “Just looking out for you, that's all.”

“I’m nearly thirteen, you know.” She’d hit her growth again, to her delight. Her At’tha might make unhappy noises about buying her clothes that fit, again, but she knew he was teasing.

“Uh huh, and not every one of Maz’s guests will respect you.” He shrugged. “I could have Dee come out here instead--”

“It would just complain about being bored. And I wouldn't be able to do this.” She flicked her foot in Ulic’s direction, sending a light spray of water through him. He chuckled with good humour.

“Sure you could, but the droid would push you in.”

Zohli leaned back on the warm stone and closed her eyes in the sunlight. “You don't like it here much, do you?”

There was a silence long enough that she slitted one eye open to see if he was still there. He was, semi-transparent against the trees; there was a faint glow around him against the shadows. “This planet has a dark history,” Ulic said finally. “Jedi and Sith armies fought here. I can feel the echoes of it. There are a few lingering spirits, like me, but they’ve faded over time.”
“Faded?”

He was frowning; if she had to guess, Zoh would have said he seemed disturbed. “Spirits without a solid focus can lose their sense of identity after a while. They become more attached to the last strong emotions they experienced. Even the Jedi spirits. And during a battle, those feelings will be pain, anger, fear, grief. So they're not pleasant spirits to be around.”

“I haven't felt anything?”

Ulic nodded. “We're a ways from the old battlefield here. But some of them can sense when I’m around. They don't like me.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “What did you do?”

He scoffed. “Why do you people always assume I did something? No, to the Jedi spirits, I’m another Sith who shouldn't be here, to the Sith spirits I’m a potential challenger.”

“Oh.” She was silent for a moment, then said, “You’ve been reading a lot. What was that book you had At’tha steal from that guy last month?”

“It's not stealing if you convince the owner to sell it.”

Zoh scowled at him. “At’tha made him think it was something else he was selling. Don't split hairs.”

“'That Guy' was a nasty piece of business whose ‘collection’ was taken from people he murdered or sold into slavery,” Ulic said mildly. “Luckily for us he just thought the book was an antique instead of Darth Victis’ grimoire.”

“What's a grimmore?”

“Grimoire,” he corrected. “It's a bit of everything: a journal, a biography, a spellbook. Bits of information she wrote down in case she’d need them later. Remember what happened on Dxun?”

“A spirit told you you're broken?”

Ulic winced. “I'm a fragment, yeah. Victis and her brother did a lot of research into binding their whole selves upon their deaths. But they also sheared bits of themselves off into other possessions, without diminishing themselves. Each piece is a copy, rather than a fragment.”

“So… not like you, then.”

With a heavy sigh, he leaned back on his elbows beside her. The loose fabric of his sleeves sank through the surface of the rock. “Not like me. It took me a long time to figure out what had happened, and even longer to figure out how to manifest like this.” He raised one hand and looked at the sky through it. “Literally snapped off the rest of Ulic’s spirit without preparation. There are cracks in me that can't be fixed without reuniting me with the rest of myself.” He groaned. “I really don't want to go to Rhen Var.”

She scoffed at him. “Now you're whining.”

“Damn right. On the plus side, the rest of me likely wouldn't try to destroy me, because if I’m fractured, then so’s he.”

Zoh dug a pebble from under her back. “That’ll be weird. Two of you having an argument with yourself.”
“I’d say bring a holocam, but I’m not very photogenic anymore.”

She giggled and he grinned; for a supposedly evil person, Ulic was alright sometimes.

He made a sound like he was clearing his throat. “You have exams coming up soon, don’t you?”

“In a couple months, yeah.”

“Thought about what you want to do afterwards?”

Zohli pulled herself upright, frowning. The thought of *afterwards* being any different from the way things were now made her queasy. “You’re asking about something specific.”

The expression on Ulic’s face was unreadable. “More than just education-wise. At thirteen, you can choose to leave.”

“Weren’t you just saying that some people here might not respect me?”

The way his eyes narrowed -- not at her -- reminded her that Ulic had also repeatedly said he wasn’t a nice person. “Some people won’t respect you, no matter your age. At thirteen you can register yourself as emancipated and self-reliant. Get a job somewhere. Not be constantly putting your life at risk on a smuggler ship.”

They’d run afoul of Commerce Guild mercenaries again on the last job. Bastra, Pulkka, and Feid had been busy for the past week repairing the damage, while Phel had taken Kate on the *Veeka* to pick up some lighter jobs and start building their own reputation. It felt like their family was… not changing. *Maturing,* maybe. Maybe it was risky, but it felt--

It felt *normal,* comfortable, and Zoh had trouble imagining any other life.

She shrugged and said simply, “This is home. Why?”

“You probably haven't noticed, but the adults have been discussing how to support you if you choose to go.”

“What?”

She turned wide, shocked eyes on the spirit, but his smile put her at ease. “I said ‘if’. They just want to make certain you have the best chance at a fresh start. Might want to have a word with your dad about it, yeah?”

She could feel a blush warming her cheeks and ducked her head. “You never did tell him what it means.”

“That's your job,” he said, grinning. *Fiend.* “I’m just here to remind you of it.”

Pulkka and Feid had become like aunts to both her and Phel; Phel treated her like a sister. But Bastra -- Obi-Wan -- had immediately taken the role once occupied by the minders her birth parents had hired, and more, with a warmth and affection that made her feel wanted and welcome. Her wariness of him from a year and a half ago felt like a different life belonging to someone else. Sometimes Zohli wished she could go back in time and assure her past self that everything was going to be okay. “Soon,” she murmured. On her birthday, maybe, or if he asked her about staying.

Zoh checked the chrono strapped to her wrist and sighed. Break time was just about over, and she had her regular comm with Doctor Oy-shso soon; the Gotal therapist was pleased with the progress
she’d been making recently. It had been rough at the start, but the support -- and Bastra helping her meditate -- had helped a lot. She unwrapped the sleeves of her coverall from around her waist and used them to dry her feet. “Gotta go be responsible for myself and all that. You coming?”

“My turn.”

They’d decided that meeting in person would be the best way to trade over the discs -- more souvenirs of one of the craziest slicing jobs ever pulled than anything else. Even though Pamah had encrypted the discs, the more hands the stuff passed through, the more risk of loss or data corruption.

But that didn't mean Pamah couldn't peek at the contents. The oldest file, the newest, or one of the two in between? Barahir had reported that the one she’d given him, dating from three hundred years ago, read like a journal entry of meetings from someone who called themself Vayll. A historian might have found something of interest within the data, but a HoloNet search turned up far too much information to sort through; practically useless without context.

It was the context that was the problem. Pamah plugged in the most recent file and let the decryptor run.

Names. Dates, all recent. S conf Needa dealt with, BSA case closed. Project 66 on schedule. Tea w Free Taa 01.13 re Fenn. M shows improvement, evaluate in 6mos. WTG becoming unreasonable, allow TF to respond.

It went on for three pages, a list of memos. Curious, Pamah ran an incognito search on a few of the names. Needa had thirty entries in the past four months, including a junior officer in Judicial; adding BSA to the search turned up a news article on a bounty hunter who’d been arrested recently for crimes on Bothawui. Free Taa was a Senator from Ryloth. ‘Project 66’ turned up forty-five million results, mostly connected to a long-running holodrama she’d never heard of, which had hundreds of fansites.

It looked like they’d found a databank connected to a news media company. The entries were so wildly varied, it was hard to draw any other connection. Pamah plugged the oldest file in, checked its date -- triple-checked, because it was literally over nine hundred years old -- and searched for media companies whose founding dates ran that far back. Some of the bigger names had been established thousands of years earlier, which was a little shocking, but things did tend to persist if they were profitable enough.

The entry with Free Taa’s name was bugging her. There were a couple more like it, indicating the writer was actively involved in influencing things. Maybe one of the media CEOs fancied themself a kingmaker?

Her comm chimed, interrupting her thought process. In the last five days since their thrilling break-in, Barahir had been comming her regularly with date overtures. She rolled her eyes and let it be, trying to focus again on the disc’s data.

A message flag popped up in the corner, the colour indicating it was Em-Toh. Pamah was about to click it away when two more flags popped up from Jayken and Lurali. Frowning, she accepted the messages.
BluJay:: [WHAT THE SHIT PAMAH WHAT DID YOU DO]

Loo0py:: [Kriff, Pa, did you see that? When's the last time you talked to Bara]

TohMnyWooky:: [shit pamah are you okay what's going on????]

Wide-eyed, Pamah dragged the requests into a group chat. [What the hells, guys?]

Lurali came back first. [Did you just see Bara’s message, Pa? This is BAD]

[Bara’s message], Jayken replied. [What the shit did you get us into?]

Pamah fumbled for her comm, ignoring the sound effects of the others responding in the group chat. Barahir’s message indicated it had been mass-sent to all of them.

[I really hope I’m just being paranoid, but things have been getting weird since the Yearend stuff. I keep seeing these same two people around, and I swear yesterday someone broke into my place even though nothing was touched and the locks were on when I got home. I’m getting creeped out enough that I’m setting this to send in ten hours if I don’t cancel it out. If you got this, I haven’t been able to send the cancel code. MB46-79.267-48A.128]

“What the fuck?” she whispered. She swung back to the group chat. The others were working themselves into a panic. [Guys, chill, you’re not helping. That set of numbers is uni library organization code. I’m going for a walk.]

BluJay:: [NO, PAMAH]

TohMnyWooky:: [NO]

Loo0py:: [PA NO]

Growling under her breath, she typed fast. [Look, I bet he hid smth there, probly the fifth disc. I have to get it b4 s1 else finds it.]

[And if that message was noticed and someone’s staked out the location?] Lurali demanded.

[Then we’re ALL in trouble and need to fall to our backup IDs]

[Shit, u right.] Em-Toh vanished from the chat; a moment later Pamah’s comm chimed with a new code. She returned with her own backup, and the group quickly reorganized.

[Look, I’ll stay in contact here. I’m on my way now.]

Loo0py:: [Be CAREFUL]

TohMnyWooky:: [what if someone asks why ur there]

[They won’t.] she replied. [We’re still on break til the end of the month, but a lot of us have work to do, the library’s always accessible if you have a student pass]

Pamah hesitated at the door, then went back. If someone had caught Bara, they could find her; and if he’d merely gone to ground somewhere, she should be ready to do the same. She stuffed a couple changes of clothes into a bag, along with the bare minimum of toiletries and all the ration bars she usually kept around for Revision Hell weeks. The discs and her backup datapad went into the reinforced pockets in her jacket, along with a handful of homebrew encryption keys.
It felt silly and paranoid; Bara was probably playing a prank just to see her again.

But would he have mass-mailed everyone for something like that?

Gritting her teeth, Pamah pulled her hood over her head and ducked out into the evening’s scheduled rainshower.

The damage to the dorsal turret had been more extensive than they originally thought: the hydraulics had been severed and fused by a stray blaster bolt. Obi-Wan had asked Phel to pick up the parts on xir current run, but xe wouldn’t be back for another week at least. They were flight-worthy, but not fight-worthy.

Cavik Toth had actually spared a moment to comm them to gloat, right before Pulkka’s enraged follow-up shots from the ventral cannon had forced the privateer’s wingmen to eject from their ships. Obi-Wan shook his head in wonder at the absolute ego it required to make things so personal.

Despite the situation, it was pleasant to have some time planet-side to just relax. Maz had introduced them to a massive room under her castle they could use for training, and it had been an absolute relief to be able to really let loose with the training droids. His muscles ached in a way they hadn’t for a long time -- a good ache, one that reminded him that his reflexes still worked.

Having the opportunity for everyone to socialise also allowed Obi-Wan a bit more privacy to meditate on his own issues. A full ship was wonderful, filled with life and a sense of belonging and home, but the constant presence of the others did somewhat intrude. Often Phel and occasionally Zohli would ask to meditate with him, and exposing either of them to what lay deeper inside his mind wasn’t high on Obi-Wan’s priority list. He hadn’t really had the opportunity to investigate his own state of being since Jedha.

It was getting easier to examine himself without flinching, at least. The Darkness remained, but it felt more orderly now, growing like ivy along the walls of his mind. He brushed a tendril lightly, and instead of the sharp, thorny sensation it might once have returned, it responded by leaning into his touch. The Light was still there, warm and comforting, and the vines of Darkness no longer shied from its presence. An accord had been reached, somehow, during his efforts with Ulic to heal old wounds. Obi-Wan had to work to maintain it, of course, but even Jedi had to tend their own state of mind regularly.

Satisfied, Obi-Wan turned his attention deeper, to the parts he wouldn’t let the others see.

The lost time from his and Ulic’s encounter with the spirit of Nadd on Dxun troubled him. Ulic claimed nothing notable had occurred, but that was far too much time for the Sith lords to have spent merely arguing with each other. He’d been trying to bring the garbled memories into focus, and thought he might have finally found the key. He reached into the untamed snarl of memory, found the point he’d noticed last time, and pushed.

The rebound flung him back into a pool of blackness so cold and absolute, he could feel his thoughts slowing.

It’s so dark.

How can I even think? My mind feels… rusty.
Failure. He said that. About me. How dare he!

Everything before that is a blur. Names, faces, words that don’t mean anything but mean everything, all thrown together so nothing makes sense.

It's getting warmer. Is it? I've been cold for so long.

No, it's definitely warmer. Everything hurts, it hurt before too, like my outside -- what's it called, WHY can't I remember a simple WORD -- is the wrong size.

Light flared suddenly, blinding and painful, and he flinched, trying to shield himself from it. His limbs flailed loosely, and one hand struck his own face hard enough to sting. Liquid sloshed over his chin. A too-warm hand caught his, and he gasped, sucking bacta-laden air into aching lungs at the shock of pain that ran up his arm.

Something struck his ears, too loud, so loud it felt like a physical blow, and he whimpered. Even that reflexive vocalization hurt.

The sound lessened and slowly became clearer -- someone with a deep, gravelly voice speaking in hushed tones to someone with a higher-pitched, grating quality. The deep voice was more soothing, at least.

“--full recovery?”

“Several years, at least. I'm no expert on human psychological trauma, but the patient appears to have endured substantially more than is considered healthy.” The high pitch scraped the inside of his head like metal on stone shut up shut up shut up--

“You don't say. What about his physical condition?”

“Judging by the patient’s response, I would diagnose severe overstimulation--”

The deeper voice blissfully cut the screechy voice off with a growl. A moment later the blinding light went out. “And yet you continue to subject him to such.”

“Sir!” The exclamation drilled into his brain and he groaned. “My priority is to ensure--”

“Prioritise later. Get out!”

There was a horrible clatter of metal on metal, light flared again, and then there was silence. He breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed; his hand sank back and was immediately submerged in soft, viscous fluid that was only slightly warmer than the rest of him.

The too-warm hand returned, touching his shoulder. “Don't speak. Can you hear me?” the gravelly voice murmured.

He nodded, feeling whatever was supporting the back of his head rub uncomfortably.

“Can you open your eyes?”

That was a good question. It felt like they hadn't been-- skin, that's the word, it feels like my skin is too small!-- opened in a lifetime.
It took a lot of flexing his face before he could get the right muscles to work. It hurt, of course it did, but there was only a small, dim light somewhere behind him now. Focusing made his head pound, but gradually the lighter blob at his side resolved itself into the face of an older man dressed in dark clothes. A full beard framed his jaw and he was frowning, carving deep lines between his eyebrows and around his mouth.

He sifted through the scattered memories, but none seemed to match the face. A stranger, then, but at least it wasn't that insulting man from before.

“The pain will fade with time; your nerve endings haven’t experienced enough stimulation to process the input. You’ll remain in bacta for a few more days.”

The words meant something, he knew they did, but it was like hearing a foreign language. All he could do was squint against the growing headache and nod. It seemed to reassure the man somewhat.

“You have been in stasis for a long time. My name is Dooku, and it is my task to help you recover.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes flew open with a gasp. The pressure in his temples faded -- sympathetic response to what the other person was experiencing. Feeling dazed with post-vision dissociation, he stripped out of his clothes and poured himself into the hottest shower he could tolerate. He let the water hit him full in the face and tried to make sense of it.

Whoever it was Dooku had found, they had a lot of pride, a lot of anger. In stasis? That wasn't normally done unless it was for medical purposes, but this rang of something else.

“Failure,” he murmured. The person’s memory was of a pale man, towering, with an extremely elongated skull -- likely a Muun. Everything had been hazed with the pain of overstimulation, and finer details were lost.

One thing he was certain of: that chunk of lost time had thrown him out and into someone else's mind. Nadd had definitely done something -- something the spirit wanted Obi-Wan to find and know about, but he would have to be able to unlock it himself.

Ulic was waiting, looking resigned, when he emerged half-dressed from the ‘fresher.

“I know what you're going to ask.”

Obi-Wan used the towel to squeeze water from his hair. “Do you, now?”

The spirit perched himself on the desk in the corner. “Nadd gave you knowledge, but you’ll only get access to it if you venture further into the Dark side. There’s nothing I can do to alter that; it's entirely up to you. I can tell you right now, if it kicked you out that hard, you’re not ready for what he shared with you.” He looked away, frowning. “It's not something you want to rush into, anyway.”

Scowling, Obi-Wan pulled his hair back in a loose knot. “He couldn't have just asked me to come back in a few years?”

Ulic’s smirk held little humour. “That’s not how Sith operate.”

“Hm.” He eyed the Sith -- his ally, if not his friend, trustworthy but only to a point -- and made a decision. “Dooku’s found someone. Someone Dark, who was kept in stasis.”

The spirit’s attention focused sharply. “Did he? I can’t begin to guess whom it might be, but it’s good to know he might have gained an apprentice or an acolyte.”
Obi-Wan dropped onto the bunk to pull his boots back on. “What's the difference?”

“An apprentice is intended to be a direct heir. Acolytes are servants and enforcers who aspire to apprenticeship.” Ulic rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Bane’s line adheres to only one master and apprentice, but in order to take on the Master, the Apprentice often has an apprentice, themself. Dooku may be planning to make a move on Sidious.”

“Eventually. I was under the impression that this one’s recovery would take some time.”

Ulic shrugged. “Sith like playing long games. The payoff is so much better.”

He arched an eyebrow at the Sith. “So what's your long game?”

The spirit regarded him in silence for a moment. “You know what it is.”

“I know what you've told me.”

“Wiping Bane’s line off the map isn't enough?” Ulic snorted. “In the process of doing that, you're going to help change everything. That's my long game.”

Obi-Wan paused in the middle of pulling on his shirt. “Everything?”

“Everything that matters.” The Sith bared his teeth in a fierce grin. “It's in my best interests if you live long enough to succeed.”

“I'm only playing your game as long as our interests coincide.” Obi-Wan gave the spirit a narrow look. “Hiding information is not helping either of us.”

“Would you have been content to leave Dxun if I’d told you what Nadd did?”

“You’d be surprised how well people respond if you give them actual good reasons for things.” He glared as he strapped his blaster at his hip. “It's insulting that you thought otherwise of me.” He caught just a glimpse of an unguardedly surprised look on the Sith’s face as he left, and felt a grim little twinge of satisfaction.

He found Feid and Deesix playing dejarik in Maz’s cantina. Pulkka and Zohli were cheering both of them on, and he pulled up a chair. “Who’s winning?”

“They are,” Feid sniped, pointing at their spectators. “They keep distracting me!”

“Speak for yourself,” Dee cackled as one of its pieces eviscerated one of Feid’s. The Zabrak woman cursed at the droid in Huttese and Dee gasped. “There are impressionable young droids here!”

“Impressionable this,” she grumbled, and sent her Ng’ok after the droid’s Ghhhk.

“Bastra!”

Obi-Wan turned and grinned as Hondo pushed his way through the crowd to their table.

The pirate slung his arm around Obi-Wan’s shoulders. “I have good news, my friend!” He sobered for a moment. “Well, some bad news, too. But! There is good news!”

“I've not seen you this excited since we wrapped up the business on Nar Shaddaa,” Obi-Wan said as he poured a drink for Hondo. His friend accepted with a delighted smile and dragged a spare chair over from the next table.
“Well!” Hondo swallowed a sip of brandy and smacked his lips in appreciation. “Is that Corellian? You have expensive tastes, my friend! The bad news first, yes? It seems our compatriot on Nar Shaddaa has gone and gained himself some attention.” He produced a his datapad with a flourish and thumbed it on.

Obi-Wan accepted it with a curious frown. “There’s a bounty on Gav Davine? Really?” The amount on offer wasn’t exorbitant, but definitely not something to sneeze at either.

“Hmm! It seems there was a Hutt who had some interest in Krayn’s business, after all. It took a great deal of digging to find that out, of course.” The other man cackled. “Porla would not want the rest of the Cartel to know he was helping to push them out of the moon operations, after all. Which brings me to the good news!”

Pulkka leaned forward, looming just enough to imply threat. “Why is it a good thing for Bastra’s alter-ego to have a bounty?”

Waving his hand in objection, Hondo said hurriedly, “No, no, no, it is not the bounty itself, but who placed it.” He leaned in and dropped his voice. “You see, there is a base I have had my eye on for some time.”

“You? Settling down?” Feid grinned. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

Hondo shrugged cheerfully. “There comes a time when every pirate must think of the future, yes? Now, this base is, of course, currently occupied. But its owner was, until recently, not in residence, and you cannot just capture a place without ensuring its owner will not come back!”

Obi-Wan’s eyebrows rose. “It’s owned by Porla?”

“Exactly!” Hondo pulled up another file. “Porla the Hutt places a bounty on Gav Davine. In retaliation, the Red Sun wipes Porla’s operation from Florrum -- a bounty cannot be paid if the one who placed it is dead. Or, I suppose, Red Sun could force him to pull it,” he added dismissively. “But it would be better for our continued prosperity for the Hutt to not survive the encounter. And then the base is left abandoned, but! Is shortly taken over by a dashing pirate and his crew!” He tipped the brim of his hat rakishly, grin back in place. “Plausible deniability is the term, yes?”

“Why has Porla moved from Hutt space?” Obi-Wan asked cautiously. Hondo shrugged.

“Possible feud with another immense slug? Jabba recently moved to Tatooine because his tastes offended even the Cartels, or so I understand. They are always squabbling.”

Obi-Wan considered the idea for a minute. “Didn’t you say you’d sold most of that body armour we used?”

“Not all of it.” The Weequay grinned. “It’s been useful to have intimidating people in the background from time to time.”

Pulkka reached over, gesturing imperiously for the datapad. “Say we do this. What do we get out of helping you?”

“A standard portion of Porla the Hutt’s wealth, for a start? And a friendly location on the north rim to hide out between jobs, if you’re disinclined to come all the way back to Takodana.”

The Whiphid’s heavy brows arched. “This is a huge base. How did you get the plans?”

“It’s on top of a mining complex. And I know some people who owed me favours.”
Obi-Wan sipped his drink and mulled the idea over. Having a bounty on Gav Davine could eventually come back around to hurt them, if anyone managed to draw the connection. But the risk of their ruse growing beyond itself….

Well. People couldn’t track that which didn’t exist. “Alright, Hondo. The rest of my crew needs to speak for themselves, but I’m in.”

Feid smirked as she annihilated Dee’s Kintan strider. “I’m in. I bet Phel will want to be, too.”

Pulkka shook her mane. “Hard to hide a Whiphid in body armour, but you’ll need air support. Dee and Zohli can help me out.”

“Can I?!” Zoh gave Obi-Wan a pleading look. “I’ve been practicing with the turrets.”

He grinned and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I know you have. Once Phel gets back we’ll see if xe wants in.” He glanced at Hondo, who was grinning like a fiend.

“Excellent!” The pirate tapped his glass against Obi-Wan’s. “Not to worry, my friends, I have it all planned out!”

Chapter End Notes

Hondo... Hondo... don't jinx yourself like that.
Legerdemain

Chapter Summary

Previously:
Slicer Pamah and her friends discovered that their thrilling adventure seeking the Ghost Node databank on Coruscant has very real consequences.

Hondo Ohnaka has laid out a plan to capture a base from an unsuspecting Hutt. There's no way this could possibly go wrong.

Meanwhile, Quinlan Vos discovered that a Jedi Master who has been missing for several years is alive and well. But did he leave for a reason?

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumí, sanerontheinside, jynx, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Reformation Year 980.01.05
Takodana

Lazy mornings were the best things ever, Hondo mused sleepily. Pale light was leaking through the gaps in the blinds, outlining the sparse furnishings in the room he rented from Maz. The quiet chirping of daybirds was only just starting; they'd have another hour before it became an unbearable high-pitched racket.

He rolled over in search of the heat source beside him and cuddled up around it, feeling wiry hair and that ridiculously soft human skin under his hands. Scogar mumbled drowsily and pushed back into his arms; Hondo nosed through his hair and pressed his lips against the spot where the mercenary's neck met his shoulder. The man shivered against him, and he smiled. Yes, lazy mornings were the best, particularly when one had someone to share them with. He continued to languidly pepper the other man’s neck and shoulders with kisses, letting his hands wander over firm planes of muscle, until Scogar grumbled in protest and rolled over, shoving him onto his back.

“Tell me, Hondo: did you intend to wake me up this horribly early?” The human was still bleary -- adorable! -- despite having completely pinned Hondo; he tested the grip holding him down, wondering if Scogar had meant to use the Force or merely forgot himself.

He grinned cheerfully. “I am still on shipboard time, my friend.”

“Hrmph.” Scogar’s half-awake squint hadn't changed, but his smirk held a devilish hint of promise in it. He shifted his weight and then rolled his hips, letting Hondo know that at least some parts of him were fully alert. Hondo’s breath caught, and Scogar chuckled. “Well, as long as we're here, may as
The birds outside were screaming defiance at the humidity when Hondo finally dragged himself through a quick shower. Scogar had partially dressed and was seated on the bed, reading something on his datapad while cradling a mug of caff from Hondo’s portable maker in his free hand. His long reddish hair, still damp from his own shower, trailed over bare shoulders covered with those little spots humans called freckles, and Hondo gave in to the urge to run his fingers through it. Scogar smiled but continued reading.

“Important work, hmm?” Hondo settled in behind Scogar and worked a comb through the human’s hair before separating it into sections. Weequay away from Quay wore their hair in braids to indicate how long they had spent out in the galaxy; Hondo didn’t fully follow the traditions, no, but he liked having a pair of plaits to let others know it had been a while.

“Running through what we’re looking at on Florrum. Your scouts were thorough.”

“I know! I paid them well enough,” he replied with a grin. A full head of hair like this seemed such a difficult thing to manage! No wonder the man usually wore it in a high knot. Hondo pulled one of the thin leather cords he usually wrapped around his own braids and used it to tie off the end of the plait. Scogar rested the datapad on his knee and ran a hand over the braid experimentally before giving Hondo a smile.

“That rear exit could be useful, but the traps are a problem.”

Hondo rested his chin on Scogar’s shoulder to see what he was looking at. “Ah! Yes, pressure-sensitive plates. We don’t know what they connect to, but it makes sense if one is accustomed to riding a hoversled around.”

“We could use a hoversled?” The human’s laugh let Hondo know he was joking. Hondo pressed a kiss behind his ear and got up.

“Alas, the external security would see us arriving. Porla is most aware of the uses for back exits.” He turned and dug through his bag for a clean shirt.

Behind him, Scogar snickered. “He’s a Hutt, of course he is. So our best options are either a full assault, or talking our way in the front door and hoping the others can break in behind us.” He went suspiciously quiet for a moment, and Hondo tensed. “Have you considered using me as bait?”

In truth, that had been Hondo’s initial idea; he just happened to prefer the delicious irony of Porla learning ‘Gav Davine’ had arrived to take the bounty out of his slimy hide. He turned and leaned against the empty chest of drawers. “Of course not! What do you take me for? No, no, I was thinking to have the Red Sun approach Porla with an offer of congeniality--”

Scogar shook his head, frowning. “We cost him a lot, last year. That’s why he put the bounty on ‘Gav’. What makes you think he would trust Red Sun to make an offer like that?”

“Because Red Sun was striking only at Krayn, and Porla hid his involvement well. We could say it’s an apology, yes? And offer Red Sun’s services for his use.” He shrugged. “Of course, we would need an extravagant gift in order to whet his avarice and let us in.”

The human arched his eyebrows. “What sort of ‘extravagant gift’ did you have in mind?” he said cautiously.

“Porla the Hutt happens to have an affection for extraordinarily rare liquors. Not to drink,” Hondo said, holding up a finger, “but to keep, so that nobody else can have it, and to display, so that those
who visit will know what they are being denied.”

“How very Hutt-like. Maz has something rare, I take it?”

Hondo beamed at him; for a human, Scogar was nearly as devious and sharp as a Weequay. “She has the bottles and cases. Even I would not ask her to part with something irreplaceable for a job like this. We refill the bottles with liquid dyed to match the original contents and re-seal them. No worries about the drink being tested, as Porla would not dare open a priceless bottle.”

Scogar tilted his head, looking impressed. “That will get us in the door alright. But you know the slug’s going to demand Gav Davine on top of whatever else Red Sun offers. And Gav Davine may or may not run the cartel. I haven’t decided yet.”

“It’s not like we would have Gav Davine with us. Let me do the talking, I’ll say his skills are worth more than his head. If Porla insists, we can negotiate. We just have to keep him distracted enough, long enough, to not notice the others breaking in.”

“Hmm.” Scogar set the datapad aside and sipped at his caff. “How do we get them through the security?”

“Well.” Hondo felt his grin widen. “I did hire a certain Squib last year.”

Scogar chuckled and tipped back the last of his drink. “Rikkat, wasn’t it?”

“Indeed! We can rig one of the cases with a false bottom and smuggle her in!” Laying out the plan was almost more exciting than putting it into action. Hondo could practically see things clicking into place behind his friend’s eyes.

“So Rikkat shuts down the security while we have Porla preoccupied and lets everyone else in.” The human slid off the bed and reached for his own bag. “We’re still going to have an ugly firefight on our hands once they figure out what’s going on.”

“Focus on eliminating Porla, yes? Without someone to pay them, his security will be more likely to run.” Hondo tore his eyes from the sight of Scogar’s bare, muscled back and bent to collect his boots. No getting distracted, now! “A few may feel their loyalty is worth more than credits, and we will have to fight those, of course--”

“It’s notoriously difficult to kill a Hutt, Hondo.” Scogar’s voice was muffled as he tugged a shirt over his head. “Mere blasters won’t work.”

Hondo pulled a small box from his bag; inside was a double-walled glass vial filled with a viscous, translucent brown liquid. He held it up. “Do you know what this is?”

Scogar squinted. “At a glance, no.”

“I’m not going to throw it across the room to you. It’s illerium, in stable solution.”

The human’s eyes flew wide; he scrambled to his feet and crossed the room. Hondo let him take the vial for inspection. “I thought this was usually green.”

“It is, normally, but here it’s combined with laminite oil for stability. The air inside, however, is nitrogen--”

“Because oxygen will cause the illerium to react.” Scogar shook his head, smiling. “Clever, smuggling our own bombs in as a gift. You’ve been working on this for a while, haven’t you?”
“I am nothing if not thorough.” He wrapped his arm around Scogar’s waist, letting his hand rest on the other man’s hip, and accepted the vial back. “The backup plan is to blast open the trapdoor to the beast pits and dump the Hutt in, but we can’t guarantee the k’lor’slugs would finish him off. But that would buy us time to figure out something else.”

“K’lor’slugs. Charming beasties.” Scogar’s comm chirped with an incoming message, and he disengaged from Hondo to check it. “And that’s Phel saying xe’s just arrived in-system. Once we get the Sunflare’s parts replaced, we’ll be ready to go.”

“Excellent!” Hondo bustled around tossing clothes left on the floor -- both his and Scogar’s -- into the ‘fresher’s autovalvet, where everything would be cleaned within an hour. The human was watching him carefully; he could feel it, and he tried not to show the tension that settled in behind his sternum.

“Hondo, are you…. Are you sure you’re alright with this?”

Oh no, this was not the time for that conversation. It was never time for that conversation. He forced a grin. “Taking Porla’s base? Of course I am! It’s got the best of everything--”

“That’s not what I meant.” Scogar was frowning, unusually serious. “I mean this.” He gestured between himself and Hondo. “Us. We’re just friends, but… are you alright with that?”

Bless his confused, tender human heart. Hondo’s smile was starting to hurt. “I don’t know what you mean, my dear! Of course we’re friends! Why else would I ask for your help in this?”

The human’s own smile was an awkward, lopsided thing that had no right being so endearing. “Right. Well, you know you can count on me, Hondo.”

“I never doubted you!” He busied himself with packing his flight bag, if only to avoid those quizzical blue eyes. Hondo had a taste for rare things, it was true, but everyone knew that the tighter one clutched that which was most precious, the more likely it was to shatter in one’s grip.

Coruscant

They had taken an extra day to make certain they had found the right person before Caliiga and Arrys had gone into action, ambushing s’Mari as he departed one of the university buildings. The lightest touch of Force suggestion had him following Arrys to the waiting speeder, and the boy had been delightfully susceptible, telling them everything they needed to know and then some.

It wasn't until Caliiga was searching the boy’s bag and found his comm that they realised he’d had an automated message set to go off. Arrys cracked the datapad’s encryption -- with difficulty: Barahir s’Mari took his slicing seriously. Neither of them could make sense of the aurenumeric code in the message, but Arrys traced the receiving comm codes. Two went into offworld relays and lost themselves in the sea of interstellar data traffic, but the third was appended to a Coruscant device: s’Mari’s friend from the security footage.

Caliiga sent the data to Tuuz, who used it to pull together a profile of the woman. Pamah Thakkan, another university student, a Coruscant citizen with a suspiciously spotless record.
“Nobody's that clean,” Arrys complained.

“No, but if you're faking a profile, you never leave it clean,” Tuuz answered. Caliga thought she could hear the squeaking of his chair’s gimbals in the background. “So either it's legit, or she's too good to get caught.”

“We did not get our systems cracked by a clutch of nobodies, Tuuz. Tell me that's not what happened so I don't die of humiliation,” Caliga begged.

“Well, we’re all going to die of asphyxiation via the Force if we don't nail this down before someone notices. I'm sending you the girl’s address, and I'll get on with breaking their comms.”

There was no way the body could be mistaken for a suicide; they took a detour and dropped it someplace where the lower-level wildlife would take care of the dirty work.

Six years ago, Master Narec had signed out a shuttle from the Temple hangar and disappeared. The man hadn't logged a destination, but there was an appended note to “see Council record 973.10.22/14”. Unfortunately, Council meeting records were under restricted access: one would need permission from the Council to see them.

Quinlan was about ready to start pulling his hair. The Councilors were all very busy people, and the best he’d been able to get from their assistants and padawans were promises to let the Masters know as soon as they were available.

Waiting around in an atrium chair would do nobody any good, least of all the missing Ky Narec. Quinlan had returned to Narec’s quarters to look for some hint of what had made the man so excited prior to his departure.

Narec had packed substantially -- he’d clearly been expecting a long journey, despite the autovalets most ships included -- but had left behind his formal robes. Not going anywhere fancy. No convenient notes left behind, not even a datapad.

He was just starting on slicing into Narec’s computer terminal to investigate the search history when the door chimed.

Quin stared at the door, baffled. Outside, he could sense… ah.

“Siri peered around as she entered, followed closely by the Twi’lek girl she’d claimed as her Padawan. “Aayla said you were raiding an old man’s drawers. We just had to get in on the scandal.”

“She did not say that.”

Xiaan giggled. “She said you said that.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her with a grin. “You got me there. Though honestly there isn’t much in his drawers, he packed up nearly everything.”

The cleaning droids had been through and removed the worst of the dust; the other two pulled chairs over from the table to watch as he set to work carving apart Narec’s access codes. “Would you teach me to do that?” Xiaan asked. Quinlan shrugged.
“I think your Master could show you as well as I could. Maybe better.” He winced as Siri poked him in the ribs.

“Flattery will get you almost anything.”

“That's a credit chip I don't dare cash.”

His slicing programs finally chewed through the security and spat out the contents of Narec’s files. After a cursory skim -- proving that Narec hadn't left a convenient journal entry explaining why he’d chosen to petition the Council for leave to go somewhere and never return -- Quin went into Narec’s HoloNet search history.

They found an intensive mixture of searches for specific planetary features and constellations as seen from the ground, followed by requests for astrogation charts, and then a list of the standard shuttle types the Temple had maintained six years previous.

Siri rubbed the tip of her nose, frowning. “Looks like he had a vision of some sort.”

“About what I was thinking.”

Xiaan leaned in, squinting at the fine text. “Why would he need to look up ships?”

Siri answered. “He was probably checking their maximum travel range so he’d know which shuttle to request.”

“Here we go.” Quin pointed at an entry. “I thought it was a spelling error, I’ve never heard of that system before.”

“Rattatak?” Siri frowned and scrolled through the list. “Mostly warnings from Judicial to avoid the planet. That's encouraging,” she commented sourly.

Quin leaned back in his seat, eyeing the astrogation results. “There’s no official route to get there, the closest system on a hyperlane is Cerea. Master Ki-Adi might have some idea, but Cereans prefer a low-tech lifestyle and don’t do a hell of a lot of offworld trade, themselves.” He pulled up one of the Judicial alerts: the system seemed to be a hotbed of pirate activity. “Have you two had dinner yet?”

Siri stared at him as if he’d just asked if she spoke Shriyywook. “What does that have to do with anything?”

After making certain Narec’s computer would remain unlocked, Quin pulled the connection from his datapad. “Because if there’s one person who knows their way around mercenaries and pirates, it’s Dex.”

She found it in the Non-Human Cultural Studies section, slipped into the case for a volume on Iridonian cuisine: the datacard she’d given Barahir, with a datachip taped clumsily to one side. Pamah tucked the card safely away with the others and found a private reading nook where she could inspect the chip.

There wasn't much on it other than a typed message and a series of rushed flat holos of two humans: a skinny man with thinning blond hair who looked like he spent most of his time in front of a screen,
and a statuesque woman with severely tamed brown hair.

I’ve run these through every database I can think of, but either the quality is too bad to identify them, or they straight up don’t exist. If you’ve found this, you got my message, which means they probably know I sent it. Ditch that comm and hide. I dunno what we found, Pa, but it’s not good!

[Base to cloud: SCATTER.] Pamah hit send and then broke open her comm, pulled the connection chip, and slotted her backup in. It wasn't the first time she’d had to burn a comm chip — the memory of pranking Czerka’s systems the year before brought a smile to her face — and it likely wouldn’t be the last. Once Jayken, Lurali and Em-Toh got the message, they’d be doing the same.

The new chip’s storage was already loaded with the others’ backup codes, among others. Pamah hunkered down, uploaded the images from Barahir’s chip, and waited for the others to connect.

Leeloo:: [ru safe?]

[So far,] she responded. [These two are probably the ones who grabbed B. Think you can find em?]

Leeloo:: [mmmaybeee. i’ll hit the dbs, once jj connects get him to slice the cams around the uni?]

[What good will that do?]

Leeloo:: [once they’re in the cam system, they can look for b in the banks. stored memory rolls over every 52 hours.]

While she waited for the others, Pamah plugged her scrambler into the datapad and then used the hardline to connect to the HoloNet. The scrambler device would give her datapad a random signature, hiding her digital footprints.

She still had the holos of the crate labels from that place’s storage. The text was jagged with hooked finials that made her eyes hurt; she connected to the translation database and started the identification process.

Jayjay:: [Hey Pa. You have a hidey hole?]

[For the moment. See if you can find these two? I can't crack anything from where I am, the data load would be noticed.]

Jayjay:: [I see L’s message, yeah. Shouldn’t be too hard. Hang tight.]

Em-Toh connected a moment later and joined her efforts to Jayken’s. Pamah frowned at her datapad: the translation system was having issues with the text.

Leeloo:: [i have good news and bad news. good news, i found connections for our nameless friends. bad news: they’re still nameless. and both of them have had a presence at the senate building in the last three months.]

Pamah nearly dropped her comm. [The Senate building, are you sure?]

Leeloo:: [it’s definitely them. what the hells have we cracked open?]

She shook the twitch from her fingers and replied, [Okay. Okay, maybe it’s not that bad. Maybe we broke into some Senator’s junk databank, and they’re SBI. Maybe they brought B in for questioning and took his comm temporarily.]
[Leeloo:: if they're sbi, they're so deep they don't even have ids]

[How is that possible?]

[it isn't.] Lurali went quiet for a moment. [pa, you need to get out of there. come to my place, we can figure things out. but I think you shud get off coruscant.]

Lurali lived on Corellia; common enough destination and near enough that a ticket wouldn't be beyond Pamah’s means. She was about to reply when an alert popped up on her datapad; the alert for the silly, magnetic security system she’d rigged to her apartment’s door.

[Guys?]

She switched on the connection to the little holocam on her desk. It had a perfect view of the room, and the brown-haired woman currently setting scanning drones loose.

As she watched, the woman walked over to the desk and started rifling through the organized chaos of flimsi notes and datacards

Pamah’s comm unleashed a stressed wail, followed by the distinctive stench of burnt electricals; the screen fritzed and went black. A wisp of smoke that stank of plastic and ozone rose from the gaps in the casing.

She tossed the burning device in the metal bin beside the desk and pulled the chat up on her datapad.

[MY COMM LITERALLY JUST EXPLODED SOMEONE’S TRACING OUR DEVICES DC NOW]

_Calm down. Freaking out won’t help._ Pamah blew out a sigh that made her hair puff. They’d used Barahir’s device to track down the digital signature of her physical comm, and overloaded the power unit; it was the only explanation. Which meant they’d be looking for her next. Individual buildings would have their own cam systems, but the uni was highly connected and the security was weak.

Pamah cracked into the university campus’ alert system and scheduled a fire alarm test. Time to get lost in the crowds.

Caliiga’s first clue of trouble was the tiny orange diode on the side of the holocam. She crushed the device, but it was guaranteed the slicer knew she was there. “Tuu, any sign of her?”

There was a pause that still managed to express displeasure despite the silence. “Thought I had her at the university, but there’s an alarm drill. It’s a mess, I’d bet good money she set that off. What do you have there?”

“Definitely a slicer’s den, you’d feel right at home. She probably knows I’m here, there was an active holocam.”

“She’ll hit the spaceport to get offworld, just watch.”

Caliiga tossed the fistful of flimsi she’d been paging through onto the desk. “What can we do until then?”
“Not much, it's too big a city to cover with surveillance and I can't slice every private cam system. Don't bother trying to catch her at the 'port, come back and we'll set you up with a ship and cover.”

---

Pamah swapped transit three times, scrambling her trail until she got to a corner in CoCo Town she knew well. Tucked into a closed alley, a cracked holoterminal offered direct connection into the HoloNet hardline. She plugged her datapad in and sliced her way into the main spaceport’s databanks.

It only took a few minutes to find a passenger whose ID holo vaguely resembled her. Human female, brown skin, shaggy dark hair hanging over half their face. Their destination was nowhere near Corellia and they had just departed, which was all that mattered. Pamah changed their name in the passenger registry, hoping it wouldn't upset someone's travel plans.

Now she needed to get into cover long enough to plan her next move. She hadn't dared reconnect to their chat; she hoped the others were alright.

---

“Got her.”

Caliiga climbed from the speeder and straightened her jacket with a quick tug. She spared a glance up into the lower-midlevel murk before marching toward the door. “Details, Tuuz.”

“Her ident just went through on a shuttle heading Rimward. Looks like the student ID was a cover, she’s working for a Hutt.”

The acolyte stopped so suddenly a passing MSE sideswiped her bootheel. “A Hutt. You're absolutely certain.”

“That's what her employment registration says. Nobody would fake something like that.”

“I'll be right up.”

---

The ambiance of Dex’s Diner hit them like a physical blow, heavily laden with blaring music and the smell of grilled nerf. Quinlan grinned at Aayla as she winced. “Still sure you wanted to come with us?”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Yes, because the noodles are fantastic. I’d just forgot how… much of the place there is.”

Under Didi Oddo’s management, the café had had a friendly warmth to it, the sense that it was someplace one could relax for a while. Dex had managed to keep that feel, but now it was like an explosion. At Siri’s elbow, Xiaan was peering about with interest.
It was a testament to how frequently Jedi visited that their tunics raised only one eyebrow -- and that being the owner. Dex leaned through the window from the kitchen. “Quin! Good ta see you! Grab a table!”

The Besalisk arrived a few minutes later and slid an unhealthy-looking appetizer in front of them. “On the house. Who’s here today?”

Siri introduced Xiaan. Dex grinned and offered both his right hands to shake; his belly laugh rattled the table when the Twi’lek girl picked one. “Ah, can’t catch you off guard! So what brings four of you in today?”

Quinlan pulled up the file on his datapad. “We need to get to this planet. Judicial has ruled it too risky to provide hyperlane maps.”

Dex’s brow dropped like an avalanche when he saw the file. “Rattatak? Aw, Quin, you don’t want to go there. Pick someplace safe. Like Korriban.”

With a grimace, Quinlan insisted, “We’re trying to find someone who went there, Dex. We know he’s alive, but there’s been no communication for years.”

“Hmmph. Not surprising. The locals probably shot ‘em down, and without a ship to boost the signal, your friend would be stranded. ‘Less they could make a deal with one of the local warlords, but if you make a deal with them, you’ll be paying it off for life.” Dex passed the datapad back and stepped to one side as a serving droid rolled up with their orders. “No, you’re going to fumble your way through anyway and prob’ly get yourselves killed if I don’t help you out. Don’t go anywhere, need to make a comm.”

Pamah huddled on a stool near the middle of the diner, the only place she could sit where her face wouldn’t be visible from the windows, and nibbled at a sandwich without tasting it. Not knowing who was tracking her, she had no way to find out if they’d taken the bait, or how long she had before they turned their eyes away from the spaceport. It was unlikely the diner owner would let her stay indefinitely, regardless of how many cups of caff she drank.

A thick finger thumped the counter in front of her and she jumped, looking up guiltily from her datapad. The big Besalisk’s face was screwed up in annoyance.

“Mind not using so much bandwidth for a bit? Gotta comm someone but you’re chewing into the local frequencies.”

Pamah flushed and turned off her datapad’s HoloNet reception altogether. She’d had a masker running in case whoever it was had tagged her datapad; the device effectively made her single datapad look like five, splitting the load of slicing across separate device IDs. “Sorry.”

The big man squinted at her for a moment before bustling through into the staff room.

It was still relatively early in the evening -- the dinner rush was about half an hour away -- and the diner was about half-full. She nibbled at her fried tubers as she glanced around, then nearly inhaled a piece as she spotted one group in particular. What was a bunch of Jedi doing in a diner? Two human adults about her age and two younger Twi’lek teenagers. Friends? Jedi didn’t do the family thing, right?
She kept catching herself brushing the pocket where her comm usually sat; losing the device -- and the connection it provided -- was distressing, and she tried to shrug off the feeling of being watched, only to have it replaced by worry.

The others had hopefully abandoned the chatspace and built a new one, but without her comm, they wouldn't be able to provide her an access code. Barahir hadn't resurfaced, and Pamah didn't want to suspect the worst, but even if he was alive, she wouldn't be able to find or help him. If only she'd answered his messages….

No. It wasn't her fault he was missing, and if she had responded, if she had met with him for anything beyond the databank search, whoever it was likely would have found both of them at the same time.

What the hells had they stumbled upon? She’d head stories of powerful people -- company executives and politicians and cartel leaders -- who would protect their information. But this sort of thing -- people being stalked and disappearing and homes being searched -- that only happened in the holos, right? For a moment, Pamah was struck with a wave of disorientation, like it was all just a nightmare. She’d wake up and Bara would be fine and they’d go on with their lives.

She didn't realise she was crying until a tear plinked off the enamel of her plate.

A shadow fell over the bar in front of her and she flinched.

“Easy, kid.” The Besalisk was back, and he leaned on the service side of the bar, one pair of arms folded on the cheap cultured marble while the other pair propped up his chin. “You look like someone who needs help. Want to tell ol’ Dex what's got you jumpy?”

Pamah chewed her lower lip. Dexter Jettster had a reputation in certain circles. He’d been a known infomonger for years. How much was her information worth to someone like him?

The diner owner poked at the small box connected to her datapad. “I been out of the game a bit, but I know what this is. You're prickly as a spooked Nexu, I'm guessing you broke in somewhere, pissed someone off, they want their data back?”

He was allowing her room to smudge the details, and she nodded gratefully. “The only other person here who knows has gone missing, my home got broken into, and my comm is, uh, lost. I have a friend on Corellia who told me to go to her, but if I'm being followed--”

“He spaceport is where they'll be looking.” He was nodding, a knowing look on his face. “If you got to Corellia, could you contact your friend?”

“Probably? I mean, we have blind drops, but I don't know how compromised my equipment is….”

“Hence all the white noise.” He flicked her masker again. “I have an idea. If you trust me?”

She hesitated. If Dex was in on… whatever this was, she was already toast. “Okay?”

“What's your name, kiddo?”

“Pamah.”

He rounded the bar and picked up her half-finished meal. “Grab your stuff, gonna introduce you to a friend.”

Dex led her across the room and walked straight up to the group of Jedi. In shock, Pamah heard him
say, “Got some directions for you, but you gotta do me a favor.”

One of the older Jedi, the only one who seemed to identify as male, rolled his eyes. “Dex--”

“It's nothing difficult, it won't even put you out of your way by more than a few hours. Think of it as doing a good deed.” He motioned for Pamah to move closer. “My friend Pamah, here, is in trouble, she got on the bad side of some locals and needs to get to Corellia without going through the spaceport.”

All four Jedi gave her cautious looks; it was intimidating. The blonde woman seemed sympathetic as she asked, “What kind of bad side?”

“And what kind of locals?” the man added. “If you're trying to run from Judicial--”

Pamah’s cheeks went hot. “I dunno, does Judicial stalk people and abduct them and break into apartments and destroy my equipment--” she gritted. Keeping her voice from rising as a struggle, and Dex rested a quelling hand on her shoulder. The two Twi'lek Jedi’s eyes had gone wide; the adults looked at each other with hardened expressions.

“Sounds like you have a cartel after you,” the woman said quietly. The man was nodding in agreement. “Where are you trying to go?”

Dex took over. “Corellia, and I know you're going that way, because you need to see another friend of mine for a spacelane map.”

The man brightened. “That's great, Dex. Where are we going?”

“A little plot of really pretty nowhere called Takodana.” He handed over a piece of flimsi bearing a set of planetary coordinates. “Ask to see Maz, she knows to expect you.”

“Maz, huh? Maz Kanata?”

The Besalisk’s brow arched under his ridiculous paper cap. “You know her?”

The Jedi shook his head. “Heard of her. She has quite the reputation.”

Dex chuckled. “You could say that, sure.” He set Pamah’s plate and mug on the table. “Why don't you kids get to know each other? Since you’ll be traveling together,” he said, winking.

The Jedi made room for her, and the blonde woman held out her hand for a shake. “Knight Siri Tachi. This is my Padawan, Xiaan, Knight Quinlan Vos--” the man nodded pleasantly but made no move to offer a hand-- “and his Padawan, Aayla.”

“Pamah Thakkan.” She swallowed. “I, uh. I'm just a student.”

Knight Vos was squinting at her. “What did a student do to have a cartel chasing her?”

“Quin!”

“They don't pick targets at random.”

Pamah sighed. Her caff had gone unpleasantly tepid but she sipped at it anyway just for something to do. “We sliced their databanks.”

Vos’s expression was a careful neutral. “Slicer, huh?”
“It was-- we were just curious! We didn't know what we’d found. Now one of my friends is missing, they cracked my comm and fried it, and someone broke into my home.” On a whim, she pulled up a still holo she’d made of the woman and her scanning drones.

The Jedi studied the image. “Nobody I’ve seen, and that business suit wouldn't be out of place anywhere midlevel,” Tachi said. “Can we get a copy?”

“Why?” Pamah asked before she could stop herself.

Tachi grinned fiercely. “Investigating cartels is part of my job. If she turns up elsewhere, it might help to have a file on her already.”

After a moment's consideration, Pamah copied the image onto a datastick Tachi provided. “So. Um.”

“What's the plan?” Vos grinned, the golden tattoo across his face catching the light. “We have to requisition a ship for a long flight. Lucky for you, we're already expecting to have one extra on the way back, so there’ll be space for you.”

“It probably won't be ready until tomorrow, though,” Tachi said. “Do you have someplace to stay?”

“I have enough for one of the capsule hotels--”

Tachi was shaking her head. “Too much risk the cartel will catch up to you.”

Vos spluttered on his drink. “Wait, you want to bring her to the Temple?” The two Twi'lek girls, who until then had been listening intently, spoke up in support of the idea, their voices overlapping.

“We can give her access to one of the empty tech quarters near the hangar,” Tachi said calmly. “Let me handle it.”

On the walk to the Jedi’s speeder, Pamah found herself bracketed by the two younger Jedi; the older girl, Aayla, had looped her arm around Pamah’s elbow. “A couple years ago, a cartel almost captured me. I won't let that happen to anyone else if I can help it,” she said fiercely.

“It sounds like you do a lot of dangerous stuff?”

Xiaan nodded. “It's our duty.”

Pamah wasn't sure what to make of those words coming from a kid who couldn't be more than ten Standard.

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M'haeli

Obi-Wan was impressed at how much Red Sun equipment Hondo had been able to recover, and how many of their previous allies were eager to join in, if it meant splitting a Hutt's wealth. Hondo had been making good use of the ships stolen from Krayn, and his people formed the bulk of their fleet.

And it was a fleet; that was the baffling part. Somewhat mismatched and patched-together, but an
actual fleet of ships from shuttle size up to heavy freighters. Three of the heavies were loaded with fighters and their pilots; the realspace-only ships would be unloaded on the planet itself.

They regrouped at M’haeli -- a quiet, primarily agrarian world without planetary sensors -- and made landfall on a vacant scrubland in order to repaint their ships and discuss tactics.

“Here is what we are looking at.” Hondo fired up a portable holoprojector. Most of them had already seen the layout of Porla’s base, so the diagram that appeared was no surprise. “Now, I received a transmission on the last route change, and we have an update to account for.” Unusually serious, he fiddled with the controls and the diagram changed.

Obi-Wan grimaced. That was a *lot* of additional security, electronic in addition to the guards, and that shield projector was new. A grumble went through the gathered pilots and their crews, but Hondo waved them to silence.

“I know, I know, it looks more difficult now. I’ve been going over it on the way here. I *am* confident that the original plan will work. We just need to take that shield down first once we’re inside.”

“How the kark are we getting inside if we can’t even get to the door?” someone asked.

Hondo grinned broadly. “I’m sure Porla will accept a comm from the Red Sun’s chief lieutenants,” he said, making an extravagant bow and gesturing to Obi-Wan. “Our biggest problem will be that sensor network he’s launched. The three lead ships will make a direct approach, but the rest will need to approach from behind the star, hide in its gravity shadow as long as possible—”

“Do you happen to have any probe droids?” Obi-Wan interrupted.

Hondo blinked at him. “Probe droids? What— ah!” His grin came back. “Ha! We do, indeed, but that will only work if everyone is willing to slave their navicomps to the *Sunflare*’s for the final jump.”

He glanced around for objectors. A few of the other captains looked uneasy about the idea, but nobody complained. Hondo changed the image to that of Florrum. “So! You approach from the opposite side of the planet in a close-range hop, drop into the atmosphere, and skim under sensor range. Hide the non-assault ships in the hills, take the speeders to get close, and wait for the signal.”

He pointed at Rikkat. “You now have two jobs—”

“Know, I know! Short out the shield projector, then open the door!” The Squib was practically bouncing with excitement.

Pulkka rumbled, frowning. “That’s a lot, considering they’ll immediately guard the entrance if the shield drops. The Squib will have a fight on her hands. What about your inside person?”

Hondo shook his head. “Their freedom of movement is too restricted.” Obi-Wan hadn’t asked who was helping Hondo in this, but it sounded like they were a slave or possibly a droid.

Rikkat’s ears drooped. One of the other crew, a human of remarkably short stature, raised his hand. “I get overlooked a lot. I can sneak off and get the gate, if Rik can take out the shield.”

“Are you certain?” Obi-Wan asked. “That’s a huge risk, and Hutts light their strongholds with ultraviolet -- the darkness only *looks* dark. I can—”

Hondo rested a hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder. “I need you for negotiations, my friend. Darwic can handle it.”

The rest of the time was spent ensuring their communications worked and that the people who would be fighting on the ground had their Red Sun gear in order. Obi-Wan planned to stay on the *Sunflare*
until their final realspace transition just outside the system, handling the probe droid’s placement and ensuring the fleet’s navicomp link with the Sunflare was set up properly. Nym’s old trick of using a probe droid to manually determine jump destination coordinates should serve to keep their fleet from being noticed on its approach run.

“You're fidgeting.”

Obi-Wan glanced up at Phel, who was in the process of programming the ion mines Rikkat would be carrying. Feid and Pulkka had pulled Zohli aside to resize one of the dark grey bodysuits, in case someone spotted the girl through the turret canopy. “Just cleaning my blasters.”

“For the third time today?” Phel’s grin was the slightest bit uneasy. “Yeah, I have… well, not a bad feeling. But it's not going to go according to plan, is it?”

“Since when does it ever go entirely according to plan?” He set down the weapon part he’d been working on. “I worry about Darwic or Rikkat being caught. But Hondo is right, I’m going to be needed to keep tempers low.”

Phel frowned. “Does the Force even work on Hutts?”

“No, but I can slow his guards’ response times if Porla orders them to kill us.” Even a half-second delay would be enough to keep people alive. Most of their allies here weren't aware of Obi-Wan’s further abilities, but they knew Scogar Bastra was a good negotiator. With any luck, nobody would notice if he had to act.

At Hondo’s insistence, he’d added one of the ridiculous red half-capes to his armour. He disliked the idea of setting himself apart from the rest of their parley team, but Hondo had reasoned that it would imply that he had authority to speak.

“Well it's something. Too bad I can't be in on that.” There was a definite note of envy in Phel’s voice. Obi-Wan shook his head.

“You're literally the only person I would be able to communicate with through those shields.” They had spent several hours establishing a true Force bond between them, removing the need for intense concentration in if they needed to share information quickly. Xe was still adjusting to the perpetual sensation of Obi-Wan’s presence in the back of xir mind.

It was more than that, though: Obi-Wan wanted to keep both Phel and Zohli as safe as possible during this. Phel may have been well able to take care of xirself -- xe was twenty and a full adult, after all -- but Obi-Wan still felt a particular level of responsibility for xir safety.

“Ugh, I know.” Xe set the datapad down and gave Obi-wan a very direct look. “But you can't keep me safe forever.”

He offered a lopsided grin. “I can try.”

Phel snorted and dropped a hand over his, squeezing lightly, blaster calluses rough against Obi-Wan’s knuckles. “You're such a mama nerf.”

He turned his hand over and squeezed back. “Can't help it, it's the job I volunteered for.”

They exchanged a smile and Phel offered one of the ion charges for his inspection. They were small and light enough to not impede Rikkat while she was running around. It wasn't enough to just shut the system down; they needed to make certain it couldn't be restarted easily.
Phel wrapped the devices securely in a roll of mesh designed to interrupt electronic signals. “Well, it's not every day you ask me to make bombs.”

Corellia

Pamah wasn’t entirely certain what she’d expected of the Jedi’s ship. Or the Jedi themselves, for that matter. Holodrama mysticism and magic really did a huge disservice to how… mundane they could be. The two girls were horrific practical jokers who even managed to catch Tachi and Vos off guard; Tachi and Vos teased each other like siblings. She learned about an hour into their flight that Jedi Initiates shared quarters and spent much of their early life in close proximity with each other.

The ship they took had space for six humanoids. Very thin humanoids: only one person could fit in the galley at a time, and the cabins were so narrow that the person with the top bunk had to climb in first.

She was really glad the trip to Corellia took less than a day.

Using the ship’s comm, Pamah sent a brief message to Lurali’s blind drop code letting her friend know she was on her way. There was no way to receive a reply; she could only hope the message had got through.

The Jedi used Coronet Spaceport’s short-term landing platform to drop her off.

“You’re sure you’ll be okay?” Vos asked as he handed Pamah her bag.

She tried to smile but it didn’t come out steadily. “I sent the cartel in the wrong direction; hopefully they don’t have anyone sliced into the spaceport security cams here because they’re too busy looking elsewhere.”

He blinked in bemusement. “I’m not sure I want to know how you did that. But I meant, are you sure you can find your friend here?”

“If she got my message, she’ll find me.”

Pamah took refuge in a tapcafe attached to the spaceport and guzzled caff. What was it with Jedi and hot leaf juice? A slicer couldn’t function on hot leaf juice. She’d been there a couple hours when an unknown user dropped into her chatbox.

[im out front of the spaceport main level where ru??????]

Grinning, Pamah finished her drink and hurried out.

A curvy woman a little older than herself, dressed in some sort of work uniform with spike-short, bright ginger hair was scowling at her comm. Pamah approached cautiously. “Lulu?”

The woman spun around, grinning broadly. “Pa!” Pamah found herself engulfed in a tight hug as the other woman babbled with relief.
“We were so worried about you! Oh! I need to tell Jay and Em-Toh you’re alright. Barahir still hasn’t shown up, we’re fearing the worst—”

Pamah let herself be pulled toward a speeder that was parked in the pick-up lane. “You won’t believe how I managed to get here, Lu, it was so crazy!”

“I want to hear all about it, but let’s get away from the cams first.”

The Coronet skyline, gleaming in the sunset, was plenty distracting; Pamah had never been off Coruscant before, and even though the usual taints of fuel and chemical pollutants lingered in the air, there was an undefinable something that smelled fresh in a new way. Lurali glanced over and caught Pamah inhaling deeply. “That’s the ocean you smell.”

“I’ve never actually seen an ocean. Coruscant is built right over all of it.”

“Yeah. Makes me wonder at the state of the ecosystem in there these days.”

“It’s probably all dead.”

“Oh, I don’t know. We get some amazing deep-sea life where the sun doesn’t reach.”

Pamah glanced over but forgot what she was going to say when she spotted one of the patches on Lurali’s jacket. “Lu.” She leaned in for a closer look. “Lu, what—”

The other woman chuckled ruefully. “Welllll… uh, yeah. I’m going to be honest with you, Pamah, I had no idea what I was getting you into.” She gave Pamah a guilty look. “I work for the Senate Bureau of Investigations, cyber security division. We’re allowed -- even encouraged -- to get indie slicers to do the illegal stuff that would otherwise cost us our jobs.”

Pamah stopped herself just shy of punching Lurali in the arm -- the other woman was doing the driving and making them crash would be a bad idea. “You would have let us all burn??!”

“No! Honest! If any slicers we work with get in trouble, we’re obligated to stand in their defense, you’re all fine!” Lurali sighed. “Well. None of my co-workers can find Barahir, either. I did call someone competent to investigate.”

Pamah glared at her narrowly. “You wanted us to find the Ghost Node?”

“It’s a massive security risk, Pa. I went looking for people who were as curious about it as my department.”

Groaning, Pamah flung herself back into her seat. “I can’t believe you were a spook the whole time!”

“Ugh.” She could practically hear Lurali rolling her eyes. “I’m not a spook. And I’m authorized to offer you protection, since you’re being pursued as a result of sanctioned SBI activity. Actually….” She hesitated and glanced at Pamah again. “I’m authorised to offer you a job.”

It took a minute for her words to sink in. “What?”

Lurali grinned; the expression made her sweet round face light up. “The SBI wants to hire you, Pamah.”

Chapter End Notes
So this has been a hellish few weeks. Work's been crazy busy, and I've been hunting up a new apartment here in Chicago. Good news is, I finished the crunch work AND I got the apartment I applied for! So I'll be moving in a month, but it shouldn't be too bad.

Hey, can I just say that I started playing SWTOR only a few months ago, and I swear the game has had absolutely zero influence on anything I've written for this? I'm hitting stuff in the game's later chapters now and thinking "hheeeeyyy didn't I write something like that???" So uh. Yeah. Whoops? Parallels unintended.
Incognito

Chapter Summary

Previously:

In their search for a route to Rattatak, Quinlan Vos, Siri Tachi, Aayla Secure and Xiaan Amersu encountered Pamah Thakkan, a slicer fleeing the retribution of an unknown target. After delivering Pamah to a friend on Corellia, the Jedi continue on their way to Takodana, seeking Maz Kanata's advice.

Hot on the false trail Pamah laid before going into hiding, Sith Acolyte Caliiga departed for a Hutt's stronghold in the Outer Rim.

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Hondo Ohnaka and their crews prepare to assault Porla the Hutt's base on Florrum.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcum, sanerontheinside, jynx, Iunara, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.01.10

Takodana

The mighty Wroshyr tree could grow kilometers in height and was immense enough to support entire cities in its branches. Its many layers supported a varied ecosystem, adapted to the different light levels of the Kashyyyk jungles. At six hundred years old, such a tree would already be over five hundred meters tall.

It took immense patience and skill to maintain one as an indoor plant no taller than her hip. Maz carefully exhumed the tiny tree’s root mesh, rinsing away the soil until she could see what she was working with. The seed had been a gift from Rraloowarra, a treasured friend and one of Kashyyyk’s tree-keepers. While some -- most, in all likelihood -- would consider the deliberate stunting of a Wroshyr’s growth to be near-sacrilege, Maz considered it sensible. The plant would either be invasive in Takodana’s deciduous rainforest environment, or it would sicken and die. Maintained with care, Rraloo’s gift thrived despite its stature.

The taproot required trimming. She applied a small-bladed knife to the fibrous material, gently paring away the core while leaving the subsurface spread intact. A delicate and painstaking process, but worth the effort. She hummed as she worked, feeling the life of the plant in her hands as a gentle warmth, distinctly different from the native flora. Each world had its own signature, and a plant would always remember its source.
She was just finishing up when her comm chimed. Maz spared a moment to ensure soil covered the tree’s roots before accepting the contact from the bartender downstairs.

“Kiffar man asking after you. Says Dex sent him.”

“Ah.” She nodded even though the other woman couldn't see her. “Seat them at my table. I’ll be down shortly.”

When Dex had commed asking for routes to Rattatak, she’d been concerned; more so when he said it was a Jedi who needed the information. Rattatak was a wretched scum spit of a dustball world swarming with pirates and mercenaries. Even the wildlife would try to kill you as soon as look at you.

If even one of those warlords got their hands on a Jedi…

Well. She would at least wait to learn why they wanted to go there before refusing.

Her misgivings increased when she saw the group at her table. In their tunics and robes, they stood out among her regulars, and many were giving them sideways glances. Worse, they had padawans with them. No responsible adult brought a child to Rattatak, regardless of how capable the child might be.

“Well, well. It isn't often we receive Jedi here,” she said as she settled into her chair. The youngest of the Jedi seemed fascinated by her, and she smiled back. “I am Maz Kanata; this is my home. I know what you told Dex, but I prefer to hear it from you. What brings you to me?”

The two Knights glanced at each other and the woman gestured for her companion to speak. He nodded and pitched his voice to carry only as far as Maz’s ears. “I am Knight Quinlan Vos; this is my Padawan, Aayla Secura. With us are Knight Siri Tachi and Padawan Xiaan Amersu.”

The names Vos and Secura rang in her ears with familiarity -- and not the favourable sort. The two Jedi came from ill-starred families.

Vos continued, “Several years ago, a Jedi Master sought a route to Rattatak. He hasn't been heard from since, although I can sense he still lives.”

Maz was no Jedi, and she didn't see the Force so much as feel rightness and wrongness. The man said what he believed to be true, although it might not be truth. She hummed as she poured tea for them. “Do you know if he made it as far as Rattatak? The galaxy is a large place, young man.”

The Jedi reached into a pouch and pulled out a small drawstring bag; inside was a carved worry-stone which didn't belong to any of the four. “I have some skill in psychometry, and the Master we’re seeking attached some significance to this. I can feel we’re much closer to him here than we were on Coruscant.”

Leaning forward, Maz adjusted her lenses to get a better look at the stone. It had the violet tint of low-quality garnet, and the edges of the shallow carvings were worn smooth from handling. It echoed from its owner, and she reached out to tap it once, sharply. The four Jedi startled as the pulse swept past and then returned, crossing light years in a heartbeat.

She frowned, displeased. Centuries of living here had given her a keen sense for where spatial bodies lay in relation to Takodana; if not on Rattatak itself, the stone’s owner had ended up roughly in that direction anyway.

There was no direct route to Rattatak. Maz sighed and raised her lenses, rubbing at the headache
forming under her browbone. “Rattatak is not a world to visit lightly, young man. Searching for your friend could bring greater trouble than what your friend might have already acquired.”

The blonde Jedi, Tachi, leaned forward. “Why do they even bother with the planet? All our data suggests that it's mineral-poor and relatively useless.”

Ah, to be so young again. Maz smiled as she fitted her lenses back over her eyes. “You think of planets in terms of what they can offer the galaxy as a whole, but not in terms of what they mean to those who live there. In the early days of the Republic, Rattatak was a colony. A colony that failed its purpose in the eyes of the Republic, but succeeded in what its settlers intended: privacy to live as they wished without interference. The sort of sentient who settles in wilderness is a particularly stubborn sort. They fought the native sentients and wildlife to carve out a home for themselves, becoming warlike; and when infighting arose, they split into factions. And so it has been. Mercenaries offer services to the warlords in exchange for money and enslaved captives, and their purpose is to keep outsiders away. They will try to destroy your ship.”

“All for control of a planet they simply want to call their own?” Secura asked.

“You see it, although you do not quite understand.”

The teenager shook her head slowly. “It just seems they lack a wider vision.”

Maz shrugged. “Some individuals do see more. They're the ones who leave -- to fight for themselves or to find a greater purpose. But many owe fealty to the warlords, and a Rattataki’s loyalty is worth its weight in aurodium.” She studied the four of them and sighed. After so long, she knew that convincing a person to shift their chosen course was certainly the best way to ensure a worse outcome; the Force moved people as it would, and interfering was ill-advised.

“I have a map. But you will find Rattatak harsh and inhospitable. Common traits of your species will make you susceptible to the local parasites, and there are supplies you will need.”

She instructed one of her droids to locate Ymajj, then gestured for the Jedi to follow her downstairs. “The last thing you want to do is attract attention of any sort. That means dressing the part, and I’m afraid most people you encounter there will be too strong-willed to be brushed off.”

“But our robes--” Secura began.

“Too drab. If you look like slaves, you will be treated as such. No, you want to look like mercenaries, the sort of people who will not be trifled with.” She opened a storage room which was filled with sleek cases. Choosing a few, she dragged them out into the open part of the floor. “Unless I am much mistaken, you'll be wanting some extra protection anyway.”

The Jedi boggled at the contents, and Maz suppressed a smile. Vos stared at her.

“You just happen to keep costumes for human-height people around?”

She laughed. “Hardly. All of these were either sold to me, or left behind by a mercenary who chose to change their lifestyle. Occasionally a set will cross the boundary into antiquity and I sell it to a museum. These sets are new enough to not raise eyebrows, but not so new you’ll be noticed.”

Tachi was shaking her head. “We can't possibly afford to pay you for this.”

Maz shrugged. “Consider it a loan. Stop by on your way home to resupply and return them.”

The youngest padawan was holding up a chestplate against herself, checking the size, but she paused
and stared wide-eyed at Maz. “But what if something happens to us there?”

“Well, then, consider it incentive to avoid being shot at too much!” Maz chuckled. She pulled open a locker against the back wall, revealing a collection of equally battered weaponry. “I recommend each of you carry a blaster and a force-pike. The blaster is more for show, of course, but the pikes are less obvious than your usual weapons, I would think?”

“And pretty common there,” a new voice said. A short, stocky man with corpse-pale skin marked by dramatic black tattoos leaned in the doorway. His right eye and part of his bald skull, shattered during a battle some years back, had been replaced with a partial prosthetic of dark metal. Ymajj had been a complete mess when he’d arrived; once he’d healed up, he had chosen to stay and accept Maz’s offer of employment. “Although I can’t imagine why anyone would want to go to that shithole.”

Vos rolled his shoulders. “We’re hoping to find someone.”

“You’ll find a lot of someones, and a lot of those someones will be happy to find you,” Ymajj said sourly. “I can give you a nice long list of who to avoid and where to go asking for information. Might be a little out of date, I only make that trip once a Standard year, but anything’s better than stumbling around in the dark, right?”

The Jedi nodded reluctantly, the locks of his hair swinging over his shoulder. “We haven’t been introduced, sorry—”

“Don’t worry about it. Call me Ymajj.” Maz’s supply runner held out a mesh bag loaded with four duraplast cases. “None of you are Rattataki, so you’re going to need this. Medication,” he clarified at Vos’ curious look as the Jedi accepted the bag. “There are parasites that are attracted to pheromones. One tab a day for each of you, and those of you with body hair need to dilute the gel and scrub it into the follicles every night. All of them, crown to toes.” He grinned humourlessly, silver eyes flashing in the dimness. “There’s a reason we don’t even have eyelashes.”

Tachi looked up from where she was helping Amersu size-test the armour. “Evolution, or engineering?”

“Nobody knows. Probably a bit of both.”

Maz scoffed. “There’s a reason I call it a hellhole. At least the treatments have been fine-tuned to no longer have side effects. So.” She eyed the four Jedi. “Are you still certain of this course of action?”

They glanced at each other, and she could practically feel the vibrations of nonverbal communication that passed between them. At last Tachi sighed. “Yes. With any luck we won’t be there very long.”

Ymajj shrugged again. “Well, on the off chance you are, those kits contain a sixty-day supply. It’s expensive to obtain on-planet, unless you bargain yourselves to a warlord.” His smile was bitter.

The transfer to Hondo’s ship -- a sleek Hawk-class freighter optimistically named Opulent Scheme -- went smoothly. Obi-Wan had made certain the probe droid was in place in Florrum’s blind spot, Deesix confirmed it would be able to mass-jump their fleet into the planet’s shadow without setting off Porla the Hutt’s planetary sensors, and the others had confirmed readiness. Phel and Kate were on their own in the Veeka, positively giddy at their first chance to operate independently with a
Zohli hugged him tightly before he climbed through the tunnel connecting their ships in space. “Be careful, alright?”

He squeezed back and kissed the top of her head. “I promise you, I’ll be back.”

She gave him a narrow look and held up her right fist with the smallest finger extended. “Accidents happen.”

It was too serious a moment to smile at the silly ritual. He hooked his finger around hers. “They do, but I swear: no unnecessary risks.”

“She’s going with you?”

The Sith spirit, invisible, chuckled quietly. Damn right I am.

She nodded. “Watch his back, okay?”

That’s the plan. The Sith Lord was itching to raise some havoc where he could.

Obi-Wan hugged Zoh again. “I love you, sweetheart. Remember what we taught you?”

“Half-pressure on the trigger until the target lights up.”

He grinned and ruffled her hair. “That’s my girl.”

Hondo caught his hand at the top of the ladder, pulling him through into the cargo bay. The tunnel sealed behind him with a hiss, and Hondo clapped him on the shoulder before returning to the cockpit.

The modified freighter only required a crew of two, but the hold was crowded with crates of disguised explosives and people kitting themselves out in faceless dark grey armour. Obi-Wan gave his own gear one final check. No lightsabers nor even the customized blasters Qui-Gon had given him this time, but a pair of common MSM 434s that hung off his belt like durasteel bricks, with his vibroblade strapped across his back under the ridiculous half-cloak Hondo had insisted upon. He turned the smooth-faced helmet over in his hands; the lack of features other than the red circle mark had been a deliberate choice, intimidating and implacable.

There had been a moment, when he’d been threatening the king of Nar Shaddaa in his own office, when Obi-Wan had truly enjoyed it. It had been fun, in a grim and dangerous way, layering every dirty diplomatic trick he had ever learned from Qui-Gon behind a loaded blaster. The anonymity, knowing Deesix and its needle gun were tucked in the corner as backup, the absolute certainty that there was no way things could possibly be turned around against him -- them, Phel and Feid had been there too, but it had been so easy to take their presence for granted. That heady rush of confidence, of power, was intoxicating, and the knowledge sent a chill through his core.

And here they were, on their way to beard a Hutt in his own den. He could feel the anticipation dancing under his skin like sparks off a live wire.

There was a soft, silent chuckle that echoed only in his own mind, and Ulic murmured, Now you know why the Sith are Sith; the real lure of the Dark side. Tough to let go of, isn’t it?

Obi-Wan nodded slowly and pulled the mask over his head, locking it to the collar of his suit. The heads-up feed flickered to life as the connection registered, giving him a full view of the room, and
he ran the startup diagnostic. *A Jedi would have told me to be wary of such things.*

Ulic laughed again, warmer and almost fond. *You don’t need me to tell you what you already know, kid. You know your limits; just remember that there’s no Jedi Master around to drag you back if you pass them.*

He heaved a sigh, the helmet’s noise-cancelling preventing the sound in the closed environment from overwhelming his ears. *I can’t afford to slip. I have people to take care of.*

*Hang onto that, then. Think Hondo wants you up front.*

Hondo, already masked, eagerly motioned him forward as he entered the cockpit. “Stand there! ...No, wait.” The pirate clasped Obi-Wan’s shoulders and shifted him a half-step to the right. “There! We shall be dropping from hyperspace shortly, and I want to be prepared if Porla comms.”

“He probably won’t, there are more than a few settlements on the planet already.” They were mostly farms run by Weequay immigrants, though, and unlikely to have a high amount of offworld trade.

Hondo was pouting stubbornly; it showed in his posture and the set of his shoulders. “It is always best to be prepared, though!”

Obi-Wan chuckled, the sound altered to a buzz through the helmet vox. “It’s a good thing these suits will block scans beyond human visible range, or Porla would be able to read our bluffing.”

Both Hondo and his copilot, Doro, turned to stare at him. “I… did not think of that,” Hondo admitted slowly.

It was an effort not to press his hand to the faceplate of his helmet. “Hondo, you should know this about Hutts, you deal with them constantly.”

“I should! I do! It’s just-- It is difficult to remember.”

“Ugh. I should get you a protocol droid.”

Hondo whimpered; his helmet vox turned it into a squeak. “Please, no.”

Doro sniggered and turned back to her control panel. “Coming up on Florrum. If you’re standing, grab the wall.”

The three *Hawk*-class freighters, heavily modified, were the flashiest ships Hondo had claimed from Krayn’s hangars; he was hoping to make an impression in more ways than one, cementing Red Sun as an elusive force to be feared. Obi-Wan wasn’t so certain of the wisdom in making their fictional cartel into something competitive, but he had to admit having the cover was useful.

No hails came from the surface, and Hondo sighed. “Hutts have no appreciation for art,” he grumbled. “Very well, direct approach to the compound’s main entrance, we shall get their attention more directly.”

Obi-Wan patted him on the shoulder in consolation before returning to the hold. Time to get Rikkat into her disguise.

Porla’s base perched on the edge of a shallow, flat-bottomed canyon, in a place where the carved-out stone formed a circular courtyard; the building itself was sunk into the ground with only a handful of stories rising above the level of the plain. A portable shield projector had been propped in the middle of the rooftop landing pad, and the hazy dome spanned to just beyond the courtyard entrance.
Massive turbolaser turrets to either side tracked the freighters as they landed a respectable distance away up the canyon. Hondo groused about the walk, but Doro refused to set down within the turrets’ optimal range.

They were unloading the precious (explosive) cargo when an armoured figure approached, hands held up away from their weapons. Obi-Wan let the half-cape fall back to show his right hand resting on his own blaster; with armour like what the stranger wore, an array of tools could be hidden in the vambraces.

The armoured person stopped and pulled her helmet, showing herself to be human, long brown hair braided and coiled tightly to her head. She radiated irritation. “Are you Porla’s people?”

Obi-Wan moved toward her. “I’ve got this,” he told Hondo privately before switching the vox to outside broadcast. “Hardly. Who’s asking?”

“Dammit!” The woman closed her eyes for a moment in frustration. “You wasted your trip, then, he’s not letting anyone in for love nor money.”

“Really.” Obi-Wan stopped a few paces away. She didn’t carry herself like someone military-trained, but not all mercenaries came from a career background. “I’m willing to bet we can change his mind, but what’s your angle?”

“I was hoping to offer him my services. The Republic levied a bunch of sanctions against the Hutts, and they’re all battening down for a siege by opportunists.” She was looking past him, at the rest of the crew setting the crates on hoversleds. “What’s all this?”

Obi-Wan opted for the simple answer. “Funnily enough, we have a similar idea.” He made a show of looking the mercenary over; without his eyes visible, it involved actively moving his head.

“Unlike you, we brought something to sweeten the deal.”

A muscle in her cheek flexed as she clenched her teeth. “I’m not above begging to be included in your party.”

“You’d stand out rather notably, I’m afraid.” Her body armour was nothing like theirs, bulky and painted in a wild spray of golden yellow and violet. “I’m not seeing a ship nearby. You’re not stranded, are you?”

She scoffed. “Took a speeder out. Why, were you gonna offer me a ride?”

He moved closer and dropped his volume. “Just wondering why you’d need to beg for an invitation.”

The mercenary studied him, and there was something like recognition in her eyes. It was gone in a moment, though. “I have a contract on one of Porla’s staff. She doesn’t leave his walls very often, usually sticks close to her boss’ side.”

“Bounty hunting, then.” He shook his head. “It would reflect poorly on us if we allowed someone with an ulterior motive to stand under our representation. I’m sure you understand.”

Her brown eyes glinted dangerously. “I’m too good to get caught.”

“But not so good you can get through the front door on your own,” Obi-Wan said, putting a little snide emphasis on it.

The mercenary flushed angrily, and he made a decision. Gesturing her closer, he dropped the volume
further and said, “We have our own reasons for appealing to Porla momentarily, and your motives are somewhat aligned with ours. If you can behave yourself, you can come with us.”

She sneered. “Behave myself, sure. I'm a professional, thank you.”

Obi-Wan rolled his shoulders and let the cape slip back into place. “Then we can work together on this, Hunter…?”

“Caliiga.” She pulled her helmet back on. “And what do I call you?”

“Davine.”

It took every bit of self control she possessed for Caliiga to suppress her reaction. When Tuuz had proposed disguising her as a bounty hunter to slip into Porla’s entourage and get close to the Hutt’s pet slicer, they hadn't imagined it would lead her to a secondary target.

_Da-veen; so that's how it's pronounced._ She cursed her luck: the one person she really needed to talk to, face to face, but they both had other business. Finding that damn slicer took precedence. Caliiga still had to interrogate Thakkan and find out what Porla wanted from Lord Sidious’ databanks, and what the woman had done with the datacards.

She might be able to get a word with Davine, but it would have to be later. Damn!

He pulled her aside and introduced her to the only other person wearing a cape, a man who called himself Alim. He was the ebullient counter to Davine’s quiet intensity, with a flair for the dramatic that was nearly off-putting. They seemed to be equals in terms of authority, although Davine deferred to Alim in the execution of whatever it was they were doing. The six crates, if she was identifying the labels correctly, were full of an _incredibly_ rare and frightfully expensive liquor from Ord Varee; the crew certainly treated them as such. The entire group worked in eerie silence -- wholly contained suits and private comm channels made for an appearance of professionalism.

Three of the crew, including one who was remarkably shorter than the others, glanced over at Davine and then split off from the group, returning to the ships. When they came back, they were still fully armoured and masked, but their gear looked more like standard mercenary wear instead of a uniform: a little pieced-together and mismatched, lacking the red circle emblem.

Davine snorted a little laugh at her glance his direction. “You won't stand out quite so much now.” The damn vox flattened his tone and obscured his accent, but she was almost certain there was a Core lilt to it.

“You're Red Sun, aren't you? I’m surprised your people have their own gear.”

He was silent for a long moment, and Caliiga desperately wished she could see his face, or at least get a read on him. The latter especially, but if he was as Force-sensitive as they suspected, scanning him would catch his attention.

“Word gets around fast.”

“Nah.” She shook her head. “I was on Nar Shaddaa when you wiped Krayn off the map. You people are a ghost story.”
“If we stayed in uniform all the time, we’d be far too noticeable. Red Sun doesn’t operate like most cartels.”

Interesting. And no wonder they melted into a crowd so quickly. “So what’s Red Sun’s angle here, Davine?”

“You haven’t earned that information yet.” He nodded to Alim’s signal that things were ready, then turned to face her. “Whatever you see, don’t react. You’ll know when it's safe to make your move.”

“Got it.” There’d likely be alarms, shooting, explosions, or all of the above. Tracking her little slicer down would be the tough part.

As if reading her mind, Davine pulled a datapad from his belt and called up a file. A rough two dimensional layout of the base which had definitely been done by hand filled the screen. “Copy the file if you need it.”

So they had people on the inside. Good to know. “Is there anyone in there I shouldn't be shooting at?”

“They know the risks.”

Well alright, then. She made sure the base layout was saved in her helmet’s onboard databank and found a position towards the rear of the group. The short person, whose head barely cleared waist height, somehow managed to squeeze themself into the middle of the group; if she hadn’t known they were there, she might have missed their presence entirely. Nobody reacted to it, anyway; it was clearly part of the plan.

They had just set out when something absolutely freezing brushed past her, raising the hair on the back of her neck. Caliiga stopped dead, looking around. None of the Red Sun crew seemed to have noticed, and she picked up the pace again. Gritting her teeth, she took a gamble and opened herself to the Force.

If she hadn’t been Sith, Caliiga might not have recognised what she was seeing -- or not seeing, in this case -- and a chill settled in her blood. Davine was concealing his Force sense well, but she knew how he was doing it.

She was using the exact same Sith techniques.

“IT’s a good thing you hit some growth, recently,” Master Siri giggled. “This would look ridiculous on you otherwise.”

Xiaan turned in front of the mirror, frowning. The armour Lady Kanata had given her was almost too large, and a few slapdash tucks had to be made to keep her from looking like she was drowning in the jumpsuit. “I don't look much like a mercenary, Master.”

Her Master smiled. “I’ll tell you a secret; anyone can wear a costume. But if you want it to not look like it’s a costume, you have to wear it in your mind.”

“In my mind?” Xiaan’s nose scrunched as she tried to figure it out. Her Master nodded and stood up.
“Here, watch.”

Xiaan found herself staring at a total stranger. Master Siri’s stance had changed, the way she held her arms and head, her expression was still neutral but somehow… colder. When she crossed the cabin, there was a different balance and purpose to her stride. This person was threatening, and if Xiaan hadn’t known it was still Master Siri, she would have shied back.

“How do you do that?”

The stranger in Master Siri’s skin disappeared and she grinned. “Practice, mostly. You took the basic social connections class, right? Remember, mercenaries are largely the sorts of people who focus on their own needs and interests first. That could include other people, but it’s usually just themselves.”

Xiaan frowned and fiddled with one of the straps on her chestplate. “It seems like a lonely way to live.”

Siri sat on the edge of the bunk and adjusted Xiaan’s shoulder armour, tugging the chestplate into a position where it wasn’t digging into her stomach. “A lot of them grow up in situations where nobody else was expected to take care of them. They didn’t have a Temple or other close-knit community to support them. The ones who do come from a community, like Mandalorians, often dedicate some of their time, effort, and credits to taking care of that community -- but they don’t look after people outside it.” She sighed. “And it makes sense: you can’t help others if you yourself aren’t taken care of first. It makes them a bit callous: they look to see what benefit they receive from helping someone beyond the few people they care about. But there’s also nothing necessarily wrong with that, either. It’s just a different way of life.

“So when you’re pretending to be a mercenary, try to put yourself in that mindset: the only people you should want to take care of and look out for are the three of us, and possibly Master Narec if we can find him. Anyone he cares about also needs to be someone you care about; there are surely more than a few, since he’s been here for years.”

It was difficult, especially after learning so much about how the Force ties everyone and everything together. “I can try.”

Master Siri hugged her. “Most people won’t notice if you can’t; they’ll be too busy watching me and Master Quinlan. What’s more important is how you hold yourself. Back straight, shoulders back but relaxed.”

The armour made that easy; the straps placed most of the weight on Xiaan’s spine, forcing her to hold herself upright. Siri nodded. “Widen your stance a little, like you’re ready for open hand sparring -- that’s it. Let a little more weight rest on your back foot. You’re used to keeping your elbows in close, but you need to let them turn out more, so that you look bigger. It’s a way of claiming more space for yourself. When we’re out and you’re looking around, make every glance deliberate. Meet people’s eyes and then look away. You’re making a choice to look around, and at least pretend you’re not distracted by things,” she added with a grin.

Xiaan sighed and slumped on the bunk. “It’s a lot to remember!”

Siri wrapped her arm around Xiaan’s shoulders “I know. But you’re clearly young and get a little leeway. Also, the rest of this disguise will help.”

Between the two of them, they got Xiaan’s goggles and air filter in place. “I feel ridiculous.”

Master Siri pulled her own on, rendering her unidentifiable. “You feel it now, but Rattatak is a dusty
Master Quinlan’s voice came over the comm. “Dropping out of hyperspace in five. Get up here and strap in, got a feeling this is gonna be rough.”

Almost the moment realspace formed around them, the shuttle’s alert system pinged with multiple scans and target locks. Master Quinlan accepted a comm from one of the ships.

“Unidentified vessel, you have entered the territory of Warlord Gerint. State your identity and business or prepare to become space dust.”

Quinlan and Siri looked at each other. Master Siri responded, “Just who we were hoping to talk to. We’re looking to offer our services to your esteemed warlord.”

There was a long pause followed by laughter. “That’s funny. You’re cute. If you were really here to offer services, you’d know it doesn’t work that way.”

Master Siri grinned. “Can you blame me for trying?”

In the pilot’s seat, Master Quinlan held up his free hand, counting up on his fingers. One… two…

The laughter from the other ship faded to a grim chuckle. “Nice try kid, but not good enough.”

The view through the front pinwheeled as Master Quinlan evaded a series of shots.

Xiaan clenched her teeth on a yelp, knowing distracting a pilot with noise was the least helpful thing to do in that situation. She could feel both older Jedi sink into the Force, working together to evade the attacks.

A hand grabbed hers, and she looked over to see Aayla giving her a tense grin.

“Follow my lead. We're going to fool their sensors so we can land without being traced.”

The older girl showed her how to make space around their ship blur. The distances between ships were much too far for a proper visual check, but ship sensors ran off electromagnetic signatures. There were enough free-floating ions this close to a planet to create mimics.

If things hadn't been so serious, it might have been fun.

Atmospheric turbulence slammed Xiaan into her restraints, and her eyes flew open. Something was wrong -- it was too bumpy, and a bunch of lights on the console were blinking red. Aayla was still in a trance, creating distractions. Master Siri’s eyes were closed; Master Quinlan’s were open, his teeth locked in a grimace.

“Yeah, stabiliser took a hit. We can land, but it might be upside down. Hang on!”

---

We may have a problem.

Obi-Wan kept moving as if he wasn't having a mental conversation with an invisible spirit. The bounty hunter?
If she's not a Sith acolyte, I will eat my damn lightsaber crystal.

That would be quite a feat. I thought something felt odd about her. Does this change anything?

Ulic was silent for a moment, considering. Well, I can't tell who she's serving, but odds are good it's Sidious. You should be able to feel how she's hiding herself, same way you are; and if you can do that, she's probably already noticed you.

Obi-Wan sighed. The openness of Florrum’s plains was already sending an itch down the back of his neck, and now this. So the options are to take her out so she can't report in, try to save her target and find out why Sidious wants them, or let her go about her business and pretend like I don't notice.

Yeah, she probably wouldn't buy that last bit.

And if she is just a bounty hunter with training?

There was the mental equivalent of a heaved sigh, which prickled the hairs on the back of his arms. Things used to be so much simpler, kid. Used to know exactly who was serving whom, none of this shady spy rubbish, Ulic grumbled.

Hidden behind his mask, Obi-Wan grinned. Well, I'll keep half an eye on her. But we have bigger things to worry about. Like getting in the front door.

A cluster of Gamorrean guards intercepted them just beyond the shield dome. [No visitors!] the one at the front of the group snorted. [Piss off!]

Hondo took the lead, stepping forward and bowing with a graceful flourish. “Greetings, my friends! We do understand that your Master is in no mood for casual visitation. However, we have been sent on behalf of the Red Sun to discuss a business proposition. We bring with us a gift worthy of the mighty Porla, as a gesture of our sincerity.”

I don’t know how he does it, Ulic muttered. I can’t tell if he’s being truthful or not.

Obi-Wan laughed at him silently. He makes himself believe what he’s saying by thinking around it. What a sarcastic genius.

The guards were looking about ready to start prodding their group away with their force pikes when a portly Zabrak man in overly embroidered robes emerged; Hondo had been rather counting on the front entrance being under surveillance. The man stopped short of the shield barrier and gave a perfunctory bow that in any true diplomatic setting might have been considered insulting.

“Greetings, gentlebeings, I am Bazikh, majordomo to the illustrious Porla the Hutt. My master offers his greetings, and desires to know what sort of business you wish to discuss.”

Hondo composed himself admirably. “Our greetings to you, Majordomo Bazikh! The Red Sun has recently become aware that some of our prior business negatively affected your master’s profits. This was entirely unintended, and we wish to make amends and extend an offer of cooperation. As a token—” he gestured, and one of the hoversleds was pulled up. Hondo pressed a button on the corner of the lid; it was an ingenious piece of engineering that folded open into a decorative display for the bottles inside. He carefully lifted a bottle free and held it as close to the crackling static of the shield as anyone would dare for inspection. “Six dozen unopened bottles of Ord Varee racûî, of the Arravakken lineage.”

The majordomo was good at masking his expression, but Obi-Wan caught just the slightest widening
of the man’s eyes at the pronouncement. The Arravakken Distillery had been Ord Varee’s best; a devastating earthquake had leveled the facility and buried its orchards in a landslip fifty-six years earlier. Hondo had done his research well; even the empty bottles were worth quite a bit, and he’d had to buy them from Maz, who had demanded to know every detail of what he intended to do with them.

Filling them with explosive liquid and offering them to a Hutt was definitely not what Maz considered a worthy investment.

Bazikh bowed again, somewhat deeper than before. “I will let my master know your intentions. Please remain here.”

He returned after nearly a full half-hour, during which Hondo’s crew made increasingly horrible jokes trying to make each other lose their composure. Obi-Wan’s ribs were aching from suppressing his laughter.

“The mighty Porla wishes to discuss your offer. When the shield drops, please move forward quickly.”

A ripple of tension ran through their crew; nobody wanted to be caught in the way when the shield restored. The soft blue haze faded and Bazikh gestured them forward. As soon as they were within the boundary, the shield snapped back into existence and Obi-Wan’s comm line to the Sunflare went dead.

Hondo’s voice drifted into his ears alone. “Are you certain you can still contact our friends?”

Obi-Wan sent a gentle, questing nudge through his bond with Phel; a moment later he received a clumsy ripple in return. “Yes. We’re good.”

A moment later, the bounty hunter opened the private channel he’d set up for her. “Are things still good?”

No need to tell her everything. “We’re fine. I’ll warn you if events turn for the worse.”

---

*Definitely a Core accent.* Caliiga kept her position toward the rear of the group as they moved across the courtyard, impressed with these Red Sun people despite herself. Any other mercenary crew might be fidgeting and posturing, but these people managed apparent silence and had borne out the wait for the Hutt’s flunky with only minimal weight shifts. They knew the intimidation value of stillness.

The main structure sank into the side of the chasm, a mining complex to which the Hutt had added an extravagant façade. The gaudy carved surface, complete with a larger-than-life bas-relief of the Hutt himself directly over the door, failed to disguise the facility’s industrial origins.

The interior was dark by human standards; Caliiga switched her helmet’s visual settings just in time to see the small mercenary slip out of their position in the group and vanish among the thick rising columns of ductwork to one side. None of the other Sunners gave any indication they’d noticed anything.

A minute later, a hatch opened at the back of the rear-most crate and something small and quick
slithered out, scurrying off into the shadows. Caliga felt her eyebrows rising and was glad of the concealing helmet. Whatever Red Sun was up to, it was definitely not going to be favourable for the Hutt.

Porla’s throne room was deep under the main building, carved out of the solid rock. The Hutt maintained a colourful court of beautiful and dangerous sentients -- sometimes both at once. She eyed the grating in the floor in front of the Hutt’s dais with distaste. Just audible past the sounds of music and raucous inebriated laughter were the skirling screeches of whatever nasty creatures Porla liked to feed people to.

The Hutt himself was a sickly green with dark purple patterning running up his spine. He wasn’t as repulsive as Jabba, but that didn't really say much. He was in a foul mood, the pupils of his bulging orange eyes narrowed to slits. She recalled Alim’s speech to the majordomo -- that Red Sun had inadvertently cost Porla dearly for something they’d done -- and had a grim premonition that the Hutt was planning to drop them all in the pit and take the gift without negotiations.

Caliiga didn't want to add “fighting not to be devoured” to her to-do list. She opened her channel to Davine and waited for him to accept.

“Don't stand on that grating--”

“We do know how to deal with Hutts, thank you,” came the clipped reply before he closed the connection. She rolled her eyes.

[Red Sun!] the Hutt growled. [You must be very confident to present yourselves to me. What do you want?]

A shiny silver protocol unit began to translate but Alim waved it away. “We understand your illustrious master, droid.” He pulled another of his florid bows; Davine didn't bother trying to match him. “Oh, mighty Porla. Red Sun wishes to extend its sincerest apologies for hurting your profits during our actions against Krayn--”

Caliiga nearly broke character. Porla had been financing Krayn too? She was absolutely certain her Lord had no idea.

“-- It was not until very recently that we learned this, and for that we are most regretful. We wish to extend to you, oh glorious Porla, an offer of cooperation--”

The Hutt spat a gob of slime which struck the floor directly in front of Alim’s feet. [You only know of my interests because of the bounty I placed on your operative, the human known as Gav Davine. If your offer is sincere, you will offer me Davine’s head along with your gift.]

None of the Red Sun contingent so much as twitched, and Caliga had a sneaking suspicion she knew precisely why they were really here.

Alim touched a gloved hand to the dome of his helmet as if suffering a headache. “It saddens me greatly to say it, but Davine is far too valuable an agent to simply execute, mighty Porla. You placed a bounty on him in order to get the attention of our leadership; their attention you now have, as well as their response. They are willing to work with you--”

Something jabbed Caliga in the small of her back. She twisted to see one of Porla’s heavies prodding her forward with the muzzle of their blaster rifle.

[Then, little flunky, I suggest you contact your superiors and tell them that the price for my cooperation is much higher than what they've offered.] The Hutt’s smile had an evil twist to it.
[Except you can't contact them, can you? I’ll have my beastmaster retrieve the comm units from your corpses.]

The guards were herding them away from the crates and toward the trapdoor in the floor. A warning shot sizzled into the tiles beside Caliiga’s foot as she tried to reach for her blaster.

In the next moment, the lights went out entirely, including the fiendish ultraviolet ones, and an alarm like a maddened krayt dragon echoed through the complex. Havoc descended. Caliiga wrenched the guard’s rifle toward herself and used the momentum to ram her armoured elbow into their nose; they clutched their face in agony and she kicked them away. Porla was bellowing at his guards, the Hutt’s eyes dilated in rage and terror.

An explosion rocked the room, and Caliiga knew she wasn't going to get a better sign. Calling up the facility map Davine had given her, she dodged through the erupting chaos and down a side passage.

The rest of them could handle this mess. She had a slicer to find.

Chapter End Notes

I'd apologise for the cliffhangers, but I'm not sorry xD
Target

Chapter Summary

Previously:

Quinlan and Siri visited Maz Kanata to acquire a map to Rattatak and hopefully missing Jedi Master Ky Narec.

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan and Hondo, in their disguise as Red Sun, encountered Sith Acolyte Caliiga outside Porla the Hutt's base on Florrum.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.01.13
Florrum

Even though she was comfortable in small, cramped spaces, hiding in a secret compartment under a bunch of explosive bottles was not what Rikkat considered a swell time. The others had been gentle shifting her around, at least, but her pale violet fur was still rumpled and making her twitchy. She woke her datapad up and checked the feed from the hidden holocams on the outside of the crate.

They were inside the Hutt’s base; she could tell from the eye-aching false darkness. Good. Her escape hatch was concealed from view by the cluster of tall people in armour. All she could see in that direction were a bunch of legs and Darwic’s crossed fingers giving her the sign to wait.

This was such a bad time to get an itch on her foot! She gritted her teeth and wriggled her toes in her boot and counted seconds.

Xe knew the moment Scogar’s group entered the Hutt’s compound: their comm channel went from active mode to unavailable as the shields locked down. Phel patted Kate’s dome as the droid booped in concern. “Don’t worry, Kate, we planned for this.”

As if on cue, a gentle nudge, like someone brushing xir shoulder, came through the bond xe and Scogar had set up. It was taking some time to get used to, and Phel wasn’t entirely certain xe could sustain shielding on xir end, but it served a temporary purpose. With a bit of effort, Phel managed to respond to xir friend’s mental touch. It was clumsy, but all xe needed for now was to be able to hear.
Kate signaled her readiness to pilot if necessary. Phel grinned inside xir helmet. “I’ll let you know. Keep the comms line open.”

Outside, concealed in a valley outside sensor range from Porla’s base, Hondo’s people were prepping the speeders. Phel dragged one of Feid and Pulkka’s rebuilt kludge-mobiles out of the Veeka’s hold and began the startup sequence.

One of Hondo's people -- Grekk, xe thought, although it was difficult to tell in the anonymizing gear -- leaned on the control shaft of their bike.

“They in?”

Phel nodded. “Let's get moving.”

Darwic waited until Bastra whispered, “Cover’s good here, go,” before ducking under everyone's elbows. The chaos of ductwork made for real shadows to hide among, and he waited there until the guards had passed. Up the tunnel, he caught a flutter of motion as Rikkat darted away.

There had been four guards posted inside the main entrance. Darwic slunk back the way they had come and peered around the corner. Make that five guards, and the fifth, a massive Gamorrean, wasn't going to be so easy to deal with.

He pulled his datapad out and checked the signals. Six of the eight shock charges he’d dropped as they had entered were showing blue; the other two must have got stepped on. No matter: six was enough. Darwic grinned, pulled his blaster, and pressed the det button with his free hand.

There was a quiet snap of activating current, and choked cries echoed up the duracrete corridor.

Rikkat gave Darwic thirty seconds -- enough time for Porla’s people to react -- before sliding out of her hiding space. None of the guards noticed her dodge off the footpath.

Thick durasteel pipes and cabling running down the side corridor offered easy access to the ceiling space above the hanging light fixtures, where people rarely looked. She shimmied along the thickest pipe, occasionally pausing to get her bearings.

She eyed the movements of the guards as they patrolled three meters below her perch. One of them snickered to their companion about Red Sun losing more than just some expensive booze. Rikkat grinned, her goggles pinching around her eyes. So far, there was no indication that Darwic had been noticed. All she needed was to find a route to the roof and the generator there. According to Hondo’s weirdly drawn map, the lifts looked like the best option, unless she could find a convenient vent shaft. She wasn’t too concerned, either way: Rikkat was an excellent climber, and it wouldn’t be the first time she’d hitched a ride on a lift car.

Rikkat tucked her datapad back into the case she’d made for it. Six levels up was quite a climb, and she’d be needing both hands.
A tug on her boot made her stop. Rikkat bit back a swear as she looked over her shoulder and saw a Kowakian monkey-lizard playing with the straps on her right foot. Of course there’d be a karking monkey-lizard in a Hutt base!

“Shoo!” she hissed, shaking the thing off her leg. “Go bother someone else!” It hopped back along the pipe out of her reach as she swatted at it.

Something else yanked at one of the cargo pockets on Rikkat’s coverall, and she nearly yelped aloud in surprise. Another monkey-lizard danced away as she turned, its sticky little fingers clutching one of her ion charges.

“Give that back! It goes boom!” Rikkat reached as the second monkey-lizard put the thing in its mouth, sharp little teeth clacking against the metal casing. At least the bomb was too large to fit down its scrawny throat, but while she was distracted, the first monkey-lizard pounced, skittering over her and putting one filthy paw right in her ear. “Hey! Whoo--” she scrabbled for purchase on the aged metal as she started to slide off. Now both the monkey-lizards had ion charges filched from her pockets! “Not treats! Those are not treats!”

The first monkey-lizard looked at her with its beady little eyes gleaming in the shadows and gave a hoarse, mocking snicker before they scampered off along the pipe.

“Fuck!” she whispered in desperation. She needed all of the charges to make sure the generator went down! Digging the toes of her boots against the top of the pipe and muttering curses, Rikkat scuttled after the creatures.

Rattatak

It was still dark, sunrise barely lightening the sky beyond the hive-shaped domed roofs, when her master shook her awake. The teenager blinked blearily at him a moment, trying to make sense of his rushed explanation as he tossed her day clothes -- still damp from the evening's wash -- into her arms.

“I don't understand. A… ship?”

He paused in the rectangle of dim, butter-coloured light spilling through the door and looked back at her. “They need our help, Asajj. Hurry!”

The clingy chill of her tunic and trousers did little to help her wake up. Asajj grimaced as she tugged the cowled wrap over her shoulders. Master Ky -- not like her former slave master, Hal'Sted, but a teacher, and her friend -- rarely woke her up so early without reason. Usually it meant one of the local warlords was up to something nefarious that had to be stopped.

But a ship? In the six years since the Jedi had been marooned on Rattatak, he'd often spoken wistfully of taking her back to Coruscant and the Temple, to train with her age-mates. To see the galaxy beyond the walls of this city which was more than half abandoned already.

If there was a ship landing and it didn't belong to a warlord, well, it would soon.

That woke her up enough to not trip on her way down the stairs.
One of their friends, Tychaad, was waiting by the door, impatiently shifting his feet; he must have been the one to alert Master Ky. Her master snuffed the single dim lantern, waiting a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness before leading the way out into the alleys.

Even though she had a million questions buzzing around in her head, Asajj kept quiet. It wouldn't do for Warlord Biikann's sentries to hear citizens rustling about before sunup, and Master Ky wouldn't answer her anyway: he always preferred active demonstrations and letting her try to figure things out for herself.

Her breath caught as she saw where Ky was leading them: the culvert under the walls was a passage they only ever used in emergencies. The less Biikann's people knew of its existence, the better.

Six more people, mostly slaves they had freed and a laborer who acted as a spy for them within Biikann's fortress, were waiting for them in the dark tunnel. Master Ky sighed.

"Sonajj, doesn't your shift start soon? You'll be missed."

The barrel-chested man shook his scarred bald head. "If this is our one chance to get you home--"

Ky's voice was fond even as he led them down the tunnel around stone walls that had been carefully angled to make the culvert appear sealed. "Getting me off Rattatak is less important than seeing an end to Biikann's rule here. If that woman gets a ship, she'll park it over your heads and you can forget about any freedom of movement so long as she can barter fuel from one of the others."

Asajj swallowed hard. The cross streets visible from the walls were risky enough; Biikann's sentries would take potshots at anything that moved. The thought of them being able to hover above the city and terrorize people into paying for 'protection' made her feel ill.

The sun hadn't quite crested the horizon when they emerged onto the plateau. Twiggy scrub clinging stubbornly to the rocks concealed the culvert from view; between the walls and the short drop to the desert pan was a barren stretch of dusty rock. Ky gestured Asajj to his side. "Remember what I taught you?"

She let her eyes slide closed as she extended her senses, seeking the sleepy malice of the sentries. Three of them were within visual range of their exit. With a gentle push, she redirected their attention towards something within the walls. Ky's hand gripped her shoulder briefly in approval as he passed, leading the group across the open space. Asajj maintained enough attention distracting the sentries to bring up the rear, letting herself drop and roll the three meters to the ground below and coming up covered in camouflaging dust.

One of the former slaves, a wiry woman named Ommo, patted her on the back. "Good work, little hawk." Embarrassed at the praise, Asajj merely tipped her head to the side in thanks and followed Master Ky out onto the dull, cracked clay.

Sonajj was right that they needed to get Master Ky home. The human was suffering from lacking the treatments needed to keep the pests from feeding on his blood; when their supply ran low, he insisted Asajj use it, that the Force would help him. But although he did a good job hiding it, the diseases the parasites spread had sapped his strength; his hair was thinning prematurely and the whites of his eyes had a yellowish cast that didn't bode well. If the Warlords didn't kill him for ruining their iron grip on the cities, the planet itself would finish the job.

He pulled the group into the shadow of a gully that hadn't seen water since the last monsoon season, the three weeks of the year where everything turned to treacherous mud and blood-sucking pests rose in deadly clouds to spawn the next year’s brood. "Asajj, I want you to keep alert for enemies,
anyone. They’ll see that coming down from halfway across the planet.” He pointed up to a thin streak of what looked like fire in the sky, reflecting the light of the rising sun. “They're landing badly, I need to help them or they'll crash. Everyone else, keep a lookout.”

The others formed a rough perimeter, pulling stolen blasters or hacked-down force-pikes from under their wraps as Asajj closed her eyes, focusing the way her master had taught her. There was the streak in the sky, growing nearer with each passing second, and distantly she could feel life onboard. She followed the threads of awareness tied to it, growing stronger and more numerous with each passing second. Most of them would be from Biikann’s fortress. “They’ll be here soon,” she whispered, not wanting to disturb Master Ky’s concentration. When she spared the energy to glance at him, he seemed serene, kneeling in the dust with his hands lax on his knees. The tension of what he was doing, however, was a tangible thing; she could almost see him straining against the descending ship, preventing it from spinning out of control. The whine of the ship’s engines was growing louder, and what had been a tiny streak in the darkness was now a fireball heading right toward them.

A surge from the direction of the city brought her to her feet, moments before the howl of speeder bikes reached them across the pan. “Ky!”

The ship roared past overhead, the hot downwash of its thrusters flattening them all to the dirt. Asajj pushed her hood back in time to see the ship set down, wobbling badly, between their group and Biikann’s approaching forces.

The ship’s gangway lowered and four people emerged to face the approaching war-party, humming force-pikes held at the ready. Master Ky tugged Asajj to her feet and ran forward. “Come! To arms, my friends!” he called, drawing his lightsaber.

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_Florrum_

The corridor sloped noticeably downward as soon as the surface changed from duracrete to natural stone, and Obi-Wan found himself surreptitiously studying the structure. Porla had tucked his throne room beneath the main building, taking advantage of the natural subterranean protection. Side passages left over from when these levels had been part of the original mine had been partially filled with duracrete to create decorative archways which could be sealed off by gates.

The further they went, the louder the music got. A pair of courtiers, high on some sort of spice, staggered giggling out of their path when one of the guards leading the group snarled at them. Obi-Wan had never been so glad for a helmet’s air filters.

Porla the Hutt lounged on an ornate hoversled designed to look like a reclining throne. On the grated floor in front of him, six dancers of various species and genders wearing body armour bedecked with flowing scarves spun and leapt about, clashing with curved blades that appeared to be genuinely sharp. The guards locked their pikes in front of Hondo, preventing their party from entering the performance area until the dancers were finished.

As they followed the guards into the pool of light glaring down from overhead, Obi-Wan’s comm pinged. The bounty hunter they’d picked up, Caliiga, sounded nervous. “Don't stand on that grating-
Hondo was also seeking his attention; between that and keeping an eye on Porla’s guards, he was already stretched thin. So he might have been a bit short when he interrupted her. “We do know how to deal with Hutts, thank you.” There was definitely a hint of exasperation coming from her, but what had she been expecting anyway?

Ulic’s voice whispered in his mind, *I'll keep an eye on her, you take care of business.*

Thanks.

“Our portly friend doesn't appear to be in the most gracious of moods,” Hondo said, sounding amused.

“Good, get him mad, he'll make mistakes.”

Hondo stopped with the toes of his boots just at the edge of the trapdoor; if Porla was disappointed, the Hutt didn't show it. He seemed relatively young for a Hutt, although that was still a span that could be measured in the high triple-digits.

“Riggu Sowani!” Porla snarled, deliberately dropping the honorific from the end of the title. Hondo chuckled gleefully on their private connection and Obi-Wan grinned.

[You must be very confident to present yourselves to me. What do you want?] Despite being in a foul mood, the Hutt still gestured a translator droid forward as a general courtesy. Hondo took pleasure in dismissing the droid, making Porla puff up in outrage.

“Oh, mighty Porla,” Hondo began, flourishing an elaborate bow that must have taken him ages of practice in front of a mirror. Obi-Wan merely folded his arms; none of the rest of their team bothered looking like anything more than set dressing. “Red Sun wishes to extend its sincerest apologies--”

Obi-Wan tuned out the rest. Porla’s chubby fingers had twitched in what was definitely a hand-sign, and a number of onlookers were beginning to move in on them. He reached out with the Force and felt baffled frustration from Phel that the shields were still up.

Where was Rikkat?

A thick glob of Hutt saliva splattered on the grating at Hondo’s feet: Porla was disgusted with them, but waiting to hear if Hondo could offer what Porla really wanted, first.

“Get ready,” Obi-Wan murmured into the team’s pickup. Hopefully Rikkat and Darwic would hear it, too.

[You only know of my interests because of the bounty I placed on your operative, the human known as Gav Davine,] the Hutt growled. [If your offer is sincere, you will offer me Davine’s head along with your gift.]

And their time was out. “Kill it,” Obi-Wan said.

Nothing changed. Someone among their team muttered, “Oh, kriff.”

Hondo feigned regret as much as one could through an expressionless mask. “It saddens me greatly to say it, but Davine is far too valuable an agent to simply execute, mighty Porla. You placed a bounty on him in order to get the attention of our leadership; their attention you now have, as well as their response. They are willing to work with you--”
Porla’s fingers twitched again and his people moved in, herding them away from the crates and toward the trapdoor in the floor.

[Then, little flunky, I suggest you contact your superiors and tell them that the price for my cooperation is much higher than what they’ve offered.] Porla’s smile was vicious. [Except you can’t contact them, can you? I’ll have my beastmaster retrieve the comm units from your corpses.]

“Any time now!” Obi-Wan gritted.

“Any change?” Feid asked for what felt like the hundredth time. On the other end, Phel made an irritated sound.

“Nope. I think something’s wrong, he just checked on me but didn’t say anything. They’re okay for now, but the shutdown team’s delayed.”

The Zabrak swore under her breath and tapped the repulsor control. Their entire attack group was sneaking at a crawl through the drained canyon network, and the urge to pop up over the edge and put some speed on across the plain was making Feid’s skin crawl. “C’mon, c’monnn. Ugh, this is killing me.”

In the Sunflare’s copilot seat beside her, Pulkka chuckled, but the humour was tense. “Is not.”

“Is too.”

“Hitting the canyon wall would kill you.”

“You’re no fun.”

They had already passed into range for the attack run, and were running out of room before they were in range of Porla’s sensor net. What was going on in there?

Being crispy-fried didn’t improve a Gamorrean’s smell. Darwic wished his usual helmet was as good at filtering air as the Red Sun gear was. He finished dragging the corpses into concealment on the side of the corridor and settled in to wait. It wasn’t much longer before he heard Bastra’s quiet, “Get ready.”

Darwic’s fingers itched to get on top of slicing the heavy electronic locks, but he was certain it would set off an alarm. “Hey Rikkat, I’m in position. What’s the status?”

Swearing, Rikkat slithered down another pipe, wobbling and nearly falling on the head of one of Porla’s Nikto guards three meters beneath her. At a curve ahead, one of the damn monkey-lizards
waved the ion charge with a massive grin on its ugly little face, brazenly taunting her. Oh! If only she could shoot the thing without giving herself away!

She had no idea where the monkey-lizards were running to, or where she even was now. Not too much further underground, at least; but outside of the general-use tunnels, Porla’s base was a labyrinth. It was only by sheer luck that the Squib had managed to keep a sight line on the monkey-lizards at all.

Rikkat scuttled along the ductwork after her stolen bombs, almost sobbing with frustration. It wasn’t fair!

She followed them through a gap in the wall, into a room bathed in an unpleasant dry heat, and watched as the two monkey-lizards dropped to the floor. “Get back here!”

At least there weren’t any guards in here. Rikkat slid down the pipe and pulled her blaster. She’d have to be careful not to hit the charges, but it wasn’t too late--

She ducked into the partial shadow behind a humming generator and was bowled over by a twin monkey-lizard ambush. The blaster went flying from her fingers before she could shoot, and she yelped as she hit the floor. It wasn’t fair!

The monkey-lizards dashed away laughing raucously and she picked herself up with a groan. Porla was gonna kill them all for sure. A cackle echoing among the confusion of machinery sent a shiver of dread through her core. The monkey lizards had barely made a sound this whole time, why--?

Rikkat patted at her pockets, growing frantic. Those little thieves! Everything was gone, including--

One of the monkey-lizards let out a delighted shriek and they barreled out of the shadows past her. The ion charge detonator was clamped firmly in one’s mouth as they scampered back up the wall.

“Oh no, no, get back here!”

The monkey-lizard paused at the top of the pipe to look at her and waved the detonator overhead like a beacon. “Rundee creespa! Boska!” it cackled.

Rikkat’s heart lodged in her throat. This was the generator room. The damn monkey-lizards had left the ion charges…. “Fuck!” She scrambled up the pipes, making for the tiny gap in the wall as fast as she could.

The wall had been shielded. As soon as she squeezed through, she caught Bastra’s voice hissing, “Any time, now!”

Something small and beeping flew past her head through the gap; the resulting explosion knocked her off the pipe with a shriek.

All the lights went out.

A jolt from Bastra was all the warning Phel had, a bare moment before the shimmering dome of the shields went down. Xe squeezed the throttle, sending xir bike shooting towards the open entrance to the base’s courtyard. “Let’s do this!”
Rattatak

Quinlan had to admit that their landing might have been significantly sloppier had it not been for the sudden sense of someone else actively helping him keep the shuttle from flipping on its side. He aimed the ship in the general direction of that sense; beside him in the copilot’s seat, Siri made slight course corrections, leaving him free to adjust their descent angle. Burning up in Rattatak’s atmosphere was not part of the flight plan!

As it was, the speed of their descent was superheating the air around the ship, and if it hadn’t been for the heavy armour plating and insulation, the cockpit would have been notably toasty. The shockwave from breaking the in-atmosphere sound barrier was probably rattling a few windows.

If they had windows here?

Focus, dammit!

There was another Force user on the planet below, helping them land, and he was almost entirely certain that it was the missing Jedi Master. If he was right, then their only real problems were going to be repairing that stabiliser and getting past the mercenaries again.

Simple, really.

There was a small cluster of people sheltering in the bowl of a long-dried streambed, and a much larger cluster of people on speeder bikes, already firing shots that dissipated into the shuttle’s shields. Personal blasters weren’t much good against a ship, but they would definitely do a lot of damage to the people in the ditch. Working together, Quin and Siri brought the ship in for a landing on the cracked plain between the two groups.

On his feet and moving as soon as the landing gear tasted dirt, Quin spoke for the first time in half an hour. “Masks on, kiddos, this is gonna be ugly.” His padawan rolled her eyes at him before pulling the goggles over her face.

They emerged from the ship into a hail of blaster-fire, force-pikes humming and ready. Lasers didn’t reflect from the plasma staffs so much as strike and fizzle out, the energy absorbed into the blades and repurposed. Aayla and Xiaan both faltered in surprise for a moment at the difference; Aayla recovered first, drawing her blaster with her off hand and snapping a pair of stun shots at the nearest mercenaries.

The familiar screech of a lightsaber cut the air; the blue-bladed weapon whipped past them, slicing the control vanes from three of the speeders before returning to its owner’s hand. Quin barely spared a glance before his attention was drawn back to defending the ship.

It only took about five minutes, but the fight felt much longer. Xiaan was sobbing when it was over, tears pooling in her goggles as she yanked them free of her face. Siri was immediately at her side, soothing her and talking her through it.

The dark-haired human, dressed in ragged desert robes but still carrying himself with a quiet dignity, motioned to his companions to pick over the mercenaries’ corpses for useful
weapons and gear. He eyed Quin searchingly. “Is it her first battle?”

Quin nodded but kept his attention on the horizon and the lumpy blob that had to be the nearest city. “What are the odds they’ll send more when these don’t report in?”

“Ohhh, high. How much work does your ship need?”

Aayla had immediately returned to the ship when the fighting had ended. Quin shrugged. “My padawan is running the diagnostics now. I’ll admit, I thought it would be a lot harder to find you, Master Narec.”

The other man rewarded his guess with a double-take. The pale girl who had come up beside him, all skin and bones, narrowed silver eyes at Quin.

“You’re here looking for me, specifically?”

Quin tugged his mask off and winced at the acrid bite of the planetary atmosphere in his sinuses. “You didn’t leave a lot of clues behind to tell people where you’d gone, you know.”

Narec stared at him. “I didn't think they would send anyone. The Force gave me a vision of my next padawan.” He wrapped his arm around the skinny teenager's shoulder protectively. “The Council told me it was risky and that I shouldn't expect support.”

Siri snickered, muffled by her mask. “Guess it's a good thing we didn't stop to ask permission before going.”

“You didn't--” Narec looked stunned.

Quinlan shrugged cheerfully and turned to acknowledge Aayla as she emerged from the ship. “Bad news: it's the stabiliser. Good news: it's only the stabiliser, and it can be fixed in situ. Bonus: we have what we need in the spare parts.” She sounded pleased through the mask.

Narec's padawan was staring at Aayla with intense curiosity. He noticed and smiled ruefully. “This is my padawan, Asajj. And I guess you already know who I am.”

Quinlan made their introductions; Siri gave a quick wave in acknowledgement as she headed into the ship for the toolkit. “I don't want to be accused of rushing you, but are you prepared to return to Coruscant with us, or do you have other plans?” he asked. The other man’s relationship with the Rattataki felt distinctly like that of a leader. Narec might easily choose to remain involved in whatever conflict they were locked into here.

Narec had his mouth open when one of the Rattataki women butted into the conversation. “With all respect, Master Ky, you're ill. We don't always have access to the anti-parasitics for him, and when he does, he gives them to the girl,” she explained. Her expression reflected exasperated understanding. “He and Asajj have made a huge difference in fighting the warlords, but he can't fight if he's too sick to walk.”

The Jedi Master rolled his eyes fondly; it was clearly an old argument they’d had several times. “The Force--”

“Can only do so much,” Quin interrupted softly. “Sometimes you just have to admit when help is needed.”

Siri scoffed. “That's hilarious coming from you, Quin. Xiaan, can you give me a hand? We're going
to have company of the unfriendly variety shortly."

Narec motioned with his chin to the rising clouds of dust in the distance, lit like flames by the sunrise. "We see them. You do your work, we’ll hold them off. And—" He hesitated, looking at his padawan. She tilted her head and gave him such an arch look that Quin had trouble holding back a laugh.

Narec gave a reluctant nod. “We will be going with you when you leave.”

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*Florrum*

K’lor’slugs were vicious and voracious creatures; even hatchlings would take a chance on devouring a fully-grown humanoid if presented the opportunity. Porla was greatly looking forward to feeding the Red Sun’s people to his pets, not least because he had no intention of cooperating with them. Of course, he would graciously accept their lavish gift -- and just where had they acquired six dozen bottles of Arravakken *racuî?* -- but they needed to be separated from it first. He was actually quite pleased that Red Sun’s speaker had stood back from the trapdoor: less risk of the crates being lost to the k’lor’slugs.

He didn’t really expect them to offer Davine. Knowing the human pest was nothing more than an agent was useful information. But Porla would be able to contact their leaders directly once he had their communicators in hand.

Then the lights went out entirely and the emergency generator shutdown alarm abraded Porla’s sensitive hearing. His guards, including the bodyguards concealed among his court, were already herding the Red Sun flunkies toward the trapdoor. Impatiently, he slammed his fist on the button.

Nothing happened.

No screech of deliberately ill-maintained mechanisms, no terrified screams. The hatch wasn’t even powered, a vintage spring-loaded mechanism he’d personally had stolen from an archaeological site on Korriban. Porla slapped the button again, to no avail.

“*Keepuna!*” he bellowed through the outcry of surprise and panic. [Kill them all!]

His bodyguards were already surrounding his throne, guiding it through the rear doors into Porla’s private receiving room behind the throne room while they fired into the crowd of grey-armoured mercenaries. Whoever had commissioned their armour had paid top credit for the work: the blaster bolts that struck home rebounded from the glossy surfaces to leave carbon scoring on the floor and walls. The places that had been hit lost their sheen, some sort of ablative coating. But once the coating was gone, the armour wouldn’t be so effective. Porla smiled grimly at the idea and let the guards escort him out.

[Captain Nibu!]

The Sullustan bowed. [My Lord?]

Porla considered his options. [Have the guards remaining in the throne room retrieve Red Sun’s offering. We will not allow it to be destroyed in the fight.]
His captain of the guard nodded briskly and got on the comm, issuing orders. Porla gestured to Majordomo Bazikh. [Tell our assessor to take the tunnel to the hangars and wait for us there; we will require her expert eye.]

[Of course, my Lord!]

It took every bit of attention Obi-Wan could spare to keep the trapdoor mechanism from snapping open. Distantly, he could tell there was a fight going on around him; Hondo, canny as ever, had dragged him out of the line of fire.

It felt like the ancient springs were actively fighting him, and Obi-Wan gave up on holding it still and snapped the heavy metal coils off their connecting bar. Hondo caught him as he sagged from the sudden release of tension.

“Are you alright, my friend?”

“The k’lor’slugs will be going hungry today,” he gasped, dragging one of his blasters free. “Let Porla’s people take the crates out, I’ll follow and put the fear of Davine into them.”

Hondo cackled and passed the message on.

Dodging blaster-fire and fleeing courtiers, Obi-Wan found a hiding spot near the rear door behind a column and waited for the last crate to be dragged past. In the receiving room, Porla was instructing the guards to connect the cargo sleds behind his repulsor chair while another guard waited at an open bay door for a transport.

A manic grin spread across his face under the mask. Obi-Wan shot the bay door controls, bringing the hatch crashing down. Tossing one of their smoke bombs into the room, he turned his vox volume up and broadcast, “Davine sends his regards!” A flurry of shots forced him to duck back around the frame of the door as thick, noxious smoke filled the room. Then someone got smart and sealed the receiving room door in his face before he could fire on the crates.

“Blast.” He sighed. With any luck, the Hutt would be forced to take his emergency escape route out onto the plains, leaving him vulnerable to their air support. “Feid, how’s it looking out there?”

“Oh, we’re just great. What took so long?” Feid brought the Sunflare around for a second pass on the shield generator. Zohli’s first time as gunner was enthusiastic, but her targeting could use some work. “Timing, kiddo!”

“Sorry! Everything spinning is confusing!”

“Eyes on the targeting array, Zoh.”

Bastra sighed. “I’m not sure what took so long, but the Hutt’s on the move. Send the word to have someone waiting on that back exit we noted.”
“Got it. What do we do if the slug appears?” She took a leisurely arc around the outside of the base, letting Zoh and Dee on the cannons handle Porla’s mounted sentries as they made a run in on Phel’s team. The ground crew was making a mess of Porla’s courtyard, and the main entrance was wide open, Darwic’s diminutive form picking off easy targets.

“Roast him. I doubt Hutt hides are proof against turbolasers.”

If Bastra thought the call was a little cold-blooded for him, he didn’t sound it. Feid and Pulkka exchanged a look. “You got it, boss.”

The lifts had stopped working. Of course they had; Davine’s people had disrupted the power generators. Caliiga cursed roundly under her breath as she hiked down the stairs. Porla kept all his most precious things deep underground, where even the visible building’s total destruction wouldn’t cause too much damage.

The trophy room must have been on a backup generator; all the static fields protecting his treasures were still active, although only the emergency lights were running. Caliiga pulled the shock collar from its pouch on her belt and eased through the room, stepping over laser sensors visible in her helmet’s optics, toward the small office at the back.

A human woman with shaggy dark hair was frantically throwing things into a satchel, fretting under her breath.

Caliiga leveled her blaster, set to stun. “Pamah Thakkan?”

The woman spun with a shriek, her hands flying up. “How did you get in here?!”

She rolled her eyes. “I took the stairs. Are you Pamah Thakkan?”

“No! I… no! I’m Emi Gal-Maren!”

Caliiga frowned and ran the woman’s image through the database uplink Tuuz had installed in her helmet. “What were you doing on Coruscant?”

Weeping, the woman stammered, “I-I was, I was, my boss, he sent me, I was, it was a-a-a, look, I’m just an assayer, he sends me to verify whether something is real, there was an auction and he wanted me to check, it was a bottle—”

“Shut up!” She gestured with the blaster and the woman gave a tiny scream and sank to her knees. The database was returning an ID confirmation, saying the woman really was Emi Gal-Maren, a forty-something professional acquisitions expert currently on contract with Porla the Hutt. “Does the Hutt have a slicer on his staff?”

“A-a a what?”

Force, she was tempted to stun the woman anyway. “A slicer!”

“Wh- no! Not that I know of? Why would he need a slicer? Porla doesn’t deal in data theft. Please don’t shoot me!”

“Ugh.” Caliiga shoved the blaster back into its holster. “You probably want to find a new boss, I
don’t think your current one is gonna survive this.”

Whatever makeup brand the woman was wearing was holding up admirably against the tears streaming down her cheeks. “But what should I do?”

With an angry shrug, Caliiga turned her back on Gal-Maren. “Whatever you want, I don’t care.”

Ulic was fairly certain his eyebrows were floating somewhere over his head. Their mysterious Sith was after a slicer? And somehow got the wrong target. That had to be embarrassing. He was a little disappointed that he couldn’t be around when she reported back to her master; it would probably be immensely entertaining.

He tucked the information away and trailed Caliiga back up the stairs, but she didn’t say anything more where it could be heard.

Porla may have been relatively young, but he was not a foolish Hutt. He had suspected Red Sun’s visit to be more than what it seemed; the power generators going offline had been unpleasant, but not truly a surprise.

What was a surprise was that they’d managed it without their infiltrators being caught.

When their second lieutenant -- or whatever it was, they didn’t appear to even have a rank system -- cut off Porla’s primary escape route and then declared that they were acting on behalf of Davine, it was one more needle than Porla could tolerate.

[One thousand trugut for each dead Sunner! Ten thousand each for the ones with the capes,] he snarled. Only Captain Nibu and Majordomo Bazikh remained behind as the guards scrambled to get back through the doors into the throne room. The Hutt smiled at the Sullustan. [Mobilise the air defenses to destroy their ships, Captain.]

Nibu was already listening to his communications. One of the reasons Porla appreciated the man was his straightforwardness and his refusal to cower even when delivering bad news. So when Nibu shook his head and reported, [My Lord, they somehow slipped a fleet in under our sensors and took out our fighters as soon as the shield went down,] Porla didn’t roar and threaten the man.

[These Red Sun are clever. They must have sent a spy to report on our weaknesses.] Porla rubbed beneath his lower lip. The gas cloud filling the room was making his eyes tingle. [We will let them have this victory, but return to crush them. Call my speeder around to the back exit.]

[Yes, my Lord.]

Although it was beneath him, Porla checked that Red Sun’s offering was secured to his repulsor chair. He was determined to make some profit from this disaster. Nibu finished issuing commands and turned to hold the repulsor chair steady for Porla to settle in at the controls.
[Do you wish us to travel with you, my Lord?]

The Hutt considered the matter. The repulsor chair had speed, but it also had a low maximum weight draw. [No, make your way out separately and we will regroup at the southern holding.] He grinned. [And if you happen to kill a few Red Sun in the meantime, I will have credits for you.] Bazikh and Nibu bowed in acceptance.

His private escape route had formerly been a ventilation shaft running at an angle up to the surface, barely tall enough for even a human to pass through without crouching. Porla had had the route widened and a security hatch installed near the far end to keep pests out, and a pressure-plate security system to deter more cognizant intruders.

He was nearly to the exit when a close explosion shook a badly-fitted light fixture loose from the ceiling. Porla ducked as rocks and grit showered down. The lamp’s cable snapped taut as it arced down to strike one of the crates; the crate wobbled on the edge of its sled before tipping over, almost graceful in its plunge.

[No!] A single one of those crates could be worth hundreds of thousands! The Hutt watched in horror as the priceless alcohol struck the floor.

The crate exploded violently, blue-green flames spraying sparks and shards of glass everywhere. Porla had just enough time to realise that racuître didn’t ignite like that before the pressure wave from the explosion set off the electrical security grid around him.

Porla’s base was a mess.

Caliiga paused at the edge of the throne room, watching Red Sun mercs hauling captive Hutt guards out, tending to courtiers’ wounds, and tossing the dead into the open pit in the floor. The happy screeching of the starved k’lor’slugs made her wince.

There were a lot more Red Sun in here than they’d arrived with.

Davine was standing off to one side like a statue, his arms folded. Probably issuing orders and coordinating with whatever forces they’d brought. His friend Alim wasn’t in the room, but another Sunner stood nearby with a blaster rifle held at rest; they tensed when she approached, but Davine raised a hand.

“Hunter.”

She nodded to him. “I think you downplayed yourself when you said our purposes were aligned.”

There was a soft, dry laugh that crackled in his vox. “Go big or go home. Find what you were looking for?”

Caliiga released an angry scoff and turned to watch Davine’s people at work subduing an outraged Sullustan. Porla’s majordomo had done them the favour of getting shot and was sitting quietly clutching his side, shock-pallid under his tattoos “No. Our target misdirected us.” She took a chance and said carefully, “I’m not looking forward to reporting this to my boss. He’s not the forgiving sort.”
Davine’s head tilted, still mysterious behind that expressionless mask, but managing to present an air of sympathy. “Nor is mine. I think we had far more success than you, though.”

“Maybe your boss could use another lieutenant?” She wasn’t serious, but getting more information on these people would possibly mean the difference between life and death if her Lord Sidious wasn’t feeling charitable.

Davine was studying her, she could feel it. “Unless I’m much mistaken, your boss wouldn’t take kindly to a defection. If you’re even able to do so.” He sounded amused.

She grimaced under her helmet. “No, you’re right about that.” Davine knew, she was certain of it. What that could mean for her -- and for Lord Sidious -- she wasn’t certain. It was a fair bet he and whoever his master was were already well aware of Sidious, if they had remained hidden for so long.

Why reveal themselves now?

Caliiga was about to say something else when Davine stepped over toward one of his people who was trying to put binders on one of Porla’s slaves. His vox was still on as he said, “No, we’re letting them go.”

The Sunner made some argument on their private comms that she couldn’t hear, waving a hand broadly, and Davine shook his head emphatically as several of their number paused around the room to watch. “I said no. We’re not here for profits. Take them back to their quarters, let them gather what they want to take with them, but we’re not keeping them.”

Interesting. Caliiga watched the Red Sun as they started treating the slaves with more respect, and tried to make sense of the new pieces of the puzzle they presented.

They found Rikkat lying miserably on the floor outside the generator room with a pair of Kowakian monkey-lizards sitting on her back and laughing uproariously at something only they could understand. The Squib perked up when she saw Hondo without his mask. “Hey boss. Uh. Sorry it wasn’t just the shield generator?” She gestured to the monkey-lizards. “It was their idea. I guess.”

Hondo gave the creatures a stern glare. “Pilf! Pikk! What did I tell you about the plan?”

Pikk jabbered at him defensively, and although Hondo only really understood one word in six, he got the gist of it. “They had the shield generator connected to the mains? Why would they do that?”

The pair of monkey-lizards exchanged a sheepish glance and Hondo nodded. “They caught you messing with it, didn’t they?”

The pair started up a screeching argument, clearly trying to blame the other. Rikkat sighed. “Well, nice to know they were on our side. But can you make them move? I really want to get up now.”

“Ugh.” Obi-Wan tossed the helmet aside with relief and accepted a crushing hug from Zohli. “That
Pulkka helped him strip off the layer of armour, setting it aside on the table in the lounge for maintenance. “What happened to the Hutt? Someone took out a speeder near the escape tunnel, but nobody reported killing Porla.”

Obi-Wan grimaced. “You know that pressure-plate security system we weren't sure about? It was an electrical net. Something set it off while he was in the tunnel.”

“It's pretty gross,” Phel added as he pulled his own helmet off. “I dunno how they’re planning to clean that up.”

“At least it's not our problem,” Obi-Wan said with a laugh. “Hondo gets to deal with it. And the k’lor’slugs, but Porla’s beastmaster is being cooperative.” The heavily scarred Aqualish had been angry, but with Porla gone he hadn't seen any reason to fight; particularly when Hondo had informed him that the alternative was simply killing the creatures because nobody else knew how to handle them. “We did have one unpleasant surprise; Ulic probably knows more.”

“Oh, do I ever.” The spirit made himself visible, sitting slightly above one of the anchored stools at the kitchen island. He looked gleeful. “Our acolyte friend was looking for a slicer; at a guess, it sounds like someone hacked her Master’s database.”

Phel’s eyes widened. “What I wouldn't give to know how they did that.”

“I'd love to know where it is,” Obi-Wan said. He nodded in thanks as Feid handed him and Phel cups of water.

“I’m guessing somewhere on Coruscant, based on what she said,” Ulic said with a shrug. “Odds are good this Caliga is one of Sidious’ tools.”

“Does that mean Sidious is based on Coruscant?” Obi-Wan wondered. People could move around, of course, and he hadn't considered where the Sith Lord might be. But it made a certain amount of sense that he would be in the heart of the Republic, weaving a net of deception in order to pull it all down at once.

“It's a fair bet,” Ulic answered. “It wouldn't be his only base, but he’d want to have as much political access as possible.”

Feid rested her elbows on the bar and prodded into Ulic’s intangible back with the spoon she’d been using to stir her tea. “Is there a reason you're not talking about taking out this Sith Lord when he's having a nap?”

Ulic twitched and gave her an annoyed glare. Obi-Wan sighed and answered, “Because of the balance of power. This Sith Lord has not only inherited everything that’s been passed down through the line of Bane -- artifacts, holocrons, a thousand generations of hoarded knowledge and stored power -- but also any political connections that have been developed over the years. He may have only one apprentice -- and we know who that is -- but he’ll have several acolytes, one of whom I just met. She's at least as strong as I am. By myself, I don't have a chance of getting to him; odds are good that if I did manage it, he’d utterly destroy me.”

Pulkka was the first to get it. “You think he’d do worse than kill you.”

“We were warned by a trusted source that Sidious not only knows about Obi-Wan -- Scogar,” Ulic corrected himself. “But is interested in claiming him as another acolyte. For the Sith, death is a mercy, not a punishment, and they’re not big on mercy. There are a lot of techniques Sidious could
use to control someone's loyalty--"

“Techniques that I’m not yet trained to resist,” Obi-Wan added. Zohli leaned in closer against his side and he gave her shoulders a gentle squeeze. “We’re dealing with Sidious’ political power right now, and Ulic is teaching me the rest. But if I’m going to face Sidious, I can't be doing it alone. I need allies.”

“So when do you start that?” Deesix asked. The droid leaned in the doorway, doing a fair mimic of Feid’s posture.

Obi-Wan glanced around the lounge; Ulic’s expression was grim and the others had various expressions of concern. “I don't know.”

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“You want me to do what?”

Her new manager smiled at her -- at least, she thought the woman was smiling. It was difficult to tell, with Bothans. “Rebuild the Senate’s cyber-security infrastructure. Your specialty is slicing; we hired you to find the holes in the walls and not just plug them, but fix the whole thing.”

Pamah ran a hand over her head and tugged at her messy bun. The Senate Bureau of Intelligence had an intensive cyber-security division she’d never known about. Lurali had explained a lot of it over carry-out food and beer, and Pamah was still trying to grasp the extent of it. They’d set her up with a new apartment, security, and an office in their Corellian division building, right down the hall from Lurali. They’d even sent people to collect everything she’d had to abandon in her apartment on Coruscant.

It was intimidating.

“Well.” She took a breath. “If you want me to find the holes, I’ll need to build a testing AI, which would require a private databank--”

Jhuvani chuckled. “Write up a requisition list and leave it with my secretary by the end of the day. You’ll have what you need.”

She blinked. “I’ll also need a couple dedicated people to coordinate with--”

“Do you have names?”

A slow grin tugged at Pamah’s cheek as she thought of Em-Toh and Jayken. “Yeah, actually I do.”
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Chapter End Notes

Darwic is based off Warwick Davis.

Someday I'll give Rikkat a job where she's not comic relief.

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So yeah, the move went great, but it was ex-fucking-sausting and it's really a miracle I got this done on time xD
Chapter Summary

Previously:

Hondo’s initiative to claim Porla the Hutt’s fortress met with some minor misadventure, but proved successful in the end.

As slicer Pamah Thakkan settles into her new career with the SBI, Sith Acolyte Caliiga discovers how badly she and fellow Acolyte Tuuz had been misled.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, DragonHoardsBooks, Juna, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.01.17

Coruscant

Pamah Thakkan had evaded them. As frustrated and frankly terrified as she was, Caliiga couldn’t even find it in her heart to take the deception personally, it had been done so well. Thakkan likely hadn’t even known what she was running from. As tempting as the idea of fleeing, or even trying to contact Davine and throwing herself on his mysterious master’s mercy might be, Caliiga knew Tuuz didn’t have that option, and would suffer alone for their failure.

She returned to Coruscant to take responsibility, knowing their Lord might choose to kill them.

Sidious regarded the two of them mildly as they knelt before his throne, his usual dispassionate expression revealing nothing of his thoughts. Maul was there, looking better than when Caliiga had last seen him, standing like a sentinel behind and to the left. His face was a careful mask, but his expressive eyes spoke of deep concern.

“I understand that you have failed me, my boy.”

Her jaw clenched at her Lord’s offhand tone. “My Lord. We apprehended one of the slicers who broke in, and have disposed of him. The other—” she glanced at Tuuz, whose eyes hadn’t shifted from the floor just in front of Sidious’ throne.

The Twi’lek nodded, looking even paler than usual. “She evaded us. Cracked the spaceport systems and attached her ID to an uninvolved individual. By the time we realised it wasn’t her, she was in the hands of the SBI on Corellia.”

“And you didn’t consider pursuing her?”
Caliiga answered. “With the SBI’s awareness of her, a sudden disappearance would raise an inquiry. On my way back, we tracked her down and I fogged her memory of why she fled Coruscant. The disks were nowhere to be found in her apartment, but she won’t remember they exist anyway.”

There was a heart-stopping silence and the room seemed to chill further. “And you believe,” Lord Sidious said softly, “that this resolves the matter?”

Tuuz cleared his throat nervously. “I was monitoring the SBI’s system. There’s been no mention of the disks, or any information they might have gleaned from the slicer. It appears she kept her mouth shut regarding details.”

“It. Appears.”

Beside her, Tuuz stiffened and made a choked sound, a hand going reflexively to his throat. Caliiga’s spine turned to ice as their Lord stood to pace the dais in front of them. “None of this excuses the fact that you failed. Your security failed. Your oversight on the Holonet failed. If you are so useless to me, Tuuz, why do I keep you around?”

Caliiga was on her feet before she realised it; quicker than blinking, one blade of Maul’s saberstaff was at her throat. Beyond the crimson glow, his eyes pleaded with her to not make him move further. With effort, Caliiga looked past him. “My Lord, we need him still.”

Sidious eyed her as if she were inconsequential. “Do we?”

Hating herself for it, she protested, “Training a replacement will take time, my Lord, time we don’t have. You have competition, and you cannot afford to weaken yourself now.”

Tuuz collapsed on the floor, gasping, as Sidious turned his attention to Caliiga. “Competition?”

Maul shook his head minutely at her and she closed her eyes. Sidious wanted Davine; if he got his hands on the other Sith, their lives might as well be forfeit. But this might be the only way to keep herself and Tuuz alive long enough to figure out something else. “In my search for the slicer, I encountered Red Sun and the man known as Gav Davine. He’s Sith, my Lord, I’m sure of it. And he hinted at being the apprentice to someone more powerful.”

Sidious regarded her for a long moment, yellow eyes glittering in the depths of his cowl, before motioning for Maul to step back. “You spoke to him.”

She fought to keep her expression neutral. “I did, my Lord. He-- he knew that I’m an acolyte. I swear I did nothing to tell him such, he just knew.”

“And what was he doing, my boy?”

“He was leading a Red Sun force to destroy Porla the Hutt’s base on Florrum.” When her Lord said nothing, Caliiga continued, “It seems Porla had a stake in Krayn’s Nar Shaddaa operation. The Hutt placed a bounty on Davine’s head in retaliation for his losses.” She took a breath. “Red Sun wiped him off the map and dissolved his holdings.” Tuuz had done some digging while she’d been paying Thakkan a visit: everything Porla had owned was being sold off or simply dismantled at a startling rate, and the other Huttss had been eagerly snatching up the pieces as they fell.

Her Lord turned to pace a few steps away from her. “They had no interest in keeping the Hutt’s assets?”

“None, my Lord. I even heard Davine say they were not there for profits, and that Porla’s slaves would be set free.” That was the confusing part: a Sith master refusing to conquer and hold. She
couldn't make sense of it.

“How interesting.” Sidious turned and stopped in front of her. One pallid hand rose, the long sleeve falling back and revealing dark-veined, bony wrists as he offered it to her, palm up. “Show me.”

Suppressing a sigh of relief, Caliiga placed her hand on her master’s and drew to the fore of her mind everything she could recall of meeting the Sith apprentice.

Reformation Year 980.01.19
Coruscant

“Come in, Padawan. Your Master has been asking after you.” The pretty Mirialan Jedi Healer offered a conspiratorial smile and dropped her voice a little. “I think he’s getting bored.”

Asajj held up the datapad she carried, grinning. “I bet this will keep him occupied. How’s he doing?” She followed the Healer down one soft, hushed hallway. Everything here was soft, soothing on the skin, gentle on the mind. The ceilings were lower than in other parts of the Temple, reducing echoes; gauzy drapes on the walls increased the effect.

“The bacterial infections are in recession, although we want to keep him another couple of days for observation.” Her full lips pursed in disapproval. “He sustained a number of injuries which weren't quite healed right—”

“We didn't have the opportunity to let him rest for days,” Asajj sighed, frowning. The broken ribs hadn't set properly, but being pursued by a warlord hadn't allowed them time to deal with it.

The Healer nodded. “He said as much. Unfortunately, we can't fix most of them without surgery, which he declined. If the scars become debilitating in the future, we may need to press the issue.”

The teenager laughed softly. “That's Master Ky, unwilling to rest more than he absolutely has to.”

“Now that's a condition we can't seem to cure,” the Jedi said tartly as she opened a door. “Unfortunate, since it seems endemic among our field-qualified Knights.”

“What does?” Master Ky was sitting up in half-lotus toward the foot of the bed, still wrapped in the soft cream-colored medical robes.

The Healer regarded him narrowly with her arms folded. “Stubbornness.”

Ky’s lean face cracked an unrepentant grin. “How else could we get anything done, Healer Fatim?” He held his arms out to Asajj, who hugged him tightly. “How are you doing, little hawk?”

She blushed at the old nickname and offered him the datapad. “I’m okay. It's just different. That's the information you asked about. Six years of politics and Council decisions.” She pulled a face at the thought. She had glanced through the files and they had seemed exceedingly dry and boring.

Fatim excused herself with a smile. Ky set the ‘pad aside and invited her to sit next to him on the medical bunk. “I understand you’re making friends?”
Asajj had been invited to stay with Siri and Xiaan until a decision could be made regarding her case - which would have to wait until the Healers were satisfied with Master Ky’s health. The Council had seemed...not baffled by her presence, but perhaps exasperated. She was certain more than a few had given each other “not this again” glances when Master Ky had declared his intention to train her. It wasn’t until she’d met Xiaan’s friends, two human boys who had also come to the Temple late, that Asajj had guessed at the source. “Trying to. Xiaan and Aayla have introduced me to some other padawans who are, um….”

“Unusual?” Ky gave her a wry smile. “The Temple could do with more of the unusual, not less. Have they started you in any classes?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. They had me take a comprehension test, and Aayla brought me some books from the Archives to get caught up.” Ky had helped her with numbers and letters, but her reading and mathematics were far behind the average for a fifteen-year old Republic citizen. She had a basic grasp of history, but access to the Holonet had been restricted to the Rattataki warlords. On the rare occasion the rebels had managed to slice into the warlords’ networks, they’d had more urgent priorities than basic education.

“That’s good! Just throwing you into things would probably do more harm than it would help.”

They spent another hour catching up before one of the Healers arrived to collect Master Ky for a therapy session. He rolled his eyes good-naturedly and dropped a kiss on top of Asajj’s head as he left.

Asajj wandered the Temple halls, aimless while she had no classes or duties. The place was immense, and she’d been given leave to explore as she pleased, provided her explorations didn’t circumvent guards or locked doors. She’d quickly learned that the freedom to explore was considered a passive training exercise -- learning to use the Force to avoid getting lost in the labyrinthine depths of the structure.

She turned a corner and found herself in a small courtyard with a single towering tree in the center; its pale trunk was skinny and bare, while spiky, vivid golden branches puffed out at the top like a pipe broom and cast the space in a warm half-light. The ground underfoot was soft with fluffy moss which sprang back as soon as she lifted her foot. Asajj moved forward and ran her hand over the trunk; the surface was crisp under her palm and crinkled like the wrappers on the soft, sticky sweets Tychaqaq had sometimes made. Stretching out into the Force, Asajj felt the deep thrum of the tree’s life, the slow steady heartbeat and breathing of something that lived on a vastly expanded time scale.

“It’s called a molaan,” someone said quietly.

Immersed in the Force as she was, the presence of someone else didn’t catch her by surprise. “Where are they from?”

“Chandrila. It was a gift from our sister Temple there, if I recall right.”

Asajj looked over her shoulder to see a human boy about her own age sitting in half-lotus in the shadow of one of the columns ringing the courtyard. Delicate features were half-concealed by jaw-length dark hair marked by a streak of golden-blond over his right eye. A short, narrow braid trailed over his right shoulder. “I hope I didn’t interrupt your meditation.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t meditating.”

Her eyebrow arched. “Hiding from someone, then?” She winced -- that had come out accusatory -- and offered a lopsided grin. “Your secret’s safe, I won’t tell ‘em you’re here.”
The boy’s answering smile was wan and disappeared quickly. “If I’m hiding from anything, it’s my own mind. I’m Ferus.”

“Asajj. I… just arrived here a few days ago.” She braced herself for the same invasive, accusatory questions she’d heard from a dozen others already.

They never arrived. Ferus’ second smile was more real than the first. “Welcome to Coruscant, then, Asajj.”

It was a pleasantly quiet space, and the boy wasn’t indicating he wanted her to leave; it almost felt like he needed company, even if he might not want it. She made a decision and moved to sit near him, but not imposingly so. “So how’d you find this garden? I got lost,” she added with a laugh.

Ferus shrugged again. “Back when I was an Initiate, we’d play hide and seek games. I was only ever found here once.”

Asajj regarded the tall pipe-broom tree for a moment before saying, “I’d never seen a tree before Ky rescued me.”

“Ky?”

“My Master.” She hesitated, but there was no judgement in his attitude, only mild curiosity. “He rescued me from slavery, but we were stuck on Rattatak. There aren't any trees on Rattatak, so he showed me his memories.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“You're not missing anything important.”

“If you were stuck there, how’d you get here?”

Asajj toyed with the hem of her tunic, still bemused at the softness of the fabric. She would never have imagined wearing anything so nice, let alone having more than one. “Two Knights came looking for Ky. They got us past the warlords and their fleets.” Not without some difficulty, and they’d needed repairs in earnest once they had landed on the green planet with the castle. Asajj had been too taken with the presence of water that wasn't a disease-ridden, parasite-infested mire to want to go inside a dusty stone building. Aayla and Xiaan had shown her how to swim while the older Jedi had been making purchases.

That caught Ferus’ interest. “That must have been exciting. Two knights? Did they… I don't suppose they have padawans.” When she nodded, his face fell.

“What's wrong?”

He was quiet for a long time, sinking his fingers into the soft moss. “My master died last year,” he murmured at last. “On assignment. She was sick but didn’t tell anyone. I’ve been seeing the Mind Healers, and they say I'm ready to be claimed by a new master to continue my training, but….”

“You haven't been able to find someone?”

He pressed his pale lips into a thin line and sighed. “There just aren't enough knights to go around. Some of them really aren't suited to training a padawan anyway, but it's a requirement for anyone who wants to attain mastery.”

She frowned. “I didn't know that. Shouldn't there be an alternative for those who aren't suited?”
His grin was closer to a grimace. “You’d think so, right? Fortunately the padawan has the right to refuse, but a lot of the time that means being sent to the Corps instead.” At Asajj’s curious glance, he explained, “The Corps are the Order’s support network, Jedi who aren’t suited to being knights. Knights are meant to take on field assignments for diplomacy and negotiations, while the Corps produces food, clothes, technology, transportation…. Basically, the Order would fall apart without them. But we’re all taught to aspire to knighthood, as if anything else is some sort of shameful failure.”

He’d dug up a clump of moss in his agitation, and looked at the fuzzy green lump in his hand with distress. Asajj reached over, took the moss, and tucked it back into the hole Ferus had created. “Are you considering a change?”

Ferus huffed a sigh through his nose. “I don’t know. Maybe. Losing Master Ch’lui hurt. A lot. The Council wants me to continue training to be a knight, and I get it. The numbers are really low now, and it seems like there’s an increase in galactic conflict, from what I’ve heard. What do you think?”

Taken aback at the unexpected question, Asajj frowned. “I don’t know if I can say, I’ve barely seen anything of the Order. I was nine when Master Ky arrived and started training me. The Council didn’t seem to like hearing that.”

“That is a bit old by their standards. Not that I’m judging, you clearly didn’t have any other options,” he added quickly. “You think they might send you away?”

“No.” Her smile was sharp-edged. “Ky told them that if they didn’t want me here, that was fine, but where I go, he goes. And I know they want him to stay.”

Ferus was picking at the moss again. “You’re lucky to have that support.”

She smacked his hand lightly to get him to stop. “I have an idea. You need to find the right Jedi and get their attention, right? Where’s a good place to access the Temple databanks?”

He stared at her in alarm. “The Archives, probably? What are you planning?”

“Nothing that will get you in trouble! We’ll find a list of all the knights without padawans and then you can try approaching the ones that seem best suited,” Asajj said. She stood and brushed flecks of green moss and gold needle-leaves from her legs, then held out her hand to him. “Come on, I don’t know where the Archive is, you’ll have to show me.”

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*Reformation Year 980.02.17*

*Corellia*

Warm afternoon light brightened the Chamber of the Green Council, only slightly muted by the tall windows’ filters and turning the emerald ashlar tiles bronze. The Nautolan Jedi Master stepped forward onto the crest of the Order inlaid in the floor and bowed. “Thank you for agreeing to see me, Councilors.”

The Head of the Green Council, a dark-skinned human woman named Dej Enkari, nodded back to him serenely. “You said you had a concern to voice, Master Kerr. By all means, tell us.”
“Thank you, Master Enkari.” Renni allowed himself to pace, collecting his thoughts. “Councilors, some months ago I had an experience which has caused me some consternation. At the time, I was advised to let the matter rest, but it has troubled me--”

“Your pardon, Master Kerr,” Councilor Hiri-Na said. The Mon Cal Jedi looked intently curious. “Do you refer to the incident on Dxun?”

Renni shook his head. It may have been related, but saying so would destroy any anonymity for the subject. “No, Masters. This concerns a young sentient I encountered. I noticed immediately that they possessed a remarkable affinity for the Force, and thought to encourage them to accept training, despite their mature age. I was then informed that this sentient had in fact been an initiate at the Coruscant temple in their youth, but had aged out and been sent away to the Corps. Their ship was waylaid by pirates en route, but no Jedi was sent to recover the lost initiate.”

The seated Councilors exchanged unreadable glances. Master Enkari gestured for him to continue.

Renni cleared his throat. “Masters, this negligence on behalf -- yes! negligence!” he insisted when someone made a sound of protest, “--on behalf of the Coruscant temple is deeply concerning. Despite their tribulations, this young sentient displayed patience, compassion, nobility, and the diplomatic skills of an experienced negotiator. That our sister temple would so readily discard and then neglect an individual of aptitude -- simply for lack of an acceptable mentor! -- brings their policies into question.”

“Where did you encounter this individual, Master Kerr?” someone to his right just out of his field of view asked.

Renni hesitated, knowing any answer could lead to Captain Bastra’s identity being revealed. He had made Nejaa a promise, after all. “They were working as a freighter captain, making one of our supply deliveries. After much meditation on the matter, I have come to accept that this should be investigated appropriately rather than set aside.”

He could feel the flurry of mental discussion like a rustling of shimmering insect wings flitting around and past him as he waited, schooling his mind to patience. At last, Master Enkari gave a decisive nod. “You are correct that this information is gravely concerning, Master Kerr. You spoke to this individual about such things?”

“They were understandably reticent on the matter,” Renni hedged. It wasn't entirely a falsehood, after all. “But I came to understand that they view the Order with some amount of resentment for their treatment as a youngling. If what I was told is true, and the Coruscant temple has been sending away aged-out initiates simply because of the risk of the Dark side to an untrained Jedi, how is being cut off from the support they have had all their lives meant to improve their chances?”

“That is what you were told?”

Renni remembered how grim Nejaa’s face had been; his friend had clearly been wondering if a similar fate might have befallen his son Valin had they not been on Corellia. “It is, Councilor.”

Master Enkari was frowning unhappily now. “I see.”

“If I may ask,” Master Hiri-Na said, “is there a reason you protect this individual’s identity?”

“Without being able to ask permission to identify them, I didn't feel it proper to drag someone back into Order matters when they so clearly wished to continue with the life they had built,” he explained. Nejaa had made that much clear, and Renni had reluctantly agreed: this wasn't about
changing one human’s mind so much as it was about preserving the future of the Order. “Their case filled me with concern; their lifestyle did not. Whatever decision this Council makes on this matter, it will be the future which is affected, not the past.”

“Agreed,” Master Darmalla declared. His lekku were twitching in agitation. “I move that we assemble a committee to investigate the stories and well-being of those initiates sent to the Corps. Aging out is no excuse! Both the Corellian and Chandrilan temples stand ready to accept those who do not meet the Coruscant temple’s standards. Jedi who serve in the Corps are meant to be doing so gladly of their own initiative. It is not a dumping ground for rejects.”

Renni pinched back a smile of relief at the murmur of agreement; another Councilor was already seconding the motion. It might take some time, but perhaps this situation could be amended.

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Reformation Year 980.02.29

Coruscant

Maintaining a straight face was a skill Mace had painstakingly developed over many years, but sometimes even that habit could be tested to its limits. He regarded the pair of padawans standing opposite his desk over the tips of his steepled fingers, considering his options.

He’d been alerted shortly after the Jedi who maintained the Temple’s databanks noticed an adorably clumsy intrusion into the Temple records; they’d known who was behind it within half an hour. Mace had decided to watch and see what Asajj’s intent was.

When he’d figured out what she was doing, he’d shown the details to Depa, who had thought it was rather sweet.

“What are you going to do about them?”

The problem was, he didn’t know. By rights, Padawan Asajj should be punished for breaking into the Temple’s records. But. But. She had been doing so to help another padawan, had sought without malice information that could have simply been given to her had she but asked, and had not touched the databanks again.

He’d gone to Ky, who had laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks.

“Asajj was raised in a different environment, Mace. She learned long ago that if she needs something, she has to get it herself, because nobody else will help her. I could talk to her about this, however she also needs to understand that the hierarchy here is much different. It would be more effective if you addressed her directly.”

And now he found himself facing a teenage girl who bore no indication of guilt or remorse, and a teenage boy who would barely look up from his hands.

What to do with them?

“Padawan Asajj. Last month, you sliced into the Temple databanks via an Archives terminal in search of the records for our active-duty knights. Since then, you’ve been encouraging Padawan Olin
to approach several of those knights, seeking one who might take him on as their padawan.”

“That’s right.” Her narrow chin raised just a bit more, and hiding a smile became even more difficult. Mace covered it with a frown.

“You need to understand that this is not how this situation is handled here, Padawan. Firstly, the choice to accept a padawan lies with the knight, not the prospective padawan—”

“If they don’t know he’s here, how will they be able to make that choice?”

His eyes narrowed. She had a point, but still— “Please do not interrupt, Padawan. We are meant to listen to the Force’s guidance in such matters. If a knight is meant to take a padawan, they will actively seek one out.”

The girl frowned, emphasising the pale eyebrows she had allowed to grow back despite still shaving her head. She didn’t speak, though.

“Furthermore, breaking into the Temple’s databanks is not an approved activity. Particularly since, had you simply asked one of the Archivists, the information would have been provided to you.” Mace let the corner of his mouth twitch at the padawan’s bemusement. “The list of active-duty knights isn’t a secret among the Jedi, Asajj. I know you’re accustomed to others hoarding knowledge, but here it is shared freely.

“As for you, Padawan Olin. I’m surprised you went along with Padawan Asajj’s plan, knowing both how unnecessary it was and how slicing the systems is treated generally. It was your duty, as the more experienced padawan, to advise her of such.”

Padawan Olin mumbled something that sounded like an apology. Mace could empathise: Ch’lui’s loss had been hard on the boy, particularly as it had been simple disease which had claimed her. Healer G’ohn had noted in Olin’s file that the boy felt he should have been able to do something to prevent it, even though it had been a rare genetic condition that still had no known cure.

He sighed. There wasn’t a malicious bone in either teen’s body, just determination to do the right thing and drive to do better.

“Padawan Asajj. I’m assigning you some additional training courses in computing. If you’re going to engage in slicing systems, you should at least learn to do so without setting off an alert within thirty seconds.”

She blushed vivid red and looked away.

“And please try to remember that you can ask for information around here. Some things may be restricted due to sensitivity or security — but there will always be a reason for it, and the reason should be respected. If you have questions or doubts about anything, you may ask me or your master directly.”

Asajj blinked. “You, sir? You’re Head of the Order. Surely you’d be too busy to bother with one padawan’s questions.”

Mace let the full smile show. “In other circumstances I might say you’re correct, however your master reminded me that you grew up in a very different society. Unless I’m offworld, asleep, or in a meeting, I am actually accessible. But there’s another reason, as well.

“Padawan Olin.”
The boy finally looked up to meet his eyes, and Mace nodded as his previous feelings were confirmed. It surprised him that his earlier sense of dread had vanished, replaced with a resignation that was almost fond. “I would like to ask if you would do me the honour of being my padawan.”

Ferus’ eyes widened and Asajj squeaked in delight, clapping her hands over her mouth.

“Sir, it… it would be an honour!”

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Reformation Year 980.03.21
Rena City, Kodai

The tiny apartment was an utter shambles. Bits of broken furniture littered the floor. Piles of datadiscs and flimsi had spilled from shelves and tables like a library’s worth of snow. Jocasta would have been horrified at the boot-prints marking some of the pages.

Yan Dooku ran his gloved fingers over a charred gouge marring the wall: the duracrete hadn’t been carved out so much as vaporised instantly by a wildly-swung plasma blade. Local authorities had been baffled by what had appeared to be a gruesome murder, and had been grateful for Jedi assistance.

He resisted the urge to smile at how Qui-Gon had avoided mentioning that Dooku was no longer a member of the Order.

“Found it.”

He turned to look at Qui-Gon’s young padawan as the boy emerged from under the desk. Anakin had a rough metal tube in hand, carefully wrapped in a scrap of cloth, as he brushed dust from his knees. “It’s definitely a lightsaber, but I’m surprised it didn’t explode in his hand,” the boy added, shaking his head. “He had no idea what he was doing when he built this.”

Dooku held his hand out for the weapon, examining it carefully. It was unnecessarily heavy and he could tell that, when activated, it would be off balance.

No, he amended. Balanced differently, for a style of combat that now only existed in archaic training manuals.

Turning from the place where the corpse had been found on the floor, Qui-Gon accepted the tube. “It looks like he was working from studies of ancient lightsabers. They’re not designed to handle the output of modern power cells.”

“The man was a student of antiquities,” Dooku said mildly. “It’s inelegant, but functional enough. Unfortunately, it appears that his prize was stolen by whomever killed him.”

“I can’t get a read on that,” Qui-Gon said with a sigh. “The only impressions are of dark armour and a blank face, possibly a full helmet or breath mask. Norval’s last moments were not fear but rage and jealousy. He wanted to prevent them from taking it, and we might consider ourselves fortunate that we weren’t the first ones to do the asking.”
Dooku sighed. When his former padawan had contacted him requesting his expertise, he had been wary but resigned. The holocrong of the Sith King Adas -- the holocrong, the very first to ever be created -- had a long and ill-fated history. There was a reason a previous generation of Jedi had sunk the thing deep into a thermal vent in Kodai’s vast oceans. But when word had reached the Jedi Council that a university researcher had finally located and uninterred the holocrong, Qui-Gon had been correct in suggesting that Dooku was one of the few sentients alive who would know how to contain such a thing.

It helped that a spirit linked to several of the items in Dooku’s vault had additional suggestions. Lord Pyrra was hardly the most cooperative of individuals, but seemed to have some interest in seeing Dooku succeed against Sidious. The Twi’lek spirit had unsubtly suggested that Dooku might attempt to make off with the holocrong, or convince Qui-Gon to let him take it. The most he had hoped for was being able to interact with such a priceless relic.

And now it was gone, in all likelihood in the hands of one of Sidious's agents.

Dooku turned from his disgruntled study of the lightsaber gouges -- at least one had been caused by a better-tuned modern blade, to judge by the lack of carbon-scoring -- to find young Skywalker looking at him again. He straightened but resisted a glower. “It is impolite to stare at another sentient, Grand-Padawan. Is there something I can do for you?”

The boy flushed. Nearly thirteen and still so open; Yan was almost envious of that innocence. “Sorry, sir. It's just… I heard you were the best duellist in the Temple.”

Ah. Admiration. He could work with that. Dooku allowed himself a small smile. “I did have something of a reputation, yes.”

“Master Dooku is the foremost practitioner of Makashi in the galaxy,” Qui-Gon put in. His glance to Dooku was part fond exasperation and part mischief: to Yan’s dismay, his former padawan had never shown enough interest or aptitude for the style, preferring the flashier flailing of Ataru. “But that conversation could be held in a more comfortable location. Shall we?”

The security officer outside looked baffled when Qui-Gon handed her the lightsaber for the evidence team, with a warning to not activate it. The official investigation into the murder two days previous would gladly accept their reports, and Dooku resisted a grimace at the thought of doing the paperwork himself again.

They returned to his ship -- Qui-Gon and his padawan had arrived in one of the Temple’s undersized shuttles which didn’t even possess a seating area outside the cockpit, and Yan refused to socialise over a steering yoke. He had no intention of wasting the opportunity to see why Sidious was so interested in the boy.

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Reformation Year 980.05.07
Alderaan

“When you said you had information for me, I wasn't expecting evidence of a large-scale scandal.” Bail Organa stared in horrified fascination at the datapad in his hands. The contents of these files could unseat a significant portion of the Senate in the wrong hands.
The mercenary seated opposite his desk gave a humourless chuckle and sipped his brandy. He was dressed nicely rather than his customary body armour -- rather akin to a midlevel functionary, which wouldn't tip any eyebrows -- but there was something in his posture that spoke of a genuine ease in higher-class settings. “The word you're looking for is corruption. The Republic has a problem, but collusive interests aren't why I came to you.” He paused and caught Bail’s eye pointedly. “Unless you want to do something about that, as well?”

Bail frowned at him. “Of course I want to do something about that, Bastra! Allowing this level of corruption to remain in the government is unconscionable.”

The ginger-haired human sighed and set his glass down on the edge of the desk. Bail was still uncertain what to think of the man. He’d been serving on the Senate Repatriation and Naturalization Committee when the Lok Revenants had presented them with an agreement to improve the efficiency of offloading slaves the group had liberated. Bail had about as much appreciation for mercenary outfits as the next senator -- which was to say, a great deal of wariness and concern regarding the legality of their activities. Their bureaucratic approach had caught him off guard, as had the soft-spoken, masked man the Revenants had sent to do their negotiating.

The pirates had been cagey about the source of the slaves, but medical interviews had resolved that question. The evidence against the Trade Federation was damning, but their representatives had successfully argued that emotional testimonies from people who had been enslaved was likely to be inaccurate, possibly coerced from manipulations by biased medical staff. Former slaves were simply too unreliable, even though they all told the same story.

It made Bail’s blood boil.

“The internecine collaborations you're seeing there are only a part of the story,” Bastra said quietly. “Remove one part and someone will step in to fill the gap. If you want to deal with the corruption, you have to find the source--”

“Which is patently obvious. The majority of the senators gained their power through money, illegal business dealings and outright disenfranchisement of the voting population. Several worlds have come under investigation for their policies determining voter eligibility, several more have appointed their representatives via royal decree rather than constituency consensus.” He knew his own rank as Senator was equally as questionable -- as a member of a ruling family, Bail had significant political and financial pull that a delegate from the non-ruling population could never hope to achieve. Bail had hoped it gave him enough immunity to be able to present such matters and be taken seriously.

The mercenary captain nodded. “That is part of the problem, but what is making it possible are decades-deep -- possibly centuries-deep -- dark financial dealings. All of those threads trace back to a single source located somewhere in the Republic government.” He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees, blue eyes hard. “When I first met you, you struck me as someone trustworthy, someone who genuinely wants nothing but the best for the citizens of the Republic. What's your assessment of things?”

Since getting to know each other, Bail had found Bastra to be a passionately caring person, bitter at the many injustices he witnessed, and yet still idealistic enough to have some faith in the Republic which had rejected him. Bail hoped to someday open the man up enough to learn the full story.

He sighed. “The Republic has been failing to meet its ideals for too long. Possibly since its inception. We like to speak of how we’ve achieved a pinnacle of civilization -- we have certainly reached a peak in numbers, system membership has never been higher -- but the cost seems to be gross inequality and Senate representatives who have more interest in maintaining their seats and the size of their personal fortunes than in helping their homeworlds.”
“What if I told you that, for the past thousand years, the Republic has been subject to subtle manipulation by a society so secretive that only a handful of people outside it know it exists at all?”

A smirk tugged at Bail’s cheek. “I’d say you’re paranoid, possibly delusional, and should probably ease off on the holodrama habit.”

Bastra laughed and leaned back in his seat. “Exactly. But if you had evidence of such….” He gestured to the datapad. “What you have in your hands is the product of several years of investigation into a particular thread of financial support underlying the activities of the Trade Federation, the IBC, the Commerce Guild, their numerous allies, and quite a number of politicians who may not even be aware that they’re tied into it. The main thread tails off into a series of false IDs and accounts belonging to people who are reportedly deceased or missing, but must be in the hands of someone politically powerful. I’m asking you to do your own investigation -- carefully, mind! -- of those politicians on the list whom you have access to.” He bared his teeth in a fierce grin. “Help me find the source, Senator.”

Bail considered the list. “Say you’re right, that it is a conspiracy centuries in the making. Every one of those threads would be under surveillance. As soon as I create a ripple in the network, either the source goes into hiding or I disappear most unwillingly.”

The other man gestured with his chin to the datapad. “Some of those senators are on committees you’ve joined. You're still relatively new in the Senate--”

How much investigation had the mercenary done on him?

“--and nobody would think it unusual if you were to seek a closer working relationship with them. Meet with others who aren't on the list, make it look like a habit you're trying to cultivate. And,” he added with a smile, “do realise that you can comm me if you think you’ve got the wrong sort of attention. I do try to take care of my friends.”

Bail snorted. “Oh, so we’re friends, are we?”

Bastra’s eyebrows arched. “I think we could be. I could also classify you as ‘someone I’m putting in danger through one of my requests and whom I would very much hate to see get hurt’. ” The bastard tilted his head. “Which would you prefer?”

After a few moments spent blinking in surprise, Bail asked, “Is this something you do often? Invade someone’s life asking them to engage in risky activities which you’re unable to do yourself?”

The mercenary was making a careful study of the office ceiling. “Let's just say it's not the first time.”

Laughing, Bail leaned forward and extended a hand for the other man to shake. “I knew I liked you. Would you care to join us for tea?”

The other man’s grip was firm and reassuring. He smiled regretfully. “Unfortunately, I have an important engagement to attend. I appreciate the invitation though, I may take you up on it some other time.”

“Please do. Breha does appreciate the perspectives of people beyond our immediate experience.”

Bastra’s laugh was warm. “You might enjoy meeting the rest of my crew, then.”

Bail showed the mercenary out and settled in to make note of which politicians to ply with luncheon requests.
Obi-Wan crossed the plaza in front of the Organas’ estate to the aircar that had been summoned for him, glad his instincts had proven correct. Bail Organa was an idealist -- an angry and disappointed idealist -- and was willing to help try to preserve what was left of the Republic. The man had a good heart and a strong enough will to hopefully succeed at what Obi-Wan himself couldn't do: long-term observation within the senatorial sphere.

He had the aircar drop him off at a shop near the spaceport market district to pick up a purchase he’d ordered that morning, and opted to walk the rest of the way back through the market. It was a pleasant early-spring afternoon; the air still had a bit of a crisp chill in the shadows but the sun was warm. The lack of panhandlers might have struck him as sinister had he not investigated Breha Organa’s social policies towards addressing the issue of homelessness and mental illness. Coruscant could stand to learn a lot from the young queen.

Less than a block from the spaceport, raised voices poured from one of the shops, and a spike of rage shot down his spine as he recognised one of them. Obi-Wan shifted the box to prop carefully against his hip and pushed through the curtain.

Two spacers had cornered Zohli against the shop counter while the droid manager protested the treatment of a patron. It was difficult to clear the scowl from his face, but he managed.

“Now, what's all this?” he said mildly. The flash of relief in Zoh's green eyes as she clutched her paper-wrapped purchases tighter told him all he needed to know.

One of the spacers, a big human man in a grease-stained coverall, glanced at him. “Nothing to worry you, fancy-pants. We just have some business with the slaver cat, here.”

Someone recognizing Zohli as Zygerrian had been inevitable; it was shocking that it happened on a world as aggressively egalitarian as Alderaan. “Really,” he drawled. “Well! As the captain of our ship, any business you have with my daughter must be discussed with me, first. I trust you gentlebeings have no objections?”

The second spacer, a skinny Twi’lek with a number of scars warping part of her face, stared at him in disbelief. “Are you screwin’ with us?”

“Adoption is a thing, my dear,” Obi-Wan said with a slight bow. “Zoh, did you get the power units or were you waiting?”

The shopkeeper droid piped up, “The young mistress’ purchases are all paid for, sir!” Its voice was a bit shrill from stress, and Obi-Wan spared a moment of sympathy.

“Then it’s time we were going.” He held his hand out and Zohli slid around the baffled spacers to grab it tightly. “I bid you good day.” He wrapped his arm around the girl’s shoulders as they left and tugged on the Force just enough to make them seem unremarkable to any observers. “Stay close, darling. Is that everything we needed?”

She was shaking under his arm but got hers around his waist and hung on tightly. Over the past year she’d had a growth spurt, and the top of her head now just cleared his shoulder, but at the moment she was hunched down as if to avoid further attention. “Uh huh. Everything else is all set.”

“I’m so glad they have a no-weapons ordinance outside the port. Let's get home.”
Pulkka took the box from him as they climbed the *Sunflare*’s ramp, scowling ferociously when she saw Zoh’s pale features. “What happened?”

“A pair of bigots decided to pick on the first Zygerrian they could find.” He handed Zoh’s parcels off to Feid. “Anyone else for tea?”

“Yes, please.”

“Sure.”

Obi-Wan got Zoh seated at the kitchen island as the shakes set in. A lumpy, misshapen blue blanket that had been Feid’s third attempt at knitting lay on the couch; he tucked it around Zohli’s shoulders before getting the water started. He was sitting beside her, rubbing gentle circles into her back, when she whispered, “Did you mean what you said earlier?”

“What, about them being—?”

She shook her head. “About me being your daughter?”

He froze for a moment. It had been a spur of the moment choice, an unlikely facet he’d used to throw the other spacers off guard. “I… did say that, didn’t I? I’m—”

“It’s okay.”

Obi-Wan glanced down to see Zoh gnawing on the side of her thumbnail the way she usually did when nervous.

“I mean, if you don’t really want—”

“Oh, sweetheart.” He wrapped his arms around her, tightly, pressing his face into her hair. “No, it’s…. That’s exactly what I want. I just didn’t want you to feel pressured to make a choice just because of me.”

Zoh wriggled til she could hug him back without losing the blanket. “I’ve been calling you ‘dad’ for a year,” she mumbled into his shoulder.

His breath caught hard and he pressed a kiss to her temple; her right ear flicked against his cheek.

I guess that answers that question.

“Well, now I feel foolish.”

She giggled and burrowed into his arms. “So like… does that mean you guys will stop wondering if I’m staying?”

“Staying?” He leaned back and looked at her. Hiding a grin was difficult, but he managed it somehow.

Zohli squinted at him. “You guys keep wondering if I’m going to leave after I turn thirteen. Ulic told me,” she said when he raised his eyebrows at her. “Today’s my birthday.”

“No!” Obi-Wan clapped a hand to his head. “It surely isn’t! Already?”

Zoh had a pinched look of uncertainty on her face. He turned and called down the corridor, “Feid! Have the final guests arrived yet?”

“Yep!”

Letting out a shriek of joy, Zoh dropped the blanket and dove into Phel’s arms as xe walked in,
wearing a new jacket and a face-splitting grin. Since Hondo’s takeover on Florrum, Phel and Kate had been taking more and more independent work, occasionally with Hondo or Nym but more often on their own. It had been nearly a month since the last time they’d been on the same planet together.

“I think all of us heard that. So are we allowed to say we told you so?” Xe punched Obi-Wan’s shoulder affectionately.

Obi-Wan chuckled and picked the blanket off the floor, folding it and setting it back on the couch. “Oh, alright. Just this once.”

The lounge was crowded with all seven of them crammed in, but they managed. The box Obi-Wan had brought home contained a meiloorun and koja-nut Alderaanian cream cake, which he was relieved to see hadn’t suffered for their earlier misadventure. Phel and Kate had arrived bearing the gift everyone had chipped in for: a full set of proper armour, brand new, tailored to fit, and ready to be painted. Zoh had to drop everything and try it on immediately; Obi-Wan managed to get a couple holopics while she was jumping around testing her range of movement.

Feid had a wicked grin as she presented Zohli with a makeup set. She coached Zohli through a few techniques, but the teen was getting frustrated. Obi-Wan finished his tea and sat down next to them with a grin.

“I think it’s because you’re not used to working with your own reflection. Make me look pretty.”

His co-pilot’s eyes lit with an infernal glee, but he’d been right: having another person to practice on made things easier for Zoh.

When he finally returned to his quarters, Ulic was waiting with a sly grin. “Didn't want my presence to drag the mood down. You look smashing.”

Obi-Wan turned to check his reflection in the mirror. Despite Feid’s ominous giggling, her instructions to Zohli had been sound. He shrugged. “I think I like it. Not enough to want to spend that much time painting my face every day, but it's not a bad look.”

“Dark eyeliner was popular among the Sith in my day. You could bring it back and call it retro.”

“Very retro.” Obi-Wan tugged his boots off and sat down on the bed. Encased in an armoured box on his worktable, a sinister object hummed. The shielding he’d built around it had to be renewed daily, and he settled into the Force to focus on shoring up the defenses. He felt a twinge of regret that he’d had to kill the poor researcher -- the man hadn't even waited for him to speak before lunging with that rudimentary lightsaber. Adas’ holocron was immensely powerful, and he couldn't wait to get the thing off his ship.

“I don't see why we can't just space it.” The holocron, as if sensing his efforts to contain it, seemed to cling where it could, seeking its own way through Obi-Wan’s mental shields. It wanted to be used, remnants of an ancient Sith lord over twenty-seven thousand years dead seeking a route back to existence. Scowling, he pulled on his disgust at its touch, making his shields slick as ice; if anything, the holocron redoubled its efforts.

Ulic snorted. “These things call to the weak-minded. Someone would manage to find it.”

Obi-Wan used the weight of his own presence to stuff the holocron’s toxic miasma back into its shell and smooth over the cracks. The process gave him a headache every time, but the alternative -- leaving it to infect everyone he cared about -- was so much worse. “Dropping it into the Maw might slow them down a bit,” he grumbled while the Sith laughed. “Well, the sooner we get it to
Takodana, the better. Maz will be thrilled with me.”

The spirit perched over his work chair and shrugged. “You said yourself that if anyone might know the best way to contain it, it would be her.”

“Or the Guardians, but they’d thank me even less for bringing something this vile to Jedha.” He finished patching the gaps and flopped back on his bunk with his hands behind his head.

“You're going to wrinkle your nice things.”

“They're already wrinkled. The autovalet will take care of that.”

Ulic snorted. “When I was your age, we didn’t have such newfangled conveniences on our starships-”

“Let me guess: if you wanted a different pair of pants, you had to swap with your brother?” Obi-Wan grinned unrepentantly as the spirit swore at him in good humour.

“Anyway, it's imperative that we keep that holocron out of Sidious' hands, if nothing else. Nadd used that thing’s guidance in his bid to conquer the galaxy, and Sidious doesn't need the additional help.”

“Agreed.” He dragged himself upright and went into the ‘fresher to wash the makeup off.

“Congratulations, by the way,” Ulic said from the other room. “You officially have a family.”

Obi-Wan couldn't help the massive grin that creased his face.

Reformation Year 980.06.12
Kamino

Kamino was easy to dislike. The design sense, intended for beings who saw primarily in the ultraviolet range, could generate a perpetual low-level headache for anyone who existed on a different frequency. Nearly every member of the Cuy'val Dar was on a painkiller prescription.

Then there was the intense speciesism -- and more disturbing, the fact that their scientists genuinely meant well when eagerly offering to ‘improve’ what they considered to be extreme physical defects in anyone who was not Kaminoan. The lighting gives you headaches? We can fix that. You can’t breathe underwater? We can fix that too. How about your cellular degeneration rate? Would you like a full consultation…?

Cort Davin had long since passed from ‘dislike’ to outright antipathy. The Kaminiiise, so knowledgeable about genetics and biology, completely failed to comprehend the most basic and inexplicable aspects of species development. Human infants could be given all the care in the world, but if they didn't get physical contact, they risked weakness and even death. Ko Sai had stared at him blankly when he had insisted on access to the infant creche for all trainers, and when given an explanation, had offered to research a ‘cure’ for future generations (Jango had stepped firmly on that one). Half the trainers had given Cort equally baffled stares -- the majority of them had expressed
indifference toward children, which worried him. Only those who had grown up Mando'ade had followed his instructions without question.

“Look, I might not have kids of my own, but back on the vhett I was one of fifteen. So shut up, get your shirt off, and cuddle the babies.”

One smartass had asked how Jango would feel about infant versions of himself being cradled by the hardest mercenaries in the galaxy. Sikkaah had dragged the wag off for a careful one on one explanation, and nobody had complained since.

The oldest of the clones, the kid Jango had claimed for himself, was three. He was growing up well, but reaching the age where he might begin to notice that his ‘little brothers’ were nearly six Standard in terms of human development. Cort rocked one of the infant clones against his chest, humming softly, and watched the boy pass in the corridor outside. Boba was starting to struggle to keep up with the Null-series clones, and Cort worried about what might happen once they noticed.

He was just about done with his rounds when the man himself showed up, hands in his pockets and looking about as relaxed as Jango ever did.

“Davin.”

“Boss.”

The other man smirked. “None of that osik, it's just us here.”

“And if one of the kids happens by?” He grinned at Jango's eyeroll. The younger man was good at projecting confidence, but quietly suffered his own doubts; Cort considered himself fortunate to be one of the trusted few Jango would relax his guard around.

He set the infant back in its bed and scooped up one who was starting to fuss in its sleep. “You're looking restless, Jag’ika. Think it's time to remind the galaxy again that the name Fett is still terrifying?”

Jango had another little ad in his arms, one scarred finger trapped in a tiny grip. “Just about, yeah. Got something on your mind?”

“Mmhm. Boba.” At Jango's raised eyebrow he clarified, “You should start taking him with you.”

“Three Standard is still a bit young to be on a hunt, Cor’ika.”

He chuckled. “Not too young to learn how it works. Leave him with that fixer friend of yours.”

“She'll spoil him rotten.” But Jango was also chuckling, probably at the mental image.

“Exactly. Look, Boba's going to start noticing his vod'e are growing beyond him. That's going to be a problem. So give him something new to experience. Distract him. Everyone will come out better for it.”

His friend was nodding with a thoughtful frown. “Yeah, that might not be bad. Roz will be over the moons, probably have him cheating at sabacc within a month.”

Laughing, Cort handed his fusser off to one of the caretaker droids for a nappy change. “We'll be doomed, but it'll be worth it.”
Boba loved the Slave I. So much so, he tried to meld with it. The trip wasn’t even that long, but Jango had already needed to fish the boy out of tight spots in the ship’s inner workings three times.

“How’d you even get in there?”

“The door.” Boba pointed to a louvered ventilation duct as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. Jango shook his head and hiked his son up on his back for the climb out of the maintenance well.

“Just because it looks like a door doesn’t mean that’s what it is. Remember, these ships are designed for people my size. So if there’s something that looks like a place to crawl into, think about whether I could get through it first.”

He could hear Boba pouting over his shoulder. “Of course you could get through, you can do anything.”

Oh, childhood hero worship. “I wish I could, ad’ika, but it’s not true. There’s lots of stuff I can’t do.” He let Boba slide off onto the seat he’d rigged with shorter crash webbing. “We’re going to drop out of hyperspace in a few minutes, so if you hang around here, you’ll get to see the station.”

“Hang from what, buir?” Boba was eyeing the curved dome of the cockpit ceiling. Jango laughed.

“It’s something people say. If you ‘hang around’, you’re staying in one place waiting for something,” he explained as he strapped Boba in. His ad had a million questions all piled one atop another, and sometimes it was difficult to keep on-topic.

The hyperspace warning came on, and Boba yelped. Jango dropped into his own seat. “It’s just the computer letting us know we need to return to realspace. Watch what I do.” He hit the button to confirm with the computer -- the alarm and blinking lights on the console stopped -- then reached for the drive control and pushed the handle forward. The blotchy tunnel of hyperspace turned into streaks which resolved into stars, and the bulbous shape of the modified Lucrehulk freighter loomed into view.

He spared a glance to his right: Boba was leaning forward against his restraint straps, mouth open in awe. “What’s that, buir?”

“That’s a station. Your Aunt Roz owns it.”

The Outland’s penthouse suites had been rigged with private docking bays and separate transit cars: Roz knew her clientele and their security needs well. Boba pressed close against the transparisteel to watch the sleepless business of the mercenary port.

“Who are they?”

Jango smiled. “Thousands of people, just like you and me.” He hoisted his son up onto his hip and pointed out important locations, like the vividly lit bazaar levels and the more refined business district. “This is an important place. And every time I leave Kamino, this is the first place I go. Ba’vodu Roz finds work for me to do.”

The doors opened on Jango’s suite and revealed a short, fuchsia Toydarian hovering at eye-level with her arms crossed. Her grumpy expression evaporated at the sight of Boba. “Oh my. Jango, honey, who's this?”
He grinned and turned so that Boba could see her without twisting precariously. “Boba, this is your Aunt Roz. Roz, I'd like you to meet my son.”

A delighted grin spreading across her face, Roz reached out to shake Boba's hand. “Well, isn't this a right pleasure!”

The boy's face lit up and he started barraging both of them with questions. Jango let Boba down and he ran around investigating the apartment.

Roz watched in amusement. “He's high-energy, isn't he?”

Jango dumped their bags by the door and kicked off his boots. “You have no idea. I was wondering if you would mind looking after him while I'm working. Didn't feel right just leaving him behind.”

She cackled. “Oh, honey, you don't even have to ask. It'd be my pleasure.”

From the kitchen, Boba yelped, “Buir! There's a huge bottle in the preserver!”

Roz snapped her fingers, grumbling, “So much for my surprise gift. It's high proof; there’s some chocolate bantha milk in the conservator for him so he’s not disappointed.” She poked Jango's shoulder. “You should have let me know!”

“Woulda ruined the surprise, wouldn't it.”

“Ha! Knew you had company the moment you docked.”

He chuckled and settled in on the couch where he could see most of the suite. “So what was with the sour face when we walked in?”

“I was gonna tell you off for not calling ahead, but stars, Jango, he looks just like you!”

He rolled his eyes as she cackled. “Funny, Roz.”

She perched on the back of the sofa by his shoulder. “So I gotta ask: does Zam know?”

“Oh, not this again, Roz!” The entire time he’d spent working with the Clawdite bounty hunter to locate Komari Vosa for Tyranus, Roz had been trying to set them up, even though Zam had cost him his mentor’s ship. The loss of Jaster’s Legacy still stung.

“I'm just sayin’, settling down would be good for you!” she argued, propping her fists on her hips. “Especially now with a little one--”

“Did you have a job for me or not?” he growled.

Roz huffed and handed him a datapad. “Fine, ya old grump. The latest bounty list. Some of ‘em're no longer valid: Porla the Hutt got whacked and nobody’s bothered to take down the jobs he had posted. Probably because there’s nobody left who knows the passwords,” she muttered. “His whole organisation disappeared overnight.”

“He got whacked?” Jango frowned at the list. The Davine bounty had been tempting him last time, but even Roz hadn't been able to pin the man down. “By whom?”
“Same people who took out Krayn. Davine looks to be one of their agents.”

“You think the hit was retaliation?”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “I got nothing on Red Sun beyond what we already knew. But considering they released every slave both Krayn and Porla owned, I'm guessing they have very particular targets.”

He nodded. “Might be worth keeping tabs on them, anyway. Let's see what else you got.”

Chapter End Notes

For those unfamiliar with Ferus: he's Siri's Legends-canon padawan. I have issues with him, primarily because, thanks to timeline stuff and too many writers muddying the facts, she would have chosen him when he was 16, which we all know means he wouldn't have been in the Temple. Instead of reducing his age, I adjusted his background.

Roz showed Jango the footage from Obi-Wan taking out Needa the last time Jango visited.
Hazard

Chapter Summary

PREVIOUSLY:

In search of an ancient Sith holocron, Qui-Gon and Anakin secretly enlist the aid of Count Dooku, only to discover the holocron missing and the scholar who'd located it dead.

Making use of contacts built through his work with that Lok Revenants, Obi-Wan hands evidence of deep corruption in the Senate -- painstakingly gathered by himself, Qui-Gon, and their Muun contact Kardin Lo -- to Bail Organa in the hopes that it might be put to good use.

Celebrating her thirteenth birthday during their visit to Alderaan, Zohli declares her desire to remain. Obi-Wan formally adopts her.

Meanwhile on Kamino, Cuy'val Dar sergeant Cort Davin suggests that Jango Fett should start taking Boba with him on his trips offworld.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.06.15
Nar Shaddaa

Hunting down Shekkish Vanner had been a chore and a half. It would have been marginally easier without the added complication of the Uvak Mercenaries butting in on things.

“Look, kid, I’m worth more alive than dead, right?” The Houk conman ducked reflexively as a shot scored a divot in the wall they were sheltering behind.

Obi-Wan returned with a couple shots of his own and heard muffled swearing. “Yes. Yes, you are.” He popped the drained charge pack from his left-hand blaster, peeked around the corner, dodged another blaster shot, and threw the pack at an exposed head he could see on the other side of the room. A smirk curled his lip under his helmet when the projectile struck true and the other mercenary fell below the level of the table. “Starting a casino blaster-fight isn’t how I intended to approach you, but it looked like you were about to have trouble.”

“You got a hell of a throw, for a human. I'm guessing you're human under that getup.” The big alien held his hands up. “Give me my blaster back and get me outta here in one piece, I’ll behave and take
my chances with Firketi."

A brief check in the Force told Obi-Wan that the man was being as honest as he ever was -- Garris Shrike had a personal axe to grind with Vanner, while Firketi was a cartel boss with a reputation for being reasonable. Shocking, really. Obi-Wan handed the confiscated weapon back, grip-first. “No funny business, or I’ll cut my losses and leave you cuffed to the bar for our temperamental Corellian friend over there.”

“Whatever happened to common decency?” his target muttered. He joined Obi-Wan in laying down just enough covering fire to dissuade Shrike’s backup from moving.

“Doesn’t exist on Nar Shaddaa.” Obi-Wan opened his comm. “Feid, status?”

“In thirty seconds, get ready to run for the nearest exit.”

He blinked. “You mean the blasted-out window? Feid--”

“A little base-jumping never hurt anyone!” Her wild grin was clear in her voice despite the wind shrieking past her headset.

“I really hope you know what you’re doing.” Obi-Wan turned his external vox back on and got Vanner’s attention. “On my mark, run for the window.”

The bigger man stared at him, looking about as horrified as a Houk could express. “I said, in one piece!”

“Trust me, my people know what they’re doing,” he said with a lot more confidence than he felt.

Deesix’s sudden transmission of, “Go!” was all the warning he got before the Staff Only door on the other side of the room exploded inward. The shriek of laser-fire was overridden by the deeper bark of Dee and Pulkka’s blaster rifles; the droid spared a moment to lob a metallic sphere into the room, which broke open on the floor with a gout of thick greenish smoke. Shrike’s team yelled in dismay and refocused on the new threat. Not waiting to see what happened, Obi-Wan grabbed Vanner’s shoulder and shoved.

“Let’s go!”

The Houk balked at the blasted-out window frame, and Obi-Wan added a bit of Force to his shove and followed him through. The drop was just far enough for their target to yell in fear before landing heavily in the back of Feid’s open speeder. The vehicle rocked from their double impact but she didn’t even wait for them to recover before sending it into a dive.

“I, uh, might have got the attention of some security force or other!” his second-in-command called cheerfully over the wind. In the front passenger seat, Zohli twisted to grin at them, her scaled-down rifle gripped tightly with both hands. “It’s been an interesting day! How about you?”

Obi-Wan levered himself upright using the back of Feid’s seat. “Oh, about the usual! Can you see about losing the heat?” The sirens he’d thought he’d heard earlier were definitely closer.

“Playing bait! If security is following us, they’re not at the casino.”

Vanner was already fumbling with the restraints, looking a bit green around the gills. Despite his species’ reputation for working primarily as muscle, Shekkish Vanner preferred comfort and taking advantage of everyone assuming he was a big, dumb brute. Personally, Obi-Wan thought it was a clever ruse. But a job was a job.
He twisted in his seat and pulled up his helmet’s imaging. A quick flip through to compensate for the smoggy gloom of Nar Shaddaa’s midlevels and some magnification, and he was able to make out the security vehicles closing in on them. He cursed softly. “Nope, you’ll want to lose these ones, it’s more of the Uvaks. Guess they were keeping an eye on you.”

“It’s so nice to have friends in low places. Siddown and strap in before you fall out.” Feid hit something which caused the speeder’s weather canopy to unfurl and close over their heads.

Feid was really starting to hate these assholes. She and Zoh had been on their way out of Minchin’s shop when the skinny, dark-haired Uvak pilot, Toth, had cornered them.

“Feid. Fancy meeting you here.” His smile had held no warmth.

“Fancy, indeed,” she’d replied with an eyeroll and a close mimic of his stuffy accent, stepping aside so he could pass through into the shop. Instead, he’d mirrored her, blocking her path; the brush of Zohli’s hand on her shoulder let her know Bastra’s girl was right behind her and ready.

“We know why your team is here,” Toth had said mildly. “We have our own interests in the target. You’d be best advised to back off.”

“I dunno what you’re talking about, Cavik. Me and the girl here are just doin’ some shopping.”

The human made a rude show of eyeing them. “You don’t appear to be carrying anything.”

Half-hidden behind Feid, Zohli snorted. “You’ve never asked to have something delivered before?”

Feid pressed her lips together against a smirk. Sharp, kid.

Toth sneered at her. “Shush, the grown-ups are talking.”

Zoh punched him right where Bastra had taught her, and Toth folded like a losing sabacc hand, wheezing. Feid whipped the side of her fist into the nerve cluster behind the man’s ear and grabbed Zoh’s hand as Toth dropped to the filthy duracrete. “C’mon, speeder’s this way!”

Ringing Toth’s bell had given them enough time to get their new-used speeder almost to the casino where Bastra had been hoping Vanner would be feeling cooperative, but not quite enough time for a clean-ish getaway.

“What’d you do to piss off Shrike?” she yelled over the scream of the engines and other vehicles’ warning alarms.

Their target had sunk as low in his seat as the restraints would let the big alien go, his knees pressed between his chest and the back of Zoh’s chair. If his species could sweat, he would have been drenched; the man managed a wan smile that bared a row of small, pointed teeth. “Sent ‘em on a wild tooka chase, in exchange for quite a lot of credits. Nothing compared to what Firketi is mad at me for, trust me. This was just for laughs.”

Bastra was twisted around in his seat, watching their pursuers; he chuckled. “I can appreciate that. If it wasn’t for the job--”

“I get it, you got a reputation to maintain.” Vanner gulped and flailed for the grip-bar attached to the
underside of the weather canopy. The interlocked plastoid panels would shrug off most blaster-fire, but not so effectively that Feid was willing to risk them unnecessarily. “Right now I’m kinda glad you guys turned up. If Firketi lets me live, I’ll buy you drinks.”

Bastra had turned off his vox; his next words came through Feid’s earpiece. “I just got word from Phel: the Uvaks have the ship under surveillance. Dee and Pulkka are clear, but they can’t get back to the Sunflare, and we might be in trouble if we try it, too.”

“Do they know about the Veeka?” she murmured.

“Possibly, but even if they don’t, that’s not a skifter I want to play right now. You know the city better than I do; what are our options?”

“Hmm.” Feid twitched the speeder’s controls, throwing it at a downward angle to the right and ploughing through three levels of very displeased Nar Shaddaa traffic. “We need to lose the mynocks first. Spaceport speeder lanes are the best place to blend in, lots of tunnels to break sight lines, and if the Uvaks try anything funny, the traffic security there takes its job seriously.”

“Do it.”

“You got it, boss.”

The stolen maintenance coverall was enough of a disguise that even the spaceport security bought Phel's cover as a tech running standard tests on the system. Having Kate along helped.

Xe adjusted the strength of the carrier signal xe'd hooked into the spaceport's outbound data traffic. The larger data-entity of the spaceport was enough to mask what xe was really doing: altering alert messages about Feid's speeder to match the ident for the Uvak's pursuit vehicle. Bastra had skimmed the other speeder's codes when it got too close, and it gave Phel more than enough to work with.

“Hey you!”

Phel didn't look up. “Busy here, security station's over there if you're lost.” Xe pointed with xir thumb down the access corridor.

The high whine of a blaster charging up brought xir head around. A wiry human man and a pale-green Twi'lek woman in Uvak uniform were coming towards xir with purpose.

“You're Bastra's little pet data monkey, aren't you?” the woman snarled.

“Lady, I dunno what you're talking about.” Phel spared a quick glance to check that the interference had gone through. The Uvaks were now on the security alert for stealing spice from one of the local cartel warehouses. It would take hours to sort it out. “I'm just doin’ my job here--ow!”

The bigger human shoved xir back into the wall; Phel's head hit duracrete hard enough to see stars. “None of that cute shit. I remember you from Corellia.”

Despite the spots in xir vision, Phel protested, “I dunno what you're talking about!”

The Twi'lek woman dug the barrel of her blaster under xir jaw, red eyes narrowed. “No, I remember you, too. It seems we’re in need of a little hostage exchange. You'll do nicely.”
Someone further up the corridor cleared their throat; the three of them looked over to see Pulkka leaning against the wall with her rifle held casually at the ready in one massive fist. “Don’t mind me.”

It was a small distraction, but enough. Phel flexed xir wrist and jabbed the electric probe rigged up xir sleeve into the woman’s side; Kate just outright zapped the human in the ass. Both mercenaries dropped, twitching, and the woman’s blaster clattered from her limp fingers.

Xe grinned. “Thanks, Pulkka.”

The Whiphid matriarch bared her tusks cheerfully. “We all done here?”

A quick check of the spaceport alerts showed security locking down the Uvaks’ hangars. “Yeah, we're done, let's go.”

“What do you mean, ‘we’re done?’ We’re not done, Toth. Your boys fucked up--”

“I said, we’re done.” Cavik glared at Garris Shrike -- his co-leader of the Uvak Mercenaries for going on three years -- and shook his head. “The only person who fucked up today was you.”

Garris’s thick brows pulled down thunderously and he stood, knocking his chair over. “That two-credit bounty hunter made off with Vanner and you might as well have invited him to just walk in--”

Cavik straightened painfully -- the Zabrak woman’s knock to his head had left behind a migraine to remember her by -- and closed the short distance between them. “Shrike, we’re not doing this. You got upset that Vanner pulled one over on you -- which," he raised his voice over Garris’ objections, “I distinctly remember warning you about. And if you hadn’t decided that you really, really wanted to carve our credits -- yes, ours, they came out of the company account -- back out of his hide, over half of the company wouldn’t be in a security lockup right now, under completely falsified charges that Bastra’s people had to make up to get us off their backs!”

Garris snarled; his breath was sour and reeked of the cheap whiskey he’d been drinking at the casino. Cavik snorted the stench from his nose and took a step back. “We’re done, Garris. When you get tired of jumping on every get-rich-quick scheme and throwing petty, unprofessional tantrums when they blow up in your face, you can talk to me again about working together.”

He turned his back on Garris, half-expecting a sucker-punch to the kidneys, and left the lounge. Behind him, Garris belched an ugly laugh.

“You’ll be back. You couldn’t get your little outfit together without my help, remember? You’ll be back!”

Cavik’s teeth ground but he kept going until the ship’s hatch swished closed behind him. It took effort to stop his hands from shaking -- nerves, rage, leftover reaction from being punched-down by a half-pint teenager. It didn’t matter. Shrike’s drunken errors were losing the company a lot of the respect Cavik had worked so hard to earn them.

In a way, he owed Bastra for the wake-up alarm. He also owed the man a swift punch to the jaw.

What remained of the Uvaks were strewn around the hangar in various states of discomfort. The six who’d been with Shrike at the casino were still coughing from whatever foul mixture Bastra’s droid
had seasoned the air with; one of them had a concussion from being hit by a drained power pack, and everyone had superficial scrapes and non-lethal blaster burns.

The fact that Bastra had been aiming for non-lethal shots seared Cavik’s pride. One human against seven seasoned mercs, and even his backup had only fired to keep everyone ducking. It was insulting.

Bella, pale and still a little shaky, looked up from where she was applying a bacta patch to the burn on her side. Bastra’s slicer had a bit of a bite to them after all. “What’s the plan, sir?”

That was a good question. Cavik surveyed the ships docked there. The only ones they could properly claim were his and Bella’s personal cruisers; everything else had been purchased from the collective funds. A clean break couldn’t be tarnished with that sort of grudge.

They’d need to build up again. Maybe as privateers: a stable contract would give them the startup capital to build a new fleet and some steady work. He’d have to ply his contacts, but the last two-and-some years had given them enough to go on.

They could manage.

“Let the others know that we’re leaving. Anyone who’s coming needs to talk to me or you within the hour.” He met her eyes and she nodded, looking grim.

“What about the ones in lockup?”

Cavik turned on his heel and headed for his speeder. “I have the evidence we need to get them out. Get your ship prepped to fly, and we’ll see how much loyalty is worth these days.”

Obi-Wan hadn’t planned on mentioning the Uvaks’ interference when they finally delivered an incredibly cooperative Vanner to Firketi’s tower on Deneba, but Vanner himself mentioned it and suggested the bounty hunter’s team had earned a bonus. Knowing Vanner was probably intending to pull something and come back later to claim Obi-Wan owed him, Obi-Wan had demurred and told the truth: that it was just part of the job.

The Nikto cartel boss had asked him to remain; Obi-Wan, Feid and Deesix found themselves being led to a comfortable meeting room with cushioned chairs and an inviting sideboard. Dee confirmed the refreshments hadn’t been tampered with, and they settled in to wait.

Firketi rejoined them a half hour later. [[I know you turned down a bonus, Captain, but you’ve at least earned something extra for dealing with that.]] He placed a bottle of Corellian brandy on the table between them and took a seat with a wry grin. [[Consider that Vanner won’t be able to claim that on your non-existent tab.]]

Feid raised her eyebrows at him; Obi-Wan tilted his head to the side in response and reached forward to claim the bottle. “You know my tastes, I see.”

[[I like to know who I’m hiring, Captain.]] The cartel boss brushed an imaginary crease from the leg of his expensive suit as he leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. [[In your case, I think you could stand to push your clients a bit more. You’re far too modest, and it’s going to get you taken advantage of someday.]]
Feid chuckled. “Free advice from the head of the Ivory Talon?”

[Oh, it’s not free.] He bared his fangs cheerfully. [I have another job, if you’re interested. Another live take, although if someone put her out of my misery, I wouldn’t drop the reward too much. Likely not as cooperative as Vanner, you’d have to really work for it.]

Obi-Wan made a show of studying the way the green liquor in his glass caught the amber lights in the room. “I’m listening.”

Firketi tapped a button on the table in front of him; the holoprojector in the middle lit up to display a dossier and a cycling series of holoportraits gleaned from security cameras at eye-level. [Sairel Draa. She’s trying to poach my freighter pilots and contract haulers for her own employers, and arranging for them to be attacked if they refuse. One of my best ended up in bacta for a month because of her.] His yellow eyes narrowed at the holo, and a quiet rage crackled against Obi-Wan’s senses. [I have questions for her, but it’s nothing I couldn’t also find out from, say, a data-dump of her ship’s computer logs. You understand?]

From the corner of Obi-Wan’s vision, Feid’s fingers twitched. He nodded slightly: he recognised the name alright. “Is there a time limit on this?”

“Nobata.” Firketi shook his head. [But unlike last time, I don’t have information on her whereabouts. You’ll need to do the legwork yourself.]

“The usual rate applies?”

The Talon boss shrugged. [Normally I would offer a slightly higher fee for the difficulty, but as your second pointed out, advice is rarely free.] He was teasing about Feid’s comment, but also serious. Twenty thousand peggat was still reasonable. Obi-Wan nodded in understanding.

Feid spoke up. “Is there any… preferred condition you’d like her delivered in?”

This time, the bared fangs had a grim cast. [Capable of answering questions, although if you get a good data dump from her systems, I can forgive the loss.]

He received an agreeable nod from Feid and a head-tilt from Dee; Firketi chuckled.

[[You ask the droid’s opinion?]]

Obi-Wan offered a bland smile. “I find its probability calculations to be largely accurate and invaluable in our work.” Trying to explain that the droid had as much say in how much danger Obi-Wan dragged it into as the rest of his crew usually received blank stares and offensive questions; they had long since stopped trying to explain things.

[[I saw the footage from the casino. Where do you get a droid that capable?]]

He chuckled. “You play cards with the right people in the right place.” Obi-Wan drained off his glass and set it on the table with a decisive click. “We accept your terms, Firketi.”

[[Excellent! And maybe someday I can entice you into a game of sabacc, Captain Bastra,]] the other man said with a grin as he shook first Obi-Wan and then Feid’s hands.

“That would be entertaining, although I’m not sure I could afford an ante on your level,” he replied neutrally. It was a bad idea to push the boundary between employer and contract, anyway, particularly when the employer represented a criminal element.
Obi-Wan commed Phel with the new bounty details once they were in the speeder and on their way home. As he signed off, Feid said, “This is the same sleemo cheeka that got us shot at on Bespin.”

“Unless there's another Sairel Draa who has the same working style.”

Dee made a thoughtful noise. “That was almost four years ago?”

“Yeah,” Feid growled. “Booster is still having trouble picking up the pieces after that.”

He blinked. “What, still?”

She shook her head. “You know Booster, he won't take charity from anyone. He's smuggling supplies through blockades right now.”

That was news. “Blockades? Where?”

Feid kept her eyes on the traffic. “The Trade Federation has been tossing their weight around more. Last month they were strong-arming Sharlissia for exclusive access on the Trade Corridor through Kabal. Now it's Gesmar Industrial on Lannik. They had a shipping deal with the Commerce Guild, but the Guild has been raising the shipping rates and Gesmar can’t afford it, so the Trade Federation is trying to buy them out.”

“How do you even block off hyperlane access? That's ridiculous.” He squinted against the wind, bearing Nar Shaddaa's particular perfume of methane, starship fuel, and petrochemical smoke. The air always carried a touch of grittiness that coated the skin after a while.

Dee snorted from the rear seat. “Not every sentient is confident enough to skip the established entry and exit coordinates. Even the Trade Federation doesn't flirt with gravity wells like you do.”

“I keep telling you, flirting puts them off their guard,” Obi-Wan said with a grin. Feid muttered something he couldn't make out over the wind, shaking her head. The droid mimicked the way Obi-Wan rolled his eyes while wearing his helmet, which was frightfully endearing. He chuckled, but it died quickly. “It's all about credits. Last I heard, both the Trade Federation and the Commerce Guild were challenging the Republic’s hyperlane tax rates. If they have exclusive rights over a planet's exports, the export tax is pointless. But import taxes still hit them unless they hold both ends of the line.”

“So they’re trying to build a monopoly,” the droid said.

“Basically. I'm sorry that Booster’s been caught up in that.” He sighed. “Maybe we should pay him a visit anyway, once this job’s done.”

“That’ll be fun,” Feid grinned. “He’ll probably throw a bottle at you. And then ask for your personal hyperspace calculations.”

“He’s welcome to them.” Obi-Wan eyed the approaching spaceport thoughtfully. The air around it was still swarming with flashing security lights from the earlier altercation with the Uvaks. “Will you need help fitting the speeder in once we get back? I need to check in with Maz.”

Shaking her head, Feid guided the speeder past the temporary security checkpoint. “We can sort it out while you talk about evil cubes.”

Obi-Wan had been correct in guessing the old pirate would be less than thrilled with him bringing Adas’ holocron to Takodana, but she’d agreed with Ulic that something like that wouldn’t allow itself to be forgotten.
It also wouldn’t stop at sitting peacefully in a box. Until they could acquire the materials to contain it, Ulic had volunteered to remain behind, in Maz’s secure office, and use what power he had to shield the thing. Acquiring that much solid cortosis plating was expensive; getting a blank kyber crystal to energise the containment field even more so. Obi-Wan knew with absolute certainty that the Jedha Guardians wouldn’t donate a crystal to the cause, and had made use of Maz’s contacts on Christophsis.

It was less than optimal: the holocron would taint the crystal over time and the containment would fail. Maz was probably right in that what they really needed was access to the same Rakata technology that had been used to create the holocron in the first place: nothing else would ever have more than a temporary effect. Given the reports of the last contacts with such places, and the fact that the majority had been sealed by Republic exploration teams for reasons such as cyber-corruption, cognitive subsumption, and artifact retains malicious sentience, Obi-Wan really was not eager to investigate.

Maz assured him that the holocron was, for lack of a better turn of phrase, behaving itself. Ulic wasn’t able to transmit through the comm, but Maz passed on the message that the Sith spirit found the experience less than pleasant and that he hoped Obi-Wan wasn’t doing anything he wouldn’t do.

He wrapped up the call and opened the door from his quarters, to find his way blocked by Zohli. His daughter braced her hands on her hips, just above the blasters Pulkka had given her, and gave him a level stare, her ears swiveled flat. “I want to actually do something this time, At’tha.”

Obi-Wan mimicked Zoh’s pose, tilting his head slightly. “Are you sure about that?”

Her green eyes narrowed. “I’ve been watching and helping for a year--”

“No quite a year.”

“-- whatever, and I know how you like to manage these things. Phel said Draa always has bodyguards, you’ll need more backup to get to her.”

He let the smallest smile leak onto his face. “You think so?”

She nodded firmly. “You’ll need to separate her from her guards somehow. I can help with that.”

Obi-Wan studied Zoh for a long moment; if anything, she merely looked more stubborn, rather than wilting. *Oh, she definitely reminds me of a particular young Jedi initiate I used to see in the mirror.* He grinned and pulled her into a hug she returned tightly. “I think we can work you into the plan. Let's go see what Phel and Kate have dug up.”

#Your teeth are not intended for masticating plastoid, Phel. You are doing me a concern.#

Phel glanced at xir stylus in bemusement. “Sorry, Kate. You know how I get distracted.”

The droid twisted her dome. #Might I recommend a raw tuber instead? You might find more nutritional value.#

Xe pulled a face and tapped in a new command. “Gross, have you tasted a raw one?”
It is doubtful that plastoid is any more flavourful.

“Plastoid doesn't have flavour,” xe muttered absently around the stylus. Finding info on Sairel Draa had been disturbingly easy -- the woman maintained an extensive HoloNet profile which had clearly been painstakingly scrubbed with credits.

But there was always a dust trail. The trick was to not get caught following it.

Most slicers designed scripts that bounced their signature through various exchanges every few seconds. They were good for keeping the slicer’s identity and actual access point hidden, but if a target had their own script set up to notify them when their information was being searched for, they would quickly recognise slicer fingerprints. One night after a run with the Revenants, Phel and Jinkins had sat down with their datapads and a pile of stims, and in fifty-six hours they had crafted an algorithm that slipped into the host databank and passively scanned the base binary code in random clumps before sifting out the keywords and attached files. It demanded an immense amount of storage space, temporarily, but Bastra had kindly used some of the leftover profits from the Krayn takedown to purchase a personal databank from a private host company on Ord Varee.

And then they’d passed out in the corner for a day.

Now Phel sent xir and Jinkins’ creation into the Independent Haulers and Trade Association databank with a focus on scheduling and schedule changes. Headhunting was strongly frowned upon in the Republic and in some systems could be considered criminal; what Draa was doing would never be in the official records in plain speech. She was head of their Acquisitions department, which was vague enough to get a pass, but her travel plans and absences would be in their system somewhere. It was just a matter of following the digital footprints.

Xe yawned and got up to get more caff.

“Come on, honey, hand it over.” Roz gestured patiently until the small human boy gave her the pen he’d filched from her desk, a guilty look pinking his ears. Not many documents required hand-signing, but there were a few legal matters that required a non-digital signature.

The pens were definitely not meant to be used in altering cheap sabacc decks.

“There are ways to cheat in this game, Boba, honey, but changing the suits by hand is too obvious.” Jango’s kid -- she fondly thought of him as her nephew -- had picked up the rules of the game with alacrity and was already trying to bend them. It brought a proud tear to her eye.

“But you won't let me look at the skitter,” he complained with an adorable pout. Roz chuckled and wiped a streak of jelly from his cheek with her napkin.

“That's skifter, honey, and I know you want to take it apart to see how it works. But they're expensive things and won't go back together that easy.” She didn't mention that the ones she had had been confiscated by bouncers in Outland’s casinos. The three-year old wouldn’t understand, anyway.

An alert pinged from her desk, and Roz patted Boba on the head. “Be right back, honey, gotta do adult things.”
The comm was from one of the slicers she kept on payroll. Roz accepted and said, “What’ve you got for me, Ghent?”

“Follow-up on Rugar An-Gen, ma’am.” The human woman sounded smug. “He’s good, but we’re better. He’s run off to Ki’an Tol Station, Aparo sector. An-Gen is using the cover identity ‘Mils Robie’ and is meeting a contact there in six days. I’ll send you the full collation file once Hian finishes compiling.”

Roz grinned. “I knew you kids could do it.” An-Gen had chosen to ditch the cartel he’d worked with for the past decade in favour of a better contract; unfortunately, the Bith slicer had decided to sweeten the deal by swiping a ton of valuable information from the cartel’s databanks. His former boss wanted both it and him back before any copies could be made.

She shook her head as she signed off. You’d think a cartel employee would know better than to double-cross the very deadly people in charge, but someone always seemed to think they were the exception.

Jango was going to have his work cut out for him at Ki’an Tol. Poncy, pretentious place where traders who didn’t have license to operate in the Corporate Sector tried to raise their station. The kid was just gonna love it.

Her pen was missing again. “Boba.”

The holos always misrepresented bounty hunting: the bounty hunters always walked right up to their targets in broad daylight, usually in a disturbingly public place, asked them to surrender, then the exciting firefight would happen where the main character was made to look like the biggest badass this side of the Maw.

Probably because nobody wanted to think about the fact that most hunters took their targets when they were off their guard and least expecting it, in a place where the hunter wouldn’t have to risk the target getting killed. The reality was much more frightening. If the hero was able to defend themself, the bounty hunter had already karked it.

Right on the edge of the Corporate Sector, Ki’an Tol Station was primarily mercantile: plenty of fancy cantinas for lunch meetings between traders, and a broad concourse full of wholesale outlets for people who could afford to drop a year’s standard wages on a single decorative lamp. It was a hunter’s nightmare: bustling and busy, and the only people wearing visible armour were station security. Troublemakers were put on the first shuttle outbound, no exceptions; even a guild license wasn’t accepted. The only area that might be considered ‘lower levels’ was the residential quarter where station staff lived with their families. Nobody could be bribed or paid off to turn a blind eye, and in full beskar’gam, Jango drew too much attention.

“What’s your business here, Mando?”

The security officers were the well-trained types who took their work seriously. Trying not to sigh, Jango replied, “I’m seeking employment.”

One of the officers snorted. The woman who’d accosted him gave him a look-over from head to toe. “You’re not the type our clientele usually hire, Mando. You’d have better luck on Kessel.”
Translation: Get off our station. Jango tilted his head. “Time was, Mandalorian bodyguards were considered the ultimate display of prosperity.”

The third officer shook his head with a disdainful sniff. “Maybe a few centuries ago. You’re just directionless thugs, now.”

*And whose fault was that, Jango?* His fists clenched until the leather creaked. There’d be time for self-recreminations later. “Are you asking me to behave myself, or are you asking me to leave?”

The first officer blinked as if she hadn’t expected the question. “If you have something less… crude to wear, you may seek a client. I doubt you’ll get anywhere, but stranger things have happened.”

Jango squinted at her. She was absolutely serious, and if he hadn’t already had his fill with the wannabe-Corporate Sector nonsense, it would have been funny. “Not with me. Is there a tailor on the station?”

Being measured for clothes -- not something off a rack, but *custom-fitted* -- was one of the more invasive and humiliating experiences of his life. He didn’t *have* to do this. On the other hand, in order to secure An-Gen’s stolen data and bring the man back alive, he didn’t have much choice. If it wasn’t for the availability of armorweave fabric -- at additional cost, of course -- he would have felt more protected walking around arse naked.

At least the tailor droids took his request to be able to conceal his weapons in stride -- they offered a set of clothing they assured him was popular among professional bodyguards in the Corporate Sector. The final product -- a high-collared draped shirt, oddly baggy trousers that hugged his legs from the knee down, boots with a subtle armoured toe cap and instep, and an offensively ostentatious, braid-covered jacket that looked tight but offered surprising flexibility -- was nice enough to not get him looked at twice, and was capable of hiding the majority of his tools. Fashion that pretended to a martial aspect always irritated him. The dark shades of blue and grey kept him from standing out too much, but he still felt vulnerable without his *buy’ce*. It couldn’t be helped: he’d just have to be smart about ducking if it came to that.

He took the mess back to his ship to change.

The next time he passed a clutch of security, they barely gave him a glance. It made casing the promenade significantly easier, despite the crawling feeling between Jango’s shoulderblades.

An-Gen had rented quarters on the station. In theory, that would be the best place to catch him -- finding the room number had been alarmingly easy. In practice, the security around the residential section was if anything higher than around the promenade, and getting an unwilling or unconscious Bith back to the docking ring would be nearly impossible. Security in the docking ring could be diverted, at least. It was looking increasingly like he would have to wait for An-Gen to meet with his contact.

Their meeting place was one of the nicer tapcafes on the third level, well-lit in gold against the neon-tinged shadows of the promenade. They had doormen outside for the sake of appearances; they were not official station security, and carried disruptors instead of blasters. It was all so pretty and *civilised*, it set Jango’s teeth on edge.

He turned a corner, thinking longingly of his helmet and its HoloNet uplink, and froze. *Was that...?*

It was; he was sure of it. As subtly as possible, Jango tailed the man, watching from the corner of his eye as the human made his own exploration of the station’s public spaces. He couldn’t help but feel somewhat envious of the other man’s apparent ease in the upper-class environment and the
understated but definitely expensive robes he wore; if he hadn’t recognized his face, Jango would have thought him another merchant or maybe a lower-level bureaucrat. The subtle gold emblems embroidered into the sleeves of the man’s robe were tickling his memory.

The man paused and answered his comlink without a flicker in his politely mild expression, but Jango got the distinct impression that something had changed. The other hunter turned and retraced his steps smoothly, his silken sleeve brushing Jango’s as he passed.

*You’ve been made, son. What are you going to do about it?* Jango clenched his teeth and turned away from the menu he’d been pretending to study outside one of the overpriced restaurants. Several meters ahead of him, the station lights gleamed like molten gold off the loose fall of copper hair as the man entered one of the access corridors to the residential lifts.

Those corridors were quiet and rarely patrolled: a good place for a confrontation. Biting the inside of his lip, Jango followed, fingers brushing the grip of his concealed blaster.

He neared the gap between two of the lifts, prepared to enter the one that opened at his approach, and pulled a quickstep to the side, pressing the business end of his Westar to the other man’s head.

Jango glared. “You again.”

Bastra smirked. “Hello there.”

“What are you doing here?”

He shrugged as if he didn’t have a blaster pointed at him. “The same as you, I’m guessing. You can put that away, we’re not interested in fighting.”

“We?”

Loose copper hair flowing over his shoulder, Bastra nodded past him at the security camera in the ceiling on the opposite side of the lobby; when Jango squinted at it, the small activity lights beside the lens winked cheekily. “We don’t have much time before security notices the loop. Join me for a drink?”

Jango eyed him with suspicion. Dark makeup lined his eyes like some core-world courtier; together with the scar across his face, it gave him a rakish look. The grey-green silk robes were definitely not cheap, and the wrapped silver tunic underneath hung loose enough to flash a smattering of copper chest hair. The gold accents twanged harder in his memory. “Nice outfit.”

“Thank you. It was a gift from Duchess Kryze,” Bastra said mildly.

New fucking Mandalorians. Of fucking course. He growled, “Get your knife out of my balls and we can talk.”

Bastra’s smirk widened and he raised the inactive vibroblade he’d been holding against the inside of Jango’s thigh. “Just making sure you asked questions first.” The blade disappeared into the folds of the robe; Jango hesitated a moment more before putting his blaster away. He nearly pulled it again when Bastra looped a beringed hand around Jango’s bicep as if being escorted and guided him back the way they’d come.

“Let go,” he hissed quietly through a brittle smile.

“When in the Corporate Sector, follow the rules of civility,” the other chided. His own smile was politician-fake. “There’s a tapcaf with a blind spot. This way.”
They didn't exchange another word until Bastra had them tucked into a corner table with drinks neither of them planned to finish. The other man studied Jango for a moment. “You look incredibly uncomfortable in that getup, you know.”

Jango scowled at him. Bastra winked. “I was only going to say it suits you and you should relax a little.”

“Cute.”

“I try to be.” Bastra mimed sipping his drink and ran his warm, callused right hand over Jango’s where it rested on the table; the hair on the back of Jango’s neck prickled in fury. “Who are you here for?”

Through clenched teeth, Jango gritted, “Rugar An-Gen. You?”

Copper brows arched in surprise. “Sairel Draa. I'm guessing we were hired by the same people.”

It made sense: sending only one hunter after both targets almost guaranteed something would go wrong. With an effort, Jango left his hand where it was under Bastra’s and took just the barest taste from his own glass. ‘Hunters’ code says not to interfere in a fellow hunter’s contract.”

Sharp blue eyes glittered at him in the dim lighting. “I’m not suggesting interference, I’m suggesting cooperation. We have a plan in the works. As it is, it stands to cause problems for you, but it can be modified.”

“I suppose you’d want credit on my take.”

“Would you want credit on mine?”

Jango snorted; Bastra’s eyebrow arched and he glanced away. “Then you know my answer.”

Jango followed Bastra’s gaze to a pair of traders in expensive robes with a droid-- no. That was Bastra’s B1 unit. The Whiphid loomed aggressively at a hawker who got too close to her Zygerrian companion, and Jango felt his eyebrows spike his hairline. “You're joking.”

“The plan was for my daughter to confront our target and draw most of her bodyguards away so the rest of us could apprehend her with minimal conflict. We can work you into the plan; if Zoh goes after your target instead, it will give ours incentive to keep him close.” Bastra’s expression was playful, but his tone held something closer to a request for consensus.

Jango’s eyes dropped to what had, at first glance, appeared to be a tattoo starting behind Bastra’s left ear and disappearing beneath the collar of his green silk robe. At close range, it was clearly makeup, and he could see the glued-on patch of a subvocal mic beneath a streak of dark blue. The other man gave a funny smile and tapped behind his left ear to indicate the presence of a comm unit. “I have a spare if you want in.”

“You carry a spare microcomm set? Those aren’t cheap.”

“They’re more expensive if they get removed during a fight,” Bastra replied. Above the teasing smile his eyes were hard. “I take the lives of my crew seriously.”

As it should be. The repeated interference in his work was really getting under Jango’s skin, but he could respect the man for that, and for his willingness to cooperate. “How much help would you want dealing with your target, once you get them isolated?”
“Hopefully none. There are several of us, and only one of you. If you need help dealing with An-Gen, just say so.” That damned smirk was back. “No charge.”

Jango squinted at Bastra over his glass, barely letting the sharp liquid touch his lips. His original plan was in tatters, no thanks to station security, and he could work around that, but... having backup would be nice. Particularly backup who had a slicer monitoring the security systems. Especially in this stuffy, self-absorbed place where people who couldn’t afford the rents were shipped off on the first coreward shuttle without recourse.

“Alright, Bastra.” He leveled a finger at the other man. “Just once.”

Bastra replaced his right hand with his left, slipping the small case of a microcomm into his palm. “As needed. I’ll want that back, if possible.”

As soon as the earpiece was in, voices came through.

“...the Bith?” said a dreadfully young voice, slightly distorted from being subvocalised. Jango mentally reviewed the dossier Roz had put together on the group after the incident on Outland. Bastra’s girl had been underage at the time, and unidentified.

“Right,” Bastra said. “Everything else stays the same. How are you feeling about it, sweetheart?”

Across the table, Bastra gave him a flirtatious grin. Jango scowled and tucked the throat mic under the edge of his collar.

There was a long pause. Jango spared a glance in the direction of the other group on the other side of the promenade; the Whiphid briefly rested a hand on the girl’s shoulder. She took a steadying breath. “I can do this.”

“Remember if things go bad, we can get you out,” another voice said. It lacked the depth of a Whiphid's throat; Jango guessed that would be Feid or Phel.

“I know.” Another quiet sigh.

Jango snuck a glance at Bastra; the man had a fond smile that softened his features as he listened to his adopted kid prepare for her first real work.

Bastra caught him looking and the wicked grin returned. “Let’s take a walk.”

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Pretending to be a cartel agent was easy. Zohli hated that it was easy: it made her recall every lesson in comportment she’d had to learn on Zygerria, her parents’ disappointment in her posture and lack of grace.

At’tha had been gentle about it and had hugged her when the memories became too much. “Don’t think of it as applying those lessons to yourself, Zoh. Think of it as pretending to be your teachers. It’s a mask, not the real you.”

She raised her chin a fraction higher and reminded herself that even though they had offered to change the plan, she had insisted she could handle it.

She could. She could do this.
Pulkka and Deesix were right behind her, acting as personal bodyguards. At’tha and Feid had altered some of his nice things from Mandalore into a beautiful set of robes that made Zohli feel like a princess in a fable, wrapped in sea-green and deep blue silk. With the wide belt hugging her securely around the ribs, it was easy to stand with her shoulders back. She was nearly her full height now, and with a bit of pale setting powder around her eyes and the tips of her ears, she looked a decade older.

She could do this.

At’tha and the other bounty hunter, Fett, were at a table near the entrance, pretending to play a game involving rectangular holographic tiles. Fett’s expression might have been set in stone; At’tha was saying something with that teasing look on his face that he used when he was flirting to throw someone off-guard. Poor Fett. Zohli hid a smile behind her fan as she passed their table, biting her lip until the grin leveled out again.

Sairel Draa was a willowy humanoid woman who might have been pretty without that expression of regal disdain she regarded everyone with; she was dressed in a massive, fluffy, iridescent gown that puffed and trailed in the slightest air current. It looked so ridiculous it must have cost a fortune. Rugar An-Gen was a portly Bith -- well, portly for a Bith -- dressed more sedately, with the attitude of someone who thought he knew better than everyone else. Their bodyguards -- six of them -- were mostly Niktos picked for their intimidating horns and towering physiques. There was one human who was dressed like a common aide, and the sixth was a Twi’lek woman whose decorative costume hid armour and a number of weapons, according to Fett.

Zohli made a show of circling the room once before approaching their table. The four Niktos loomed over her, nearly twice her height, and she swallowed.

“You can do this, sweetheart,” At’tha whispered in her ear.

It’s a mask. Pretend to be your parents. What would Mother have done? Zohli let her chin tick upwards another notch and glared down her nose at the Bith slicer, ignoring the bodyguards.

“An-Gen. We have a lot to talk about, young man.” She channeled every note of her mother’s lofty, proprietary tone into it and fluttered her fan in front of her chest, deliberately keeping her eyes from straying over to Draa. “We’re so very disappointed that you chose to betray our trust. Were we not paying you well enough already?”

The slicer blanched. “I--”

“And you are?” Draa interrupted with a sneer.

“Oh!” Zohli gave her the sweetest, fakest smile she could manage. “Arunel Tan. Ivory Talon. You must be Miss Draa.” The muscles in the older woman’s jaw clenched although her expression didn’t change. “I’m afraid we can’t simply let you take him, my dear. Dear Rugar has access to far too much sensitive data for us to let him go so easily. I’m sure you understand.”

It took every bit of Zohli’s self-control to maintain her careless expression. Draa’s smile showed teeth. “Far too well, my dear. How much would you estimate his information is worth?”

“Keep staring at her, trust Dee and Pulkka,” At’tha whispered. It sounded like he and Fett were moving.

“Oh,” Zohli bared her canines, tipped with fake gold caps. “His life, most assuredly.” She snapped her fan closed; four sedative-tipped needles hidden inside the decorative panels shot out and speared the Bith in the chest. The sedative wouldn’t knock him out, but it would slow him down. He screeched,
a high-pitched sound that had everyone except the one human bodyguard wincing in pain.

Then Pulkka’s arm swept her back out of the way of a nasty vibroblade one of the Nikto guards had pulled.

Around the room, patrons shrieked and ducked for cover.

Temporarily covered by the Whiphid matriarch’s armoured bulk, Zoh pulled her disruptor from its concealment in the front of her wide belt. “Well, we got their attention,” she hissed into the comm. “Now what?”

Hunkered down in an access tube with a series of interlinked datapads plugged into a port in the wall, Phel squinted at the multiple holocam feeds. Draa and An-Gen were being pushed back by their human guard and one of the Niktos, leaving three Nikto bruisers and what Fett had identified as a professional assassin facing Pulkka, Dee, and Zohli. An-Gen was starting to stumble as he tried to dislodge the needles.

Pulkka, playing up the Enraged Whiphid act, bellowed and scooped the guard who’d swung at Zoh into a sleeper hold. Muscles bulged under her robe as she squeezed. The blade dropped from his hand and he flailed in panic.


“On it.”

One feed showed Draa and her closest two guards flinching from a sudden stun shot that caught their assassin in the back. The Twi’lek woman slumped over a chair and rolled limply to the floor, and one of the Nikto guards yelled for the others to get Draa out.

“Good shot, boss.”

Another camera angle showed Bastra, disruptor hidden away in his robe again, hiding around the curve of the bar as Draa’s guards split up. Two of them started pushing Draa and An-Gen toward the exit; the remaining two had their blasters out and laying down suppression fire. Shots plinked harmlessly off Deesix’s carapace as the droid raised its left arm; a pair of sleeper darts from Bastra’s borrowed vambrace took one of the guards down; the other dropped to Zoh’s disruptor shot under Pulkka’s arm.

Bastra was already moving; he did something that made his appearance blur and vanish as he vaulted the bar and followed their targets out.

Station security were quick to respond to the bartender’s alert, storming up the corridor on the left. Obi-Wan ducked and rolled to the far side of the walkway, pulling the Force around him like a cloak. Draa, An-Gen, and their remaining two bodyguards hurried the opposite direction.
“They’re moving, Phel.”

“Got them heading toward service lift Resh-nine. An-Gen is slowing them down.”

Jango and Feid’s voices on the line confirmed they were en route to intercept. Obi-Wan ducked into the closest lift lobby just as Phel whispered, “Confirming they’re heading to the docking bay, but I think I’ve been spotted in the system. Gotta move, sorry.”

“Go deal with An-Gen’s quarters, Phel, we’ve got this.” Leaning back against the wall, Obi-Wan heaved a couple breaths and pulled out an elastic to pull his hair back out of the way. “Pulkka, status?”

“Security’s questioning Zohli. She’s a sobbing mess, it’s beautiful. They don’t know what to do.”

“Excellent. Keep us informed if they don’t fall for it.”

The lift door hissed open on the sounds of a fight further down. Obi-Wan pulled his disruptor and broke into a run.

As soon as Bastra had started circling the bar, Jango had gone to meet Feid at the docking ring. The team's slicer had whispered the location of Draa's ship in their ears, and by the time their targets were heading for the lifts, the two of them were already holed up and waiting.

The golden-skinned Zabrak woman squinted at him. “You better behave yourself, Fett.”

He bristled. “I'm not the one you ought to be worrying about. What's up with your boss?”

She shrugged. “He's just like that. Don't take it personally.”

That made him scowl, although he couldn't say why. He didn't have time to say more as the lift opened, revealing Sairel Draa cowering behind the remaining Nikto guard, who had a proper blaster in hand, followed by the human guard who was supporting a sagging Rugar An-Gen over his shoulder.

Jango’s stun shot caught the Nikto center mass and dropped him in a pile of ugly; Feid’s shot sent the human and Bith sprawling into the wall. Composure shattered, Draa shrieked and fled down the docking ring. Jango was about to follow when Feid caught his shoulder. “The boss has her. Let's get your prize trussed up and gone before Security gets here.”

Bastra came sauntering cheerfully up the corridor as they were finishing up, his unconscious target draped over his shoulders like she weighed nothing. “Bag please, Feid.”

The front of his loose shirt gaped as he lowered Draa to the floor, revealing freckled collarbones along with the chest hair. Jango coughed and turned back to verifying his target’s identity. A whistle echoed down the corridor, and he glanced up to see a golden-yellow astromech droid bumbling up the corridor. “That yours?”

“Kate. Find anything?” Bastra seemed to understand what the droid whistled back at him. “Good to hear. Draa's ship is through the gate here. Would you see if you can access the computer systems?” He finished stuffing Draa's ridiculous fluffy gown into the containment bag and caught Jango's eye.
“Phel got some things out of An-Gen's quarters for you.”

Giving the other man a narrow glare, Jango asked, “Sure they didn't make a copy for themself?”

The Zabrak woman gave him a disgusted look. “What end would that serve, Fett? We're being paid by Talon, too.”

Giving him a considering look, Bastra just shook his head. “You really don’t trust easily, do you.”

Jango put the microcomm back in its case and handed it over. “Hard lessons. You trust too lightly.”

The other man’s eyes went flinty for just a moment. “I never do anything lightly, Fett.”

“Yeah?” He snorted. “Coulda fooled me.”

The smirk came back and he hoisted Draa up onto his shoulder. “That’s the point.”

The lift opened to reveal the team’s skinny, gap-toothed human slicer. They offered Jango a bag weighed down with datadisks. “That’s everything I could find. Need a hand moving him?”

Jango hit the control to activate the containment bag’s repulsorlift. “Nope.” He pursed his lips and nodded reluctantly with a sigh. “I appreciate it.” He glanced at Bastra, who for once wasn’t grinning at him. “You saved me some trouble.”

“N’entye, Vhett,” Bastra said quietly. He waved the slicer through into Draa’s hangar. “It’s just a job.”

Security had determined that Zohli hadn’t started the fight -- the tiny air-gun needles from her fan weren’t visible at all in the holocam footage -- and had escorted her, Pulkka and Dee back to their hangar. Zoh had left the tears turned on the whole time, wailing about being attacked unjustly.

It was fortunate none of the guards were from a species with a keen scent of smell; Pulkka could scent Zoh’s deception on her. She reassured the officers that they would be fine and that they need not linger for the lady’s benefit. As soon as they departed, Zoh collapsed on the couch in giggles, hysterical from adrenaline and relief. When the others finally got back after copying Draa’s computer system, the girl flung herself off the ramp into Bastra’s arms with a cheer. He caught her, grinning, and swung her around.

“You did such a good job, sweetheart!” He planted a kiss on her cheek.

Pulkka grinned and shook her head at them as she helped haul the incapacitated target into the ship. “She’ll be wired all night.”

“Oh, I know.” Bastra hugged Zohli tightly. She laughed and hugged him back, burying her face in the shoulder of his robe.

Only Pulkka had been aware of how truly concerned for the girl’s safety Bastra had been. He’d put a confident face on for Zohli’s sake, but the parental worry had been a perpetual cloud for hours.

It made Pulkka smile at how close their family had grown.
Jango bent to catch his son as the three-year old barreled into his legs, forcing a smile.

“Buir! You’re home!”

“That’s right, ad’ika. Look at this; I got you something.” He pulled a box out of his pocket. “I need to have a word with Auntie Roz, Boba. You go open that.”

Boba tugged at the sides of the box, frowning. “How?”

Jango’s grin became real for a moment and he winked conspiratorially. “There’s a trick to it. See if you can figure it out without my help.” The boy pouted for a moment but started prodding at the different coloured fibreplast panels on the sides. Jango’s smile faded as he turned and headed for the apartment’s kitchen, where Roz was seated at the table working.

She glanced up and frowned at him. “I’ve seen happier faces over a losing hand of sabacc, honey. What happened?”

He sat down heavily. The chairs turned on their mounts, and he idly rocked from side to side, burning off some extra energy. After a moment of tense silence, which he spent staring at the polished surface of the table and trying to reorganize his thoughts, Roz asked, “You did get him, didn’t you? Or is my network wrong?”

“Oh. Yeah,” he said dismissively. “Bastra was there.”


Jango explained what had happened. From the living room, he heard Boba’s triumphant cheer as the boy got the puzzle box open; a moment later his son ran in, waving the pair of fibreplast snubfighters Jango had hidden inside.

“Auntie Roz! Look what buir got me!” He pushed a button on the bottom of one and it produced a credible impression of an active sublight engine.

Roz chuckled. “That’s great, honey! What do you say to your buir?” She mispronounced the word, but she was trying.

The little boy’s face screwed up for a moment in concentration before he said carefully, “Ni gedeteya par dinui, buir?”

Jango’s eyebrows went up in surprise. Roz bared her tusks at him in amusement. “I found an educational holoseries called Verd’ika on one of the Keldabe public access channels. He’s been watching it every day.”

He grinned, delighted. “That’s very well done, Bob’ika. Ni ijaat dinui. Have you learned ijaat yet?”

“Oh.” His little face lit up and Jango felt the stress of the job start to melt. “Honor?”

“That’s right. It’s my honor to give you the present.”

Boba hugged him and ran back out into the living room, waving the toy ships in a pretend dogfight.
Jango felt a lopsided grin settle on his face and didn’t bother to hide it as he turned back to Roz. The Toydarian fixer was smiling fondly.

“He’s a good kid, Jango.”

“He really is.”

“So Bastra was after Draa for Ivory Talon, huh?” She pulled up the file she’d built on the man and added a note. “Interesting way of handling it; definitely not your style, which helped you, believe it or not. Officially, Ki’an Tol claims it was a minor disagreement that escalated temporarily. Unofficially, they’ve been trying to figure out who was behind it because a lot of their station holocams are showing absolutely nothing from key locations.”

Jango nodded. “Their slicer, with an astromech for support.”

“Someone contacted me asking for information on your current contract. Of course I said I have a confidentiality agreement,” she added with a grin. “You should work with this kid more often.”

He bristled, lip pulling back in a snarl. “Absolutely not.”

Roz arched a brow at him. “Hmm. And why not?”

“He’s too flashy. It’s unprofessional. Inefficient.” Unbidden, Jango remembered the man’s ridiculous outfit, copper hair hanging loose past his shoulders. “He treats it like some sort of… espionage game, instead of a serious career.”

His friend hummed, poking information he couldn’t read from his angle. “Not every bounty hunter goes straight for the throat, honey. Everyone has their strengths, you know. If he used to be a Jedi, he’ll be accustomed to using people’s expectations against them. Nobody from Ki’an Tol has asked for information on Bastra or any of his crew: despite the mess they made, they went unnoticed.” She looked at him, her expression deceptively mild. “You’re blushing, honey.”

“Humans can blush for more than one reason, you know,” he said, glaring.

“Uh huh.” She typed something else and paused. “So by human standards, is he cute?”

Jango pushed back from the table, rolling his eyes in disgust. “You’re so predictable sometimes, Roz. I’m going to go spend some time with my boy.”

Roz watched him go with a knowing little smirk. “You do that, honey.”

Chapter End Notes

I regret nothing.
heck
Previously:

The *Sunflare* crew accepts a bounty contract from and Ivory Talon cartel boss, only to encounter Jango Fett running a parallel job. They team up to complete their missions, despite Fett's immense reluctance.

At the Corellian Temple, Jedi Master Renni Kerr proposes to the Green Council an investigation into some of the Coruscant Temple's more distressing policies.

On Serenno, Count Dooku struggles to balance his work with the added strain of rehabilitating a weakened Xanatos duCrion.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcum*, sanerontheinside, jynx*, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Reformation Year 980.06.30_
Takodana

“Jab.”

*Thmp*

“Cross.”

*Thock*

“Hook.”

*Smack*

“Front kick.”

*Crack!

“Good! Again. Jab.”

Feid tapped with the pads, testing the impact of Zohli’s wrapped fists against the leatherette surface. The teen was improving, but still putting too much stock in power and not enough in technique. “Get your arm all the way out, you have a lot more range than you think you do. Leaving your elbow bent
is sacrificing energy. You want to push it forward, through the target. Again, but slow. Twenty percent power, focus on your movements."

On their last visit to Takodana, Pulkka had found a neat trail leading from the lake into the surrounding trees; it ended in a pleasant clearing that was mostly flat with few rocks or tree roots, and Bastra had immediately proposed using it for training. There was more room than the Sunflare’s hold offered, and the hum of his lightsabers was muffled by the dense greenery. Phel had declined the offer to teach xir to use one of the blades, even though it was merely an extension of the exercises xe and Bastra already did deflecting training remote shots. With Phel and Kate off on a job, Bastra currently occupied, and Pulkka and Deesix working on an upgrade for the ship, it was just Feid and Zohli out circling each other in the humidity.

One of Zoh’s kicks hooked the pad from Feid's hand, sending it flying off into the underbrush. They shared a laugh as she went to fetch it. “You need to point your toes more,” Feid called after her.

“Boots don't bend that way!”

“True: they don't.” Feid passed over a bottle of water as the Zygerrian girl returned. “But they do bend enough that you get the benefit. Save the spike kicks for when you're aiming at the squishy bits.”

Zoh giggled. “Like Toth’s.”

“Exactly.”

They were running through elbow strike drills when a voice called, “Well, here you are, but where’s your boss?”

Feid signaled a pause and turned to see a big Feeorin mercenary coming down the path from the lake. “Hey, Nym.”

“Nym!” Zoh ran over to hug the man, which he tolerated for a moment.

“Hey, princess. Where's your dad?”

She let go and pointed back towards Maz's castle. “He's been helping Maz with a project.”

At Nym's curious glance, Feid shrugged. “It's a Force user thing. You'd have better luck telling the bartender you're looking for him.”

He nodded agreeably, but his eyes lingered a bit. “You make sweaty workout gear look good, you know?”

She rolled her eyes. “Already told you my type is no, Nym.”

He grinned easily, “Can't blame a guy for trying, can ya?”

Feid knelt to unstrap the shin guards from her legs. She didn’t bother to look at him but kept her tone mild. “Actually, I can, cus I already told you after that business on Llanic that I'm not looking, but you keep trying anyway. Something wrong with your ears?”

He took a step back with his hands up in surrender, but the twitching of his head-tendrils indicated he was having fun. Feid snorted and contemplated shooting him.

“Don't have to get snappish. Say hi to the rest of the team for me.”
He left and Feid wrapped an arm around Zohli's shoulders. “Any guy acts like that, he's showing he
doesn't respect your ‘no’. Got it?”

The girl frowned and wiped sweat from the end of her nose. “I thought he was just being friendly.”

“That's the trap.” Feid tweaked the tip of Zoh’s ear as she let go and crouched to stuff their gear back
in its bag. “They come on all friendly so you look like the mean one when you say no. Was I
‘snappish’ with him?”

“No?”

“But he said I was, to make anyone listening think I was being unreasonable.” She smirked but there
was no humour in it. “Nym's an okay guy, but he's also an asshole. I'm too old to give a damn what
guys like him think of me, but you're still young enough where their opinion feels important. Stick to
your ‘no’ and never let someone convince you to change it.”

The girl frowned, but Feid hoped that some of the lesson would stick. It was a painful one to learn on
your own.

Rebuilding the shielding around Adas’ holocron was difficult. The cursed thing fought him with
every layer, even with Ulic’s help.

“Does he ever shut up?” Obi-Wan asked in irritation. He had a headache developing from trying to
ignore the insidious whispering. What remained of Adas promised power, the power to reveal his
enemies, to reshape the galaxy if he wished.

All it wanted was for Obi-Wan to be its tool, carrying out Adas’ twenty-eight thousand year-old
decrees.

“He really likes to listen to himself talk,” Ulic grumbled. “Four millennia of isolation at the bottom of
an ocean will do that to ya.” The spirit couldn't do much more than maintain the joins between the
shielding layers while Obi-Wan focused on sealing them together, but it was a welcome assistance.

“Does he even know you're here?”

Ulic shook his head. “My mind doesn't exist on the same level in the Force that yours does. He just
knows there's someone sensitive in the area.”

The voice lost strength with every layer they applied, fading to nothing. Obi-Wan sat back and
wiped cold sweat from his brow. Everything in Maz’s office was Maz-sized, and the guest ‘chair’
he’d borrowed was a comfortable cushion on the floor. “Without the limitations of a physical brain,
how does a spirit -- or whatever it is in a holocron -- go senile?”

Ulic chuckled and stretched out a handsbreadth above the woven rug. It looked awkward with the
armour and robes he always appeared to be wearing. “Sith essence doesn't adapt or change the way
even a spirit might. It's a piece of Adas, but unlike something like me, it's been limited by what it is.
Spend long enough stewing in your own memories and thoughts, eventually it becomes your entire
world.”

“‘Limited by what it is?’” Obi-Wan pulled his jacket back on against the lingering chill of rebuilding
the shields. The work had sapped even the mid-afternoon air of its warmth and left a lingering whiff of something pungent and not entirely pleasant.

“Gods, I have missed having you around!” Ulic said with a grin. “Please tell me you’ve had luck getting something from Christophsis.”

“Next week.”

“Brilliant, can’t wait. To answer your question, when a Sith intentionally binds part of their spirit to an object, they’re seeking a form of immortality. But it’s immortality for who they are in that moment. An immutable copy, if that makes any sense.”

Obi-Wan had to admit he’d missed Ulic’s often acerbic company, as well. His crew -- his family -- were wonderful, but they didn't understand the nuances of the Force and what it meant to be attuned. “So… more like a monument? Carved in stone and unchanging.”

“But still eroded by time, if left untended.” Ulic shrugged awkwardly with his arms folded under his head. “Adas has lost his edge; all he is now is annoying. But still dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Is he of any use to us at all? I almost feel bad for him -- what's left of him.”

Ulic snorted. “Don't. He’d just try to use you.”

Obi-Wan grinned at him, teasing. “Like you aren't?”

“Hey.” The spirit aimed a translucent finger at him. “There is a difference between exploiting someone, and having common goals. But… you could talk to him about what things were like in the bad old days when the Rakata were running things. Or about himself, I bet he’d love that. He was the first Sith’ari, and anyone who claims that title has an ego the size of Yavin.”

Frowning, Obi-Wan eyed Ulic carefully, parsing the unfamiliar term from what he knew of the language. “High… high lord? Overlord?”

“It’s….” Ulic gestured in the air over his head. “It’s like, the greatest of Sith. Someone who embodies the ultimate ideal and has earned the right to command the--” He circled his hand, searching for an accurate definition. “The whole thing. The culture, the philosophy.” He snickered. “Of course, the title is always assumed by the person, never granted. It's the peak of hubris.”

“Well, it's the height of something. How did Adas claim the title?”

“He invented it.” Ulic sat up and patted the sealed durasteel box containing the holocron. “You can ask him for the details, if you want. I rather think he did deserve it -- he invented a lot of what later generations took for absolute, and did rightly claim the role of King of Korriban. There hasn't been another worthy of the title since then, although there have been several who claimed the title.” He snorted. “Because there's a prophecy about it.”

Obi-Wan groaned. “Not another one!”

Ulic laughed. “Prophecies are common as droids, you can't turn around without tripping over one. This one is pretty specific, though. The Sith’ari is supposed to both lead and destroy the Sith, which will make the Sith stronger than ever. It's generally accepted that Bane fulfilled it, but it depends heavily on some factors that seem faulty to me.”

“I sense a rant coming.”
The spirit held up a hand with his thumb and forefinger a millimetre apart. “Maybe a small one.” He pulled a face. “Bane definitely destroyed the Sith and rebuilt them. But whether they’re stronger? True, there’s no huge, galaxy-spanning competition since it’s just master and apprentice, and they’re better able to hide close to the Jedi. But Bane’s theory was that, with fewer practitioners, the Dark side would become concentrated in the only remaining Sith.”

His eye was twitching; Obi-Wan rubbed at his cheek. “That's not how the Force works.”

“Exactly. That's my main problem with it. What's meant by stronger is up for debate, and the official claim doesn’t hold up well to scrutiny. They can’t even claim the inconsistency is due to Force theory of the times, because that wasn’t part of it.”

“Except that they've worked their way into the Republic's government somewhere, and as such can influence galactic politics. That sounds pretty strong to me,” Obi-Wan said with a touch of bitterness. He'd spent so much effort digging through the finances of the Trade Federation and its allies and kept meeting dead ends -- occasionally literal ones. With any luck Bail would turn up something with his eyes in the Senate.

Whatever Ulic had been about to say was interrupted by a quick, coded knock at the door before Maz poked her head in. “If you're done messing with the evil box, I need my office back.”

“Of course, Maz. Sorry.” Obi-Wan picked himself up and shifted the durasteel case back to its unobtrusive hiding place under a stack of flimsi. Ulic faded to invisibility before they left, but Obi-Wan could feel him clinging close at his shoulder on their way down the lift.

They have power, sure, the spirit muttered, but is that strength?

You're saying there's a difference.

If you have to hide and use manipulation to further your ends, it's clever and effective, sure. But not strong in the way Sith value strength.

The lift opened and Ulic whispered, We can pick this up later. You have company.

Obi-Wan had spotted the big Feeorin chatting up the bartender immediately. With a grin, he picked his way through the crowd and hitched up beside Nym. “A bit far afield for you, isn't this? I thought you were working Bothawui.”

“Bastra!” Nym’s cybernetic left hand came down between his shoulder-blades hard enough to make him wheeze. “Feid sent me in here for ya. I got some juicy news, wanna swap stories?”

Intel for intel, the best sort of trade. Obi-Wan nodded in thanks to the bartender as a glass of his usual landed in front of him. “Let’s find someplace a little more comfortable to hole up.”

Nym tsked. “You know I don't play that way, kid.” He followed Obi-Wan towards one of the quieter tables in the back and gave a suggestive eyebrow-waggle as he hooked the chair out to sit backwards. “Now, if Feid had made that suggestion….”

Shaking his head, Obi-Wan said, “It's not my business how my crew manage their personal lives. That's between you and her.” He’d once asked Feid if she wanted him to tell Nym to back off; she’d declined and said that being defended wouldn't allow her to find out who the real problems were. He was still prepared to defend her, but only at Feid's explicit request. He sat the normal way, in a comfortable slump with one ankle resting across his knee.

The pirate shrugged. “Saw your girl. How old is she now?”
“Thirteen.”

Nym offered a rueful grin. “If you’d asked me two years ago, I wouldn't have believed she could survive this life.”

“Two years ago, you didn't.” Obi-Wan arched a sarcastic eyebrow at him. Nym had done his best to talk Obi-Wan out of taking Zohli on.

“And now she looks like she could happily pull the ears off a Gundark. You're letting her in on stuff now?” At Obi-Wan’s cheerful nod, Nym chuckled. “How are you gonna manage when she insists on solo work?”

“Hopefully by then she'll have enough experience to know what she’s doing.” He sipped his drink. “So, what stories do you have to share?”

“You know SoroSuub, yeah?”

Obi-Wan frowned. “Sullust, makes up more than fifty percent of the planetary economy, employs seventy percent of the local labor.”

“Well.” Nym eyed him from under his brows. “The Commerce Guild has been getting buddy-buddy with their management. Mind, I wasn't told that: I got a huge request for guns from a group calling themselves freedom fighters. Whole swathes of the lower labor force are being encouraged into longer hours and riskier work, corners are being cut and people are being killed in preventable accidents. Including--” he paused for a drink-- “one of their better managers. Who has since been happily replaced with someone who departed the Guild under questionable circumstances. The fighters want things back the way they were, but now SoroSuub has instated a private security force made of B1s. Thought that might be something you'd want to look into.”

That painted an ugly picture. SoroSuub held a lot of sway with the Sullustan government -- anyone working for the company could practically get away with murder already. There were plenty of misconduct cover-up accusations that always somehow turned around and discredited the whistle-blowers. If the Commerce Guild was angling to take over somehow, they'd effectively own the entire planet.

There wasn’t much Obi-Wan could personally do about it, but it was definitely a puzzle piece that hadn’t previously turned up in his research. Either someone was working independently from Sidious’ bankrolling, or they were being exceptionally careful not to leave footprints.

Nym was looking at him expectantly; Obi-Wan nodded and tapped the rim of his glass to Nym’s. “The Trade Federation is dumping funds into the accounts of the Quarren Isolation League. They're based on Pammant, which has a notable set of shipyards. I don't know what they're doing, but given the proximity to the Corporate Sector, I’m sure it's something the rest of the galaxy might come to regret.”

“Quarren Isolation League?” One of Nym’s brow-ridges arched. Obi-Wan studied the surface of the liquid in his glass absently.

“They're nothing new, been pushing for Dac space to separate from the Republic for years. Mostly they’re just noisy. They lost a little weight recently when the previous Dac senator, Tikkes, disappeared, but if the Neimoidians think they're worth fronting, it doesn't bode well for the sector.”

“It always fascinates me how you know these things.”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “Turn on the news once in a while.”
“Nah, that shit’s boring. Who wants to watch fat bureaucrats in fancy robes argue all day?”

“Mm, yes, stars forbid you actually learn something new.”

“Hey!”

Obi-Wan chuckled at Nym’s mock glare; the pirate managed to keep it for only a second before the glare dissolved into a lopsided grin. He clapped Obi-Wan’s shoulder. “Nah, that's what I got you for, you actually understand that political stuff. Might as well be Shyriiwook.”

“You understand Shyriiwook, Nym.”

The Feeorin grumbled, head-tendrils twitching in a way that called Obi-Wan’s parentage into question. “You know what I mean.”

He relented. “I’ve been following politics since I was thirteen. You pick things up after a while.”

“With that mysterious teacher of yours, yeah. So... guess who I ran into on Commenor.”

Obi-Wan squinted at Nym’s darkly mischievous grin. “Hmm. Someone we both know, someone you wouldn't think twice about punching in the face.” He raised a brow as Nym’s grin widened in confirmation. “Toth?”

“Got it in one.” Nym chuckled. “Looks like the Uvaks have splintered, he was picking up work. I might've called his reliability into question and he took it personally.”

He could read between those lines. “You started a bar brawl.”

“He swung first!” Nym laughed, holding his hands up in protest. “I was just lookin’ to save his client the unnecessary risk.”

Chuckling, Obi-Wan saluted Nym with his glass. “You definitely have a way with people.”

They were still chatting when Pulkka turned up; the chair gave an alarming creak as she dropped into it. “Phel commed, they just reached Corellia. If you need anything from Coronet City, xe’s not planning to depart for another forty hours.”

Obi-Wan nodded in thanks; he couldn't think of anything he personally needed, but Zoh had worn through the elbow of her favourite jacket and some of the seams were straining. Getting a new jacket as a gift would take the sting off having to let the old one go. “I'll comm xir in a bit.”

“Yeah, I’ll see what I can find. Anything else? Some proper brandy?”

In the holo, Bastra’s eyeroll was still visible. “If you're offering, I'm not saying no. Nym says hello, by the way.”

Phel grinned and leaned back in xir pilot's chair, propping a foot on the edge of the console. “How is that old asshole?”

“Still an old arsehole. Picking fights with our friends from the Uvaks.” The man frowned, the expression tugging at the scar where it crossed the bridge of his nose. “Which reminds me, keep an
“Thanks for the warning. I still gotta hit up the cantina for an outbound job, but I’ll be careful.”

Beside xir, R2-K8 whistled cheerfully and popped her electrical probe out, blue sparks snapping between the prongs. Phel laughed. “Kate says she’ll take care of me. I think I’m in good hands. Uh, manipulators.”

Xir friend grinned back. “Well, you should keep her with you. They won’t think to look for the Veeka, so the standard security should be more than enough.”

The ‘standard security’ they’d installed on the ship’s entry and maintenance access panels was anything but standard. Phel smirked at the droid. “I bet you know the city better than I do, anyway.” Kate gave a modest chirp and Phel rubbed her dome affectionately. “Well, we’ll let you get on with things. Say hi to everyone for me.”

“All do.” Bastra offered an irreverent salute as he signed off.

Phel pushed back into the comfortable worn leatherette of the pilot’s chair with a happy sigh. Things were going well, so far. Three years of working with the ex-Jedi had really turned xir life around. Phel still wasn’t a hundred percent on trusting the Force, but xé’d learned to listen. No bad feelings today.

Kate helped Phel locate a good shop for spacer-appropriate clothing with feminine styling. Xe didn’t know much about fashion, but between the shopkeeper droid and Kate, xe managed to find something in slick grey leatherette that was sturdy, stylish, would fit over Zoh’s armour, and had detailing in her favourite shade of blue-green. Even with the customary haggling it wasn’t cheap, but Bastra had given leave to use the shared account to cover it. They arranged for it to be delivered to the hangar and then made their way back to the spaceport cantina.

Phel leaned against the bar, drink cradled in one hand with xir index finger resting below the rim while Kate hovered at xir hip. There weren’t a lot of other spacers seeking work; back when xé’d started working with Bastra, there would have been a lot more pilots propping up the bar with the number of fingers or digits visible around their glasses indicating the capacity of their ship. Over the last three years, more and more had taken private contracts as pressure from the trade guilds increased. Xe wondered what people without contracts would do without the convenience when all the guild-managed pilots were unable to help them without incurring massive tariffs from the guild.

Xe and Bastra had been keeping a close eye on the guild politics: they both kept their licenses up to date, ensuring legal protection if a client tried to stiff them or they got jumped by pirates. But lately the trade guilds had been shifting from pressuring the independent haulers to aggressively courting the haulers’ guilds themselves.

If the guilds sold out and got absorbed…. Phel swallowed past the tightness in xir throat. The trade guilds’ terms were strict and ensured the majority of the profit never stayed in the hands of the pilots taking the rancor’s share of the risk. Eventually, legitimate haulers would likely be branded smugglers if they refused to maintain their license because of the cost.

Xir train of thought was derailed by someone elbowing up beside xir at the bar. “A shuttle, eh?” The guy -- human, short and pale with brown hair, dressed in rough spacer’s leathers -- couldn’t have been much older than Phel. He gestured to the single finger Phel had brushing xir cup’s rim. “Room for two passengers?”

One finger merely meant small capacity; guessing it was a shuttle was a bit too perceptive. Phel
studied him narrowly and felt that insistent *tingle* xe had always felt but never identified as the Force until Bastra had explained it. “I don't usually take passengers, but two is manageable. It'd be cosy,” xe warned.

The young man’s face developed a lopsided grin that really had no business being attractive. “Oh, cosy works for me just fine.” He winked and laughed. “But unfortunately I’m not looking for myself. Travel time to Coruscant isn't more than a day, I’m sure it wouldn't be a strain.”

Tilting xir head, Phel grinned, shoving down the bashfulness that always came with being complimented. “Cocky, aren’t you.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” The guy held a hand out. “I’m Val.”

Phel shook it, feeling the Force practically *tingle*; xe hoped that was a good thing. “Phel. This is Kay-eight. And travel time to Coruscant is eighteen hours. We’ve been making improvements to the hyperdrive,” xe said in response to Val’s open surprise. It was only half-true: Bastra had also been making tweaks to the hyperspace calculations to avoid the standard coordinates, but that wasn’t info they generally shared around.

Val nodded and gestured to the bartender. “Lemme buy you another and we can talk business.”

Phel bit the inside of xir lip, pushing aside the ridiculous curl of disappointment. “Aw. Only business?”

The kid gave xir a startled glance which warmed into a grin. “Well. We can get the business out of the way with, and then talk about other things?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

They took their drinks over to a table against the wall where three other people in casual street clothes were waiting. The Nautolan seated with his back to the room turned and the Force pinged . Phel stopped and sighed. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Phel!” Renni Kerr gave a brilliant grin. “What are you doing here?”

The only human at the table, an older man with dark hair who bore a notable resemblance to Val, leaned forward, frowning in consternation. “You know each other?” The third person, an older Mon Calamari woman with pale mottling across her head, seemed equally baffled.

That invisible nudge from the Force was becoming insistent. Phel relented and settled into one of the spare chairs with Kate lurking protectively. “Ship I used to crew on gave him a lift home from Dxun.”

Both the older human and the woman gave xir a closer look. “You know Bastra, then,” the human said as Val settled in beside Phel. “Name’s Nejaa; Val’s my son. I helped Bastra get started, a few years back.”

The pieces clicked into place and Phel reflexively locked down tighter on xir shielding, the shy pleasure from Val’s flirting earlier vanishing. Jedi, all four of them. Wonderful. “He's mentioned you.” The tension was too much; Phel turned xir gaze to xir drink and took a sip. “So you need to get to Coruscant?”

Kerr cleared his throat awkwardly. “Yes. Preferably without a lot of fuss.” He gestured to the Mon Calamari woman. “Sarih and I wish to, eh, *sightsee.*”
“Sightseeing. Okay. Are you going to need me on retainer for a ride back, or will you figure that out later?” Beside xir, Kate warbled softly to herself, already calculating fuel costs.

The Jedi exchanged glances and Sarih shrugged. “Likely not; we don’t know how long our vacation will take.”

There was no way two Jedi were *really* going on a holiday tour of the galactic capital. Not while dressed in normal-people clothes. *Not your business. Do not even go there.* Kate offered an estimate using the standard rate and Phel nodded. “Three-fifty per person. You could save yourselves some credits and travel economy, you know–”

“Oh, yeah?” Val lounged with one arm over the back of his chair; the gentle lopsided grin was back. “And how old does that make you?”

So that was how this was going to go. “Twenty. You?” Xe found xirself examining Val a little more critically. He might be a Jedi, but he wore spacer’s gear like he’d been born to it, unlike Renni and Sarih, who had seemed ill at ease out of their usual robes.

“Just turned nineteen.” The grin widened. “Pronouns?”

“Don’t go there. You don’t want to know.” With a shrug, Phel said, “Hey, it’s your money. I’m waiting on a delivery to my hangar, but after that, we can depart whenever you’re ready.”

“Which would mean traveling officially, which would entirely defeat the purpose of this trip,” Sarih said mildly.

Kerr hesitated. “I can sense your discomfort, young one. You don’t have to–”

Phel grimaced and waved a dismissive hand, irritated. “Yes I do. I don’t know why yet, but I bet I’ll find out. It’s how these things usually go.”

Nejaa was studying xir carefully. “Do you have a family name?”

“Don’t bother, you won’t find me in your records.” Bastra had done some discreet searching years earlier, using Phel’s biometrics, without success. “If you really need a name for a report or something, the closest family I can claim is Bastra. Use that.”

Xe could have sworn Nejaa’s cough was covering a chuckle. “Next time you see him, give him my regards.”

“And mine,” Val added. He grinned at Phel’s glance. “He seemed really upset when I met him, and I distracted him with games. I’m glad he’s doing better now.”

Phel’s response was interrupted by a simultaneous chime from xir comm and a happy whistle from Kate. “Sounds like my delivery just arrived. I’m at docking bay seventy-eight resh. How soon would you two like to leave?”

Kerr and Sarih left to collect their luggage from the Temple. Nejaa eyed Val with a raised eyebrow and an admonishment for his son to behave himself before following them. Val chuckled. “Whew. Parents, huh?”

“Uh.” Phel winced. “I really wouldn’t know. I didn’t have anyone except my buddy Myles for a long time until I met Bastra. He’s only a couple years older than me, but he’s kind of dad-shaped, I guess.”

“Ooh, yeah?” Val lounged with one arm over the back of his chair; the gentle lopsided grin was back. “And how old does that make you?”

So that was how this was going to go. “Twenty. You?” Xe found xirself examining Val a little more critically. He might be a Jedi, but he wore spacer’s gear like he’d been born to it, unlike Renni and Sarih, who had seemed ill at ease out of their usual robes.

“Just turned nineteen.” The grin widened. “Pronouns?”
Phel’s eyebrows peaked. “Xe, xir. I tried ‘they’ for a while but it confused people.”

Val repeated the words as if tasting them. “That’s cool. I’m boring; just ‘he’ for me.”

Time to nip that one. “No more boring than ‘xe’ is,” Phel said, careful not to let tension leak into xir posture. “Stuff happened, and as I got older, I just didn’t like being identified by gender anymore.”

Holding a hand up, Val apologised. “Didn’t mean to sound like I thought you were being fancy. So does Myles still travel with you?”


Val’s green-gold eyes softened. “It seems to be, if it still upsets you. We can always try to find him.”

Shaking xir head, Phel set the emptied glass on the table. “It’s a huge galaxy. If I hadn’t met Bastra, I might not have made it half this far.” Xe laughed and ran a hand through the short, gelled spikes of xir hair. “Sorry, I brought the mood down--”

“Hey, I asked.” Val touched xir arm lightly. “So what have you been doing with Bastra?”

They spent the time until the other Jedi returned swapping stories; when Val left with his dad, they swapped comm codes.

The air smelled of rich, chalky red soil and something undefinably cloying and herbal. The sky overhead was pale yellow shading to a comfortable soft green at the horizon, streaked with wispy white clouds, and most of the identifiable plant life had fluffy bluish or purplish leaves and pale stems.

Obi-Wan frowned across the rolling hills to the edge of what could likely be called a forest: the trees sprouted in many-trunked clusters, fanning out like dusting-brushes directly from the ground. There was something familiar about the place, although it didn’t match any world he’d visited before. He paced forward into the diffuse sunlight, feeling pebbled earth crush beneath his boots. The air temperature was muted, like a spring day on Alderaan, although it was difficult to tell what part of the seasonal cycle was in effect.

He’d had this dream before, he realised, long ago as an initiate. It hadn’t seemed worth the trouble of investigating at the time -- merely a placid diversion from his usual dreams and disturbing visions. If he concentrated, he could find a memory of a village under a similar yellow sky, rising from a broad plain covered in waving violet grass and walled with wooden staves that could have been cut from one of those brush-trees. The scene had been idyllic. There was no memory of population to accompany it, though, which troubled him.

Where was this place? There were no visible stars to perhaps identify a spatial location. With a sigh, Obi-Wan pulled himself out of his meditation.

“That wasn’t a happy sigh,” Ulic commented. The spirit appeared to have been ‘reading’ again, sitting on the desk in the corner on top of the book he’d asked Obi-Wan to leave out.
Obi-Wan ran a hand back through his hair and unfolded from his half-lotus. “Nothing interesting this time. The Force isn't being very forthcoming, I'm afraid.”

“Looking for something specific?”

“Direction, mostly.” He turned his datapad on, opened a new page, and made notes about the vision-world. Ulic watched him quietly, until Obi-Wan gave him an annoyed look. “What?”

“Oh, nothing.” The spirit grinned when Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “Okay, maybe something. Have you considered what Lord Victis said, back on Serenno?”

“That was a while ago.”

“Yeah. I’m guessing you forgot. A lot’s happened, though, you’ve been busy.” Ulic’s smile was a little too innocent; Obi-Wan gave him a narrow look and sighed, settling back on the cushion. The spirit was going to make him work for it.

Using the Force to improve recall wasn’t like having a photographic memory or reviewing holo footage; it required meditation on the events of a known point in time, piecing the individual elements back together like a puzzle. He remembered sitting at the worktable in Dooku’s estate, the hard wooden surface under his elbows. The Twi’lek spirit, pale as frost, robes and scarves trailing into violet mist in the dim light. Dimly he felt Ulic lean into his mind, gently witnessing.

The Twi’lek Sith Lord smiled, sharp and fierce. “We’ve noticed that, while Ulic has been teaching you -- happily, I might add; having a student is good for him -- you haven't officially accepted our bargain.”

Ulic snorted quietly and mumbled something that sounded insulting.

“To disrupt Sidious’s plans?”

Victis’ nose crinkled, thin lips turning down. “Bane’s plans, Sidious’s actions. It's far too dangerous at this time to confront Sidious directly: he has regrettably good prescience and the power to act on it. You could do with honing your abilities in that direction, you know.”

Obi-Wan watched as his own hands slid the book he’d been reading out of the way to lean forward on the table. “I assumed such visions simply came when the Force had something to show.”

“Hardly. One does need some natural affinity for it--” the Sith lord rolled her eyes with an exasperated scoff-- “which I regrettably lack.

“But you can spend time learning to pick up subtler cues and clarifying what you already see. My brother Pyyra could help you with that, if he wanted. He hasn't yet decided if this is a good idea.”

“To be honest, Lord Victis, neither have I.”

Ulic’s mind poked his, interrupting the memory. When he opened his eyes, the spirit was sitting in front of him “You focused a lot on the rest of that conversation, but that part was important. I think she was right. When’s the last time you had a serious vision?”

Obi-Wan frowned. “A while ago. It was bad enough I had to warn Quinlan.” It had woken him in a cold sweat: premonitions of darkness if his old friend returned to his ancestral home. He shuddered.

“I remember that.”
“You think she's right, that I can learn to--to cultivate that talent.” It wasn't a thrilling prospect: most of his visions were disturbing at best, outright traumatizing at worst. The thought of subjecting himself to such things willingly was discomfiting.

Ulic gave him an arch look. “She wouldn't have said that without good reason. From what I’ve been able to glean, Sidious is exceptionally precognitive, and you're not going to get ahead of him if you don't develop your own skills.”

Obi-Wan had to wonder for a moment if Sidious’ visions were likewise distressing, if everything his shadowy opponent did was out of fear: a desperate, calculated attempt to avoid what he saw.

*Would he have foreseen the outcome of that fight on Naboo?* He shook the thought away. Likely not, if Sidious’s interest in him hadn’t begun until he’d been on Serenno.

He hoped Qui-Gon had been able to break through to his former master.

“You're over-thinking things again.”

Obi-Wan pulled a face at the spirit, who was smirking unapologetically. “One of us has to. How do I develop farseeing as a *skill*, rather than something that just happens?”

The smirk vanished and Ulic shifted uncomfortably. “That… I don’t know. Most Force users of both stripes have been content to let the visions come as they will. There’s only one group I can think of which bends the Force like that, and they might not deign to teach you.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “I’m not going to like this, am I?”

He’d been here before; his fragmented memory provided images of peaceful hills, rolling fields, placid herd animals allowed to roam freely. The reason for his prior visit was still buried in a disorganised tangle. Xanatos rubbed his temple and pulled his cowl up against the light rain falling past the temporary shelter of their shuttle, features pinching in disgust.

His Master joined him a moment later as the ramp closed; Dooku looked out from under his hood at the bucolic scenery with disdain. “You understand your assignment, my apprentice?”

The term rankled but he ignored the urge to retort. “Yes, my Lord.”

The older man’s hand rested on his shoulder for a moment. “Remember: trust in your feelings.” Xan glared at him and he stared back, unaffected. “Your grasp of the Force may be tenuous right now, but it has not abandoned you. Consider this a test.”

“I’d rather not. Why is this necessary?” Was Xanatos so much of a disappointment that his new Master sought to replace him?

Dooku's smile was cold and showed teeth -- not at Xanatos, but at a memory of someone else. “My Master thought to delay me, distract me, by setting the challenge to restore your strength. We require a pair of willing and eager acolytes to be our hands while I help you. Do not trouble yourself over them; they are disposable. You are not.”

Sith would say *anything* to further their own ends; it was a hard lesson he’d learned from Plagueis,
one of the first memories to re-cement itself after Dooku had brought him out of stasis a year ago. It had strained things between himself and the Count, and he still didn’t trust the man, even though he had yet to go back on his word. Xan ground his teeth. “I understand, Master.” He shrugged deeper into his cloak and stepped out into the rain.

The cloak was at least waterproof. Xanatos let the rhythm of the droplets pattering over his head and shoulders lull him into the light meditative trance he’d spent so long re-learning. The past year—no, be honest, it had been eight months since he’d been well enough, settled enough, to start relearning what had been lost in the confusion of his new, cloned body. He didn't understand most of the medical jargon the droid spewed, but he gathered that his cloned brain had lacked the physiological connections formed through experience which made memories make sense. Never mind his tenuous connection to the Force. It was improving with every meditation session he had with the Count, but still far too thin for his liking.

He pulled on it now, tugging until that thin golden thread unfolded into a path he could walk in his mind. To the sides of the path, brilliant flares of light in a multitude of colours moved and shifted: thousands of Force-active sentient, living their daily lives heedless of the weather.

Xan glanced at himself -- the representation of himself. He, too, was a glimmer of light, tinted violet-red against the soft background glow of living things. Behind him, Count Dooku also shimmered, more purple than red. All the others shone in shades from blue to green to gold. Unsuitable.

Bandomeer was a planet where the Jedi Order produced most of its food and internal material goods. The majority of the Jedi here wanted to be here. But, as Dooku had informed him on the flight from Serenno, the Order also sent its outcasts here. Initiates who were never chosen, padawans who failed badly in their duties, knights who were deemed unsuited for other work. People who seethed in resentment over their treatment by the Order they had called home; who would leap at any second chance, if it meant a better fate than ignominy.

Jedi who could easily accept the Dark side.

He followed the trail in his mind even as his feet led him along the dirt paths between rows through the fields. Blue, green, blue, gold, green. So many Jedi, content in their complacency. Xan fought to keep a sneer from his face.

There, hidden behind a windbreak of fluffy, drop-shaped conifers: a pair of blue lights veined heavily with violet. Xanatos released his meditation and stepped softly from the path.

The human teens didn't notice him until he was nearly on top of them; they were engrossed in low conversation, huddled miserably under their cloaks in the thin shelter offered by the trees. The girl, flaxen haired and violet-eyed, jumped to her feet, scrabbling for a canvas sack of what appeared to be young seedlings, their root-balls wrapped in linen.

“Master! We were just, uh--”

“Resting!” the boy chimed in. He remained kneeling, and Xan could see the cluster of saplings they’d begun planting -- too close together, at least two of those trees would be strangled -- in the fibrous soil between them.

He raised a hand as they spoke over and around each other. “Relax, you're not in trouble. My name’s Xan.”

“Hui,” the girl said.
“Braedeen.” The boy tugged anxiously on the fluffy tail of red hair that curled over his shoulder; where Hui was pale, he was ruddy, with the bony frame of someone finishing a growth spurt. They couldn't be more than sixteen Standard -- a bit younger than the Count was hoping for, but more malleable for it.

The Force was distant again, but he didn't need it to project an air of nonchalance as he looked around. “Boring little world, isn't this?”

Hui dropped back to her seat with a snort. “It's awful. I miss civilisation.”

“Me, too.” Braedeen glowered at the bag of just-sprouted young trees. “I asked to be sent anywhere else -- the MechanicCorps or something -- but the Council said, ‘good, this will do you’.” He was clearly mimicking the phlegmy voice of someone else, someone who didn't use standard Basic speech patterns.

It sent a tickle of familiarity through Xan’s muddled memories, but he brushed it aside. He shook his head. “I don't understand why; you're both obviously wasted out here. What were you best at?”


“She's an awesome pilot, I scored in the top of our year for mechanical aptitude. We’re both stronger with the Unified Force than the Living Force. Sending us out here makes no sense.”

“It’s been three years! Every year we can request a review for a transfer elsewhere, but they keep saying no.”

Xanatos nodded as the pair spilled their grievances, eager to have an apparently sympathetic ear to bend. When they ran out of steam, he said, “That really is not fair of them. How fortunate that the Force has led me to you. My Master is seeking a pair of additional assistants. Our work is too complicated for the two of us alone,” he explained, hiding a smile as he saw the teens latch onto the lure he offered. “It's not quite on the level of being a padawan, I know, but I can see that you’d be much better suited to our current project.” It was just so easy: the extra bit of flattery was barely even necessary.

Hui was back on her feet. “We won't have to wait for the next review cycle, will we?”

“Of course not. A Jedi Master may requisition assistance from the Corps freely.” That, Dooku had reassured him, was true. His Master would pose as a field Jedi himself and simply submit a petition to the AgriCorps management for the temporary reallocation of two staff members to provide short-notice assistance. By the time anyone discovered the truth, they would be long gone.

“That sounds excellent to me,” Braedeen said. At his shoulder, Hui bobbed her head eagerly. “When do we leave?”

Chapter End Notes

I feel badly for readjusting the Halcyon-Horn family timeline, but the introduction of the Prequels completely threw that into disarray years ago.

I bet you thought you'd seen the last of those two.
Happy New Year <3
Gridlock

Chapter Summary

Previously:

Sith Acolyte Caliiga was forced to report failure to Darth Sidious. Her Lord was most displeased, but the additional information she had collected regarding a potential hidden rival has set the Sith Lord on edge.

After receiving an unusual request, Mace Windu decided to send Jedi Master Locke Tholme to handle a dire matter on Kiffex, replacing Quinlan Vos. Now Mace has to figure out what to do with the results.

In his identity as Scogar Bastra, Obi-Wan visited Bail Organa and presented the Viceroy of Alderaan with a report of corruption with the Galactic Senate. Bail has been quietly conducting investigations on his own while performing his duties as Senator.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, DragonHoardsBooks, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.07.01
Coruscant

Lightsaber blades screeched and crackled as their integral polarities were forced together, red blades spitting angrily. Caliiga leaned in, muscles straining, dragging hard on the Force to push her opponent back. He snarled and twisted, letting her blade slide off and past. She recovered, barely quick enough to dodge the swing that frizzled the ends of her hair.

“You're getting sloppy, woman!” Sheyvan called as Caliiga aimed a riposte at his wrist; he parried and spun away, laughing. “Our Master must feel you unsuited for field work, after your last failure!”

Caliiga growled and scythed her lightsaber around, using the Force to throw it in a flat spin. While Sheyvan dodged the flying blade, she vaulted forward, caught the hilt on its return, and dropped like a meteor with a strike that could cleave him from crown to toes were he any slower. She had the satisfaction of seeing his dark eyes go wide as their blades met, if only for a moment. He pushed back with the Force and she let herself be thrown, controlling her arc into a flip and landing upright, blade already in guard.

Losing track of the slicer had set her back -- and Tuuz, although their Lord had used the Twi’lek more for his slicing expertise than his Force abilities. It had still netted them valuable information about their Master’s rival. Even if they still didn’t know the other Sith’s name, gaining a temporary
ally in the apprentice, Davine, had been a momentous success.

If they could bring the man to their side…. Caliiga hoped she might build some rapport with Davine, if they happened across each other again. She still had Davine’s comm code from the incident on Florrum, but they were hesitant to contact him directly: he knew who she worked for and would likely suspect a trap, or his unknown Master might take the opportunity to remove some of his rival’s support. Better to catch Davine unsuspecting. Instead, Tuuz had been carefully searching the HoloNet for any signs of Red Sun activity.

She and Sheyvan circled each other, trading blows. The other acolyte proudly styled himself as their Lord’s ‘Hand’ and had an irritating habit of looking down his pretty nose at her and the others, particularly Maul. Someday she would wipe that supercilious smirk from his face. But she was not above allowing him to spar with her. He might have wanted an opportunity to grandstand, to display his superiority of skill, but training with a better fighter could only make Caliiga stronger.

She wondered what sort of opponent Davine would make.

A low chuckle from the door made them separate in surprise. Wrapped in his customary dark robe, the cowl pulled low, Lord Sidious approached them with a terrifying smile. Caliiga and Sheyvan deactivated their blades and dropped to one knee on the hard salle floor.

“It is so good to see you striving to better yourselves,” he purred. Tendrils of absolute Darkness washed out from him, coiling around the two acolytes. Her Lord’s praise suffused Caliiga with warmth despite the chill his unshielded presence created. “But training shall have to wait. I have need of your services.”

“What in the stars do you think you’re doing?”

Chimeeru and her friends jumped up from their work and turned to bow to Master Parrie.

“We're making a jump course!” ‘Soka said, as if it was the most logical thing ever, like their Clanmaster hadn’t used that tone of voice. Chimee carefully didn’t look at any of the others, knowing she’d collapse in nervous giggles if she did.

Master Parrie sighed, but she was smiling just a little. “I can see that, Ahsoka, but why are you using the Grand Hall?”

“There were so many who wanted to play, nowhere else had room!” Chimee said quickly. The others -- all ten of them -- nodded eagerly and voiced agreement. Chimee risked turning to look at their handiwork. It was easily the best jump-course they’d ever created: lines of glittery chalk shapes in multiple colors spiraled off into numerous possible paths spreading across a section of the Grand Hall's tiled floor. It was beautiful and promised hours of exploration without having to risk getting lost in the Temple’s maze of corridors. They had at least made sure they weren’t using a spot where lots of people walked through!

Master Parrie nodded patiently. “I see. And where did you get the chalk for this?”

Chimee tucked her head, the tips of her soft baby horns just brushing her shoulders. “Shar gave them to me.” The tall Padawan with the pretty marks on his face had brought the large, fist-sized chalk sticks back after a mission with Master Ki-Adi. Despite her fears for him in the red desert, he was so
nice; her Shar had even given her a big hug when he’d returned.

“I suppose I’ll have to have a word with his Master about appropriate gifts. Did you all forget you have swim lessons today?”

Nearly everyone perked up; Chimee gasped and hurried to collect the chalk sticks. She had forgot! There were no chronos in the Hall, and they’d all lost track of time.

Master Parrie laughed, in the nice way she did when she thought they were being cute. “I suppose this means I should teach you how to use the Force to keep track of time; you won’t always have a chrono available, as you can see. But for now, it’s back to the crèche to get changed and then off to the Room of a Thousand Fountains with you lot.” She held her hand out for Chimee’s container of chalk sticks. “Let me clean those up for you, you don’t want to be late!”

“What if we want to use them again?”

The Clanmaster patted the top of Chimee’s head gently, stroking a four-fingered hand down one of her horns. “You may ask for them any time you don’t have lessons, dear.”

Chimeeru was only just starting to understand the impressions she picked up from others; she could tell that Master Parrie was being truthful, but also that the Clanmaster was hoping to know where the group took off with the chalk next time, if only so she could keep track of them.

That was silly. They were in the Temple: of course they’d be safe! But Master Parrie had her reasons. Chimee handed the container over and hurried to catch up with her friends.

Mace Windu eyed the wobbly chalk lines covering one corner of the Great Hall’s floor. The area was swarming with MSE droids trying in vain to clean the substance off the tiles; streaks of vivid pink and green, smeared by the droids’ wheels, tracked back and forth across the Hall as the droids had returned to Maintenance for stronger solvents.

“Really, Ki-Adi?”

The Cerean Jedi Master raised his brows. “I had nothing to do with this.”

Mace gave in and chuckled. “You could at least have reminded your Padawan to check the ingredients of his present.”

“It’s art chalk. How should he have known they’d put it on the floor?”

The Head of the Order gave Ki-Adi a level stare; after a minute, Ki-Adi returned it with one of his rare smiles. “It’s delightfully whimsical. Reminds me of the innocence of chaos in the larger universe.”

“Just when I think I know you.” He turned to continue their aborted walk to the lifts.

The other Jedi Master laughed. “And how’s your own Padawan getting along?” The entire Council had quickly heard about Ferus Olin’s amusing friendship with Ky Narec’s unconventional Padawan and how the girl had tried to help him gain a Master’s attention.

“Our initial meeting aside, Ferus is a perfectionist, to an almost obscene degree.” Mace frowned.
“I’m worried he’ll stress himself into making more serious errors than the ones he’s trying to avoid.”

“I remember seeing the teaching masters’ reports; the boy was remarkably faultless. You think there's something under the veneer?”

Mace’s smile creaked at the edges. “Such is the way with most such people. Fear of judgment, perhaps, or fear of failure. He’s been seeing a Mind Healer, ostensibly for dealing with losing his previous master, but I’ve asked her to probe gently to assess his overall well-being.”

Ki-Adi followed him into the nearest lift car and pressed the button to descend. “At least he has a friend who might help him loosen up?”

He couldn’t help a rueful chuckle. Padawan Asajj was Ferus’ polar opposite: brash, headstrong, loudly opinionated, struggling with her coursework. She hadn’t managed to make many friends outside of the peers Ferus had introduced her to. “They’re quite the odd couple. But he’s been giving her extra help with her studies. Every evening I walk in the door and they're on the couch going over the material. They’d make a good field team.”

“Let’s not rush them, Mace.”

The lift let them out onto a floor staffed by masked Temple guards. None of them gave any indication they recognized the Councilors’ presence, but Mace knew they'd marked their approach from the Hall. He led the way down the corridor and through a series of doors which required the Guards’ touch to open. The Temple’s Head of Security met them at the end, looking perturbed.

“Master Windu. Master Mundi.”

“Master Drallig.” Mace studied the man for a moment. Cin clearly had something on his mind but was reluctant to voice it. “How’s our guest?”

“Still in stasis, but barely contained.” Cin hesitated. “Are you certain it's wise to move him? Merely bringing him back from Kiffex left a number of people in a Mind Healer’s care.”

Ki-Adi gestured for Cin to open the final door. “The Citadel has been out of use for a long time. It took a while to ensure all systems were functional, but it is a far more suitable place for him than an active Temple in the middle of a city. We can’t keep him in stasis forever.”

The Head of Security glowered. “I’m logging my strong objections to this, Mace.”

“Noted.”

The Temple's holding cells, designed specifically for containing and controlling Force-active beings and objects, were rarely used save for the artifact storage. The long rows of open-fronted cells, enclosed by force fields and cut off from the Force by crystal matrices embedded in the walls, rose in three levels above the floor -- whether the sheer numbers were optimistic or pessimistic, Mace could never decide. Only one cell was in use, partway down the left side on the ground floor. Inside, on a mobile biobed with the blinking tiara of a stasis monitor wrapped around his forehead, lay a dark-haired Anzati dressed in robes reminiscent of a Jedi’s. Even from outside the force field, the unconscious man radiated Darkness, greasy and cloying. Mace grimaced but put his part of the code into the lock; Cin hesitated before adding his. The force field dimmed, allowing them through.

Inside the cell, the ferocity of the Anzati’s struggle against the enforced stasis was palpable. For a moment, Mace let himself consider how badly the Kiffex mission might have turned had Vos been assigned as requested. Requested by his aunt, Sheyf Tinté, in fact, which had given Mace a sour feeling from the start: getting Vos away from that woman as a child had been an immense problem
for Locke Tholme when he’d been the Watchman for that sector. Mace hadn’t shared with the rest of the Council the fact that Quinlan had received a message from Kenobi advising him not to return ‘home’; they’d readily accepted his reasoning that Vos and Secura required more recovery time. It may have kept the pair on the Inactive roster for a bit longer than necessary, but it was probably for the best.

Tholme’s report from Kiffex had described finding the Dark Jedi, still very much aware and more venomous than ever after a thousand years in stasis, sending an army of mind-controlled Anzati against the outlying Kiffar settlements. His assessment had been a short, blistering indictment of the former Council’s idea of justice and containment. It had taken the combined efforts of Locke, Master T’ra Saa, and the elusive, transient Master Zao to subdue the Anzati and his army. Volfe Karkko had not gone quietly nor easily; Locke had spent a month in the Healers’ wing, and poor, blind Zao hadn’t survived. Despite the enforced unconsciousness, Karkko’s dreaming had affected the ship’s non-Jedi crew; one had attempted to break the Dark Jedi’s restraints and had nearly succeeded before he was caught, and another had been found tampering with the navigation.

The Council was divided on even allowing Karkko to live. Locked away decades before the Ruusan Reformation had changed the topography of the Order and the Republic, the Darkened Jedi had grown bitter and vengeful against the Order and the Council in specific -- the opposite effect from what the Council of the time had hoped to achieve. Privately, Mace thought locking the man away and forgetting about him was excessively cruel; the former Jedi Master had Fallen but had then been treated like an animal by the Council, mostly due to rampant prejudice against his species. While Karkko’s Fall had been the result of his own hubris, the regrettable end result lay on the Council’s heads. Executing him would not make it right. Simpler; safer. But not right.

A group of Mind Healers had volunteered to attempt to help Karkko, but in order to do so he would have to be conscious. It was generally agreed that he was far too dangerous to be kept in the Temple for longer than necessary, and he had already been in the Temple’s containment cells for over a year. The Citadel, far away in the Outer Rim on a lifeless world, designed specifically for the containment of violent Fallen Jedi and other Force users, was more ideal. The only reason Karkko hadn’t been imprisoned there initially was that the Citadel hadn’t yet been constructed.

The Mind Healers were well aware that there would be no available transportation from Lola Sayu. Supplies would be dropped off by a shuttle which wouldn’t even land. They and the small maintenance staff accompanying them would be effectively trapped on the rock with Karkko until such time as they could determine whether he could be saved.

For just a moment, Mace’s thoughts strayed to another of their Fallen, one who hadn’t been granted the courtesy of rehabilitation. A twinge of regret made him grimace; but Kenobi had his own role to play which could not be done within the Order’s confines. It may have been a subconscious desire to atone which had made him support the effort to treat Karkko with as much dignity as they could afford.

Deep in stasis, Karkko didn’t give the appearance of slumber so much as he did the appearance of one struggling with his inner demons. Perhaps he was: the Force-nullifying properties in the walls prevented his mind from wandering beyond the bounds of the cell. His olive complexion had sallow from long incarceration, his long black hair dry and matted from lack of care. One of his probosci, extended in threat during the fight with Tholme, Saa and Zao, had failed to retract properly; although someone had kindly attempted to press it back into its pouch in Karkko’s cheek, it had slipped free again. Mace glanced away, feeling as if some of the Anzati’s privacy were violated.

Ki-Adi sighed and grasped Karkko’s arm gently, clasping the inhibitor cuffs around the man’s wrists. “Have they determined how he keeps extending beyond the inhibitors like that? It shouldn’t be
possible.”

Despite the medical stasis, they were taking no chances during the transition to the Citadel. Every member of the medical staff and ship’s crew was a fully trained, field-qualified Knight or Master; no Padawans were being put at risk. One of the cabins on the transport had been refitted into a nullifying holding cell and medical monitoring suite, and Knight Muln had been devising a hyperspace route that would both get them to Lola Sayu as quickly as possible and avoid the major stops, reducing the odds of unfortunate pirate entanglements.

Cin shook his head. “We’ve tried everything. I dare say once he’s conscious, the staff will have their hands full.” He signaled to the nearest Temple Guards, who moved to bracket the biobed as Ki-Adi took the control pad.

The Guards had gone ahead, clearing the route between the holding cells and the hangar. It was a tense, if quiet, ride up and then down the corridor. The team of Healers, support staff, and flight crew were already waiting; several of them winced or shivered as the biobed passed. A thousand years, it seemed, had given Karkko more than enough time to explore and test his enforced limitations.

Garen Muln gave the biobed a sour glare as Ki-Adi guided it up the ramp. “This is gonna be a long week.”

---

Satine Kryze, Duchess of Mandalore, glared at the portly, well-dressed human in the holo. “I've told you before, Mr. Stark, that Mandalore is not seeking a partnership. Certainly not with the Commerce Guild.”

The man gave a rakish grin that looked like he practiced it every morning in the mirror. Tovari wanted to punch him. “That's not what your representative told me when I encountered him in the Corporate Sector.”

What? Out of range of the holofeed’s pickup, Tovari pulled up the list of trade representatives on her datapad, then shook her head at the Duchess. None of the Trade Commission's people had been assigned anywhere near that part of the galaxy.

Satine narrowed her eyes at Iaco Stark. “We don't have any representatives in the Corporate Sector, Mr. Stark. You're mistaken.”

“Really?” Stark tapped something which shared a still image from a security holocam. “I suppose this man didn’t happen to be on Ki’an Tol Station a week ago?”

“We don't maintain exclusivity rights on Mandalorian-made robes, Mr. Stark. I don't know who that man is, but he's not one of ours.”

It was probably a good thing holograms didn't pick up colour, or Stark would have seen Satine visibly pale, although her expression never wavered. Tovari squinted at the still while Stark wheeled some more; it took her a moment to recognise Scogar -- Obi-Wan -- with long hair down around his shoulders, his hand hooked through the elbow of a dark-haired man who seemed somewhat ill at ease. Even if Stark was telling the truth about meeting Obi-Wan personally -- which she highly doubted -- Obi-Wan knew better than to misrepresent someone else. Stark was trying to pin the Duchess in a trap.
“--know how unfortunate it would look for Mandalore to be seen dealing with the corporate entities out there. Where would your famous independence be, then? Now, if you would just consider--”

“You're very good at making up stories, Mr. Stark,” Satine growled. Her tone could have frozen molten durasteel. “Mandalore does not require outside assistance for its financial stability.”

“But with the Trade Federation petitioning for exclusive access rights to commerce along the Hydian Way, you’ll surely need assistance with both exports and imports. Consider how much luricale Mandalore buys annually--”

Tovari really wanted to know where Stark had found the detailed records of Mandalore’s imports. Well, southern Mandalore’s imports. The northern continent largely kept itself separate from the south and its desperate needs for imported foodstuffs. The New Mandalorians did sometimes trade with their reticent northern cousins, but it was largely through immigrant resellers like Tovari’s own parents, and not nearly enough to meet all of the domed cities’ needs. The rest of their requirements were largely fulfilled by trade from Kalevala, Concordia, and Concord Dawn.

If Stark was talking about luricale -- an essential grain which, on Mandalore, had only grown in wetfields on the southern continent prior to the Excision -- he was talking about an interruption of trade with Kalevala, their primary luricale supplier. Which implied that the Trade Federation or one of its allies was considering invading the sector, if not the individual systems.

She gestured to one of the internal security officers her aunt had assigned to oversee the meeting. “Get me the latest report on sector piracy and mercenary activity,” she murmured. He nodded briefly and departed, his counterpart shifting to take the space by the door.

Satine was barely resisting an eyeroll of epic proportions. “We do this once a month, Mr. Stark, but my answer is never going to change. Mandalore is not seeking a corporate alliance. Thank you.”

“The galaxy is changing, Duchess. Sooner or later, Mandalore will have to move forward into the new millennium. Better to be early than late.”

The meeting ended; Satine took two breaths and then sagged back into her chair. “I hate that man.”

“He’s odious,” Tovari agreed. “You’d think nobody would touch him after the Hyperspace War, but compared to the rest of the Commerce Guild he’s almost clean.”

Satine finally let loose with the eyeroll. “Throwing rotten fruit into a sewer doesn't make it less rancid.”

Officer Jiro returned with a datapad. “The files you requested. I also included the most recent data on the known local mercenary companies. There appeared to be some correlation,” he said as he handed Tovari the datapad.

Satine frowned. “You caught that, too.”

“The suggestion that they might engage in in-sector trade disruption to force your hand?” Tovari bared her teeth in something that was too angry to be a smile. “Absolutely. But since they can't make a move under their own banner for fear of the Republic getting involved, they’ll hire mercenaries to harass trade ships until we beg for their assistance.”

“Or cry to the Republic for help, at which point the Trade Federation gets to weigh in politically.” Satine poked a couple buttons and pulled up the holo still. “Oh, Obi. Causing me headaches and you're not even here for me to yell at. It's very inconsiderate of you.”
The officer frowned. “I'm sorry, I'm still new here and politics wasn't my thing. What does the Commerce Guild or the Trade Federation want with Mandalore?”

“How refreshing,” Satine said with a tired smile. “The Commerce Guild and Trade Federation are political and financial allies; what's bonded to one is subject to the other. And they want our beskar production, likely for their cursed battle droids.” She thumped her fist on her desk. “I will not let Mandalore be responsible for machines of warfare and subjugation!”

Tovari pinched her lips on a reminder that the northern Mando'ade -- the ones who still called Fett their Mand'alor -- produced the majority of beskar into weapons and armour for use by their soldiers and mercenaries. If Stark was pressing Sundari for trade, he'd likely already been told by the so-called ‘True Mandalorians’ where to shove his offer. And they weren’t dependent on trade the way self-contained urban developments in the middle of a desert wasteland were.

She sighed and set the datapad down, rubbing her forehead. “Intel on Death Watch says someone’s been courting them. That will be fun to deal with. They could do a lot of damage if we don't get ahead of them.” The Duchess nodded in agreement.

Jiro was studying the holo. “I know that man. We met briefly on Corellia.”

Satine’s eyebrows arched politely; Obi-Wan was still something of a sore spot for her, and Tovari stifled a wince as the Duchess said, “Did you, now,” in the cool tone she usually reserved for politicians who had severely overstepped.

The officer’s lip quirked. “Gave him a citation for disorderly in the spaceport cantina. Someone else started the fight, but he was involved in it.”

“Lemme guess,” Tovari said with a grin she wasn't feeling. “Zabrak woman, gold skin, black hair?”

Jiro blinked in surprise. “You know them?”

“Crewed with them a while. If there wasn't a Whiphid matriarch in their shadow, I'll be surprised.”

“There was.” His awkward smile turned genuine. “We were relieved she wasn't involved, or someone might have ended up in medical. Fight started when someone said some nasty things about their captain--” he gestured to the holo, indicating Obi-Wan, and Tovari nodded. “Wonder what he's doing there with Jango Fett.”

Satine's jaw dropped. “What?”

“That's not--” Tovari peered closer at the holo, very carefully not looking at the Duchess; it was Fett. “Well. We should be glad Stark hasn't identified either of them. How did you know?”

The man maintained an amazing stone-face as Satine glared at the holo in outrage. He shrugged. “I was in CorSec, it was our job to know what the rogues’ gallery look like under their masks.”

Satine recovered her composure with visible effort and tuned to eye Officer Jiro; Tovari knew that look, the one that said the Duchess was reassessing someone’s role. Her aunt was likely going to get a request to move Jiro to a more suitable investigative department, possibly as soon as they left the office. The Duchess sat forward, resting her elbows on the desk. “Are you familiar with Death Watch?”

“Familiar enough. A single one coming through Coronet Spaceport wasn't likely to be a problem, but if there was a group going through, we’d have to keep an eye on them. Standard merc jobs for the most part, although they handled things with more violence than your average group of hired muscle.
Always employed by the same people. Corporate elements, cartels. Anyone who paid whatever they were asking.” He frowned. “Had to deal with the results of someone refusing to pay ‘em once. Wasn’t pretty.”

Satine’s grin had more than a little mischief in it. “They have a base somewhere on Concordia. Perhaps I should have Matsuuri sit down with you and compare notes.”

Tor Jiro offered a good-natured nod. “Happily, Your Grace.”

Tovari bit her lip to hide a grin as Jiro and the other officer were dismissed. Aunt Ethyne had quietly confided in her that Jiro had been advised to speak to her by ‘Kenobi’, although they’d agreed to keep Obi-Wan’s name out of anything. In his last comm from a Junction station, the man had been visibly concerned about connections between himself and the Duchess being used against her. Tovari was starting to wonder if his Force had been behind that little change in Jiro’s career path.

Clearing her throat, she mentally switched gears. “What’s the plan if Death Watch or someone else starts disrupting in-sector trade?”

It was a tough question. Satine was adamant in her pacifism -- which was likely exactly why Stark was pressing them for cooperation. Trade convoys that refused to shoot back at a pirate might as well jettison their cargos for convenience.

Satine sighed hard enough the lilies in her hair wobbled. “Well. I don’t dictate Kalevala’s policies. Or Concord Dawn’s. We may need to offer them a tax reduction and ask them to handle our exports. It’s less than ideal, but I will not compromise Mandalore’s ideals for the sake of that disgusting piece of corporate filth. We’re better than that.”

Nodding, Tovari added a notation to her datapad. “I’ll see if I can’t lean on some contacts to get us a better deal.”

There truly was nothing more depressing than sitting through Senate budgetary meetings. Bail eyed the order of business on his datapad, which covered several pages and promised to start more than one argument that would drive the session into overtime by hours. He could already see the representatives of the Scientific Development and Oversight Committee puffing up in their booth. It had been a bad year -- series of years -- for the Republic, financially, and the taxation of trade lanes didn’t seem to be alleviating things. It was just more red tape to get tangled in, without addressing the real problems.

Most of the meeting didn’t directly concern him -- he was neither treasurer nor secretary for his various committees -- but he liked to be present in order to see who argued most versus whom was actually affected. Even before the mysterious Bastra had handed him a massive file that traced credit trails in circles around the Republic government, Bail had tried to keep track of things. Now he paid close attention to what the names on Bastra’s list were saying and how they deflected.

They may not even be aware they’re connected. On the table was yet another proposed cut; it was layered evenly, percentage-wise, across all systems, but then gouged a number of committees which were already hurting for financial support. The SDOC was one of the worst hit, with notations regarding which of its sub-committees should be prioritized.

When the Speaker for the Appropriations Committee mentioned a massive reduction for a particular
sub-committee -- something called the Extragalactic Society -- and advised cutting support entirely, a 
murmur rose through the room. Bail frowned: he’d never even heard of the group, but according to 
the pre-meeting report, it had recently grown to consume a substantial amount of the SDOC’s 
funding. He made a note on his datapad as a strident human voice broke through the discussion.

“This recommendation is unconscionable! You all know what the current project requires, a number 
of systems have pledged support to the SDOC expressly for the support of our work--”

Someone in the booth was attempting to hush the speaker, who turned to argue that the matter was 
far too vital. Bail squinted across and was surprised to see a bearded Jedi Master of venerable age 
maintaining the stand. The Appropriations Committee Speaker attempted to call for order twice 
before she was forced to mute the SDOC booth, apologising for the disruption.

“The Financial Appropriations Committee is truly sorry, however your current project is not only 
too costly to put forward at the present time, but given the ongoing Separatist Crisis, it is an 
extravagant waste of both materials and resources. We cannot at this time justify sustaining the 
initiative--”

They were being very cagey about the nature of the project, and nobody seemed to be questioning it. 
Election year budget issues be damned. Bail quietly let himself out of the Alderaanian booth and 
made his way around the outside of the chamber and down several levels. He was just in time to spot 
the Jedi departing the Senate Chamber, a ferocious glower folding his lined face. Bail picked up his 
pace a little to catch up.

“Master Jedi? I'm sorry, do you have a moment?”

The Jedi turned and his scowl lightened marginally. “Ah… Organa, is it?”

Bail bowed politely and fell into step with him. “Yes, sir. I'm afraid my presence is only out of 
personal interest and I’m not as cognizant of the finer details under discussion. You mentioned an 
initiative being run by the Extragalactic Society? It's not a matter that has been proposed to me 
personally, but I’ll admit to curiosity.”

The Jedi Master arched a shaggy white brow at him. “Jedi Master Jorus C’baoth. Alderaan has an 
admirable history of supporting the Jedi and our mandate--”

Bail refrained from wincing at the use of that particular, dreaded word.

“--to spread the Light to all corners of the known galaxy. Your own grandfather, Themis Organa, 
became quite the advocate after I settled the Ascendancy Contention, and your father followed in his 
footsteps--”

“With respect, Master Jedi, I do know a sales pitch when I hear one. The flattery is unnecessary,” 
Bail said with good humour.

He received a piercing glare which set off a headache between his eyes. C’baoth’s posture stiffened; 
despite his advanced age, the Jedi Master was in excellent health and towered over Bail. “I 
understand you're a young senator, Organa, but one might think you had learned some respect for 
your betters prior to your election.”

Shocked to silence, Bail resisted rubbing the bridge of his nose. “My sincerest apologies, Master 
C’baoth. I meant no disrespect. Your involvement in resolving such a prickly matter for my 
homeworld has been widely praised, and I apologise for not recognising you sooner.”

Appeased, the Jedi Master graced him with a smile; the headache eased somewhat but didn't fade
entirely. “I imagine any holos of me from that time were rather darker-haired. To answer your question, the ExGal Society seeks to move beyond the pitiful limitation of our present hyperlane routes, with an initiative to send an exploratory ship through the Unknown Regions and beyond. In short,” he said with an almost exuberant grin, “we seek to expand our reach beyond our known galaxy. Imagine the possibility of not only bringing the Unknown Regions into the Republic, but worlds in other parts of the universe!”

Bail racked his brain for the hypothetical exploration concepts that had filled his childhood bookshelves. “It's a... a colony ship?”

“Exactly! The ExGal Society is *so very close* to its goal: we have the design, we know where the parts, supplies and personnel may be procured--”

“But it's the funding which is holding you back.” Bail frowned, remembering the caginess even through heightened tempers. All Senate sessions were broadcast on the Senate’s exclusive public access HoloNet channel; they didn’t want details being released. “Why hasn't this been introduced to the citizens at large? There would surely be any number eager to offer their support.”

The Jedi Master paused beside the fountain in the atrium, apparently drawn by the cascade of water over multiple metal domes. They hummed in a shifting harmony as they drifted on the surface of the pool. “One of the stipulations of our donors is that they must have positions onboard. I'm sure you understand how such things work.”

Any system, corporation, guild or committee which pledged funding would expect to see a return on their investment. It had the potential to be politically lethal for ExGal and anyone involved, if the venture provided no profit in the end. Bail cleared his throat. “They must have a great deal of confidence in your society.”

C’baoth smiled proudly to himself. “It was a challenge to bring some of them around; the reason the planned route passes through the Unknown Regions to seed colonies is to offset the longer-term wait while the ship makes its way to our nearest universal neighbor. They will have first access to the fruits of the colony worlds.” His expression darkened. “With a budget cut, not only for our direct parent committee but others which have pledged support, we may never be able to set out.”

Bail made a mental note to check his committees’ funding allocations. “That's greatly disappointing, Master Jedi. Have you perhaps approached private investors?”

The Jedi’s smile was condescending. “Without Republic support for my project, neither I nor any other Jedi can accompany it. There must be Jedi onboard *Outbound Flight*, Organa. It is imperative.”

Bail’s comm chimed a reminder for his next meeting, and he offered a polite bow. “I’m afraid I must go, Master C’baoth. It's been a pleasure, and I wish you the best of luck with your project.”

C’baoth’s laugh was harsh. “There is no such thing as luck, only the Force.”

None of the other Jedi Bail had met in his time as Viceroy or Senator had been nearly so intense. What would Bastra make of C’baoth? Bail immediately dismissed the idea: it wasn't as if a lone mercenary would have much experience with the Jedi. C’baoth’s insistence on the importance of his mission -- it was clearly his idea, for which he had found eager followers -- neglected the more urgent issue of the Republic outright losing systems due to financial stress and taxation. Who had thought taxing the trade lanes was a good idea to start with?

As he walked into his office and apologised to his guests for his own tardiness, Bail had a great deal on his mind.
The Room of a Thousand Fountains was quiet at this time of day: with Anakin and the other in-Temple Padawans in advanced lessons and the Initiates at class, it was the perfect time for Qui-Gon to sink into the Force and enjoy the warm, golden thrum of living things. It was a soothing counterpoint to the attention-grabbing nova that was Anakin, energetic and eager.

*I may be getting too old to have a Padawan,* he thought with a wry grin. It was exhausting keeping up with Anakin, although the boy was certainly exceptional. He absorbed information and technique like a sponge -- as long as that information and technique were presented in a way that grabbed his attention. He disliked reviewing and practicing things once he'd grasped them, always demanding more challenge. Teaching him patience had quickly become Qui-Gon's priority.

He paused at the base of the hill to remove his boots and socks, relishing the sensation of soft, cool grass underfoot. He’d long since passed the point of being embarrassed by the stares of Jedi who were unfamiliar with his ways -- although he’d learned to carry the discarded footwear with him after an encounter in his youth with a particularly insistent caretaker droid. Boots were certainly not seedling planters!

His preferred copse, guarded by dense-flowering Corellian *chuwan* shrubs and semi-private, often had other Jedi seeking the quiet separation for their own meditations; sensing another in the space was no unwelcome surprise. What was unwelcome, as he rounded the shelter of the *chuwan*, was the realization that it was a Padawan curled into a ball, radiating hurt and sobbing quietly into her arms. She glanced up and blushed, rubbing the tears from her cheeks.

“Sorry for the intrusion, Master. I’ll go.”

Qui-Gon held up a hand. “I am the intruder, Padawan. Would you prefer to be alone?”

She didn't; he could feel it, but it was important to let her choose. He kept his expression neutrally pleasant while he waited and took the moment to study her: human, with fair skin and long dark hair, somewhere close to twenty Standard. The length of the braid over her shoulder indicated more than a decade of training; she should be close to her Trials by now.

After a bit, the young woman shook her head. “I’m okay.”

He doubted that, but simply nodded and took a seat on the grass a respectable distance away. “I’m Qui-Gon.”

She sniffed and shoved her hair out of her face. “Lorana.” She hesitated then asked, “You have a Padawan, right? Anakin?” At his nod, she said, “He’s a sweet kid. And he’s so… *vivid* in the Force. You must expect a lot from him.”

“No more than what I know he’s capable of.”

Lorana rested her chin on her knees and ran her fingers over the *chuwan* blossoms, watching as the tiny yellow flowers snapped closed in reaction and then opened again. “It’s so hard to know if my Master thinks I’m capable, or if he just expects me to know everything already.”

Remembering his own Master’s stern expectations, Qui-Gon frowned. “Is there something in particular you’re having difficulty with?”
She sighed. “It’s all diplomacy. I’m to speak to a bunch of people and convince them to support my Master, but I just don’t have the same way with words as my Master does. They tell me I’m very sweet but they can’t justify changing their minds.”

“Your Master hasn’t been very forgiving?” Qui-Gon kept his tone polite, but inwardly he growled. It was a Master’s place to find their Padawan’s strength and push them towards the best area of study. Lorana was a deeply compassionate person -- he could feel it, like a gentle violet radiance in the Force -- but compassion did not necessarily an orator or diplomat make. She might make an excellent mediator, but being persuasive was not the same as seeking an agreeable middle ground.

She scoffed through a sniffle and rubbed her face with both hands. “He expects me to just walk in the door, tell them what to do, and have them rush to say of course, Master Jedi, anything you want, Master Jedi! If they don’t take me seriously, it’s my fault and I’m not trying hard enough.”

That sounded distressingly familiar. He tucked away the still-keen memories of his time working with Dooku. The Padawan was the teacher, the Master the learner. Too many Masters -- and Qui-Gon had been one of them, himself, once -- forgot their own responsibility to listen and learn from their students’ struggles. “What have you learned of how your Master handles such situations?”

Lorana was silent for a time, thinking. Qui-Gon let himself sink into a light trance, feeling the currents that eddied around them.

“When Master Jorus walks into a room, he demands the respect of everyone there.” She wanted to be critical; it was a painful flare of red battling with her gentler nature which longed to give everyone the opportunity to be the best they could be. “If… if they’re not immediately acknowledging his rank, he ignores theirs, acts like they’re unworthy of his notice. I-- I can’t do that, Master Qui-Gon. I can’t do what he does. He tells me, over and over, that we are luminous beings, that any Jedi who can’t carry themself secure in their knowledge that the Force is with them should… should re-think their training.” She buried her face against her knees again. Carefully. Being critical of her Master -- he’d recognised the name -- would do her little good at this point. Qui-Gon tamped down on his flare of concern, projecting serenity that accepted her concerns as worthy of consideration. “Has your Master advised you to do so?”

Her face still pressed to her knees, Lorana shook her head slowly.

Choosing his words with care, Qui-Gon said, “There is a great difference between knowing the Force is with you, and trusting the Force to guide you. The first assumes that your choices are always right and that the Force will make everything work in your favour. It is arrogance, not confidence. The second allows for the Force to direct us, and to examine whether our choices truly come from a place of selflessness for the benefit of others.”

“You think I don’t trust the Force enough?”

“Only you can make that judgment, Lorana.” He hesitated. “Perhaps the trouble is more that you don’t trust in yourself to interpret the Force’s directions?”

She raised her head and stared at him with wide grey eyes. “So… Master C’baoth didn’t mean for me to go in and… and force people to do what I want. He wants me to let the Force guide me to say the right things.”

Knowing what he did of C’baoth -- who had knocked heads with Master Dooku many a time in their younger days, leading them to never again be assigned to the same conflicts unless the need was dire -- Qui-Gon quite suspected the Jedi Master meant the former interpretation. But that would be no
help to this young woman, who clearly struggled to find a space to call her own in the galaxy. “Perhaps we should meditate on the matter together. Would it help?”

Lorana unfolded from her misery ball and straightened, turning to face him. “I think I’d like that, Master Qui-Gon. Thank you.”

Somewhere off in the darkness, metal creaked ominously, echoing through the vast space; the damaged turbolift car still hung like a grisly pendulum through the hole blasted in the ceiling. With the Temple generators shut down, silence had fallen: the room’s many fountains lay still and brackish in the increasingly stale and humid air.

The central waterfall in the Room of a Thousand Fountains -- a waterfall he had played around and scaled a thousand times -- was a slick, barren cliff face. Water-smoothed stones shifted dangerously underfoot as he climbed, fingers slipping on the algae-coated rock. It would be a long, back-breaking fall to the ground from here, and he gritted his teeth with the effort. At the top of the cliff a shadow waited, cloaked in black, eyes glowing amber in the gloom. A voice, smooth and cloying, laughed at him. “Looking for this?” The man produced the comm-sized stick of a detonator, waving it over the side of the cliff. “Maybe I should give this to your friend for safe keeping?”

A chill ran through him as he glanced down into the pool below. Barely visible in the depths, a murky figure twisted and struggled against chains binding it to the bottom; a stream of bubbles rose to the surface as they thrashed. He fought against a surge of anger that threatened to overwhelm him. “Why are you doing this?!”

The yellow eyes gleamed in the darkness as their owner took a step back, palming the detonator. “Revenge. What has this Temple ever done for me?” He tossed the detonator idly, red lights blinking as it tumbled end over end to smack into the other man’s palm. “Come on, Garen, you don’t have time to save both!”

With a yell, Garen grabbed the Force and launched himself the rest of the way up, lightsaber already out and ignited as he landed. Green blade met red, and lit by the flare between them, Obi-Wan grinned. “How interesting.”

The pebbled edge under Garen’s heel slid out, sending him careening over the cliffside. He hit the cabin floor with a yell, tangled and struggling in the bedsheets.

“Fuck!”

Throwing the blankets roughly into his bunk, he stomped down the corridor and thumped hard on the door to the Healers’ quarters. “Keep that bastard out of my head, dammit!”

The door slid open to reveal a bleary-eyed Tholothian man. “What did he do?” In the dimness behind him, the other Mind Healers were sitting up in their bunks with mixed levels of curiosity and alarm.

“He’s gone walkabout in my dreams again. I don’t need to be dealing with this shit,” Garen growled. It really had been a long week of interrupted nights, no thanks to their unhappy passenger.

Still in a loose sleep-shirt and pants, the Healer grabbed his robe off its hook and stuffed his arms into the sleeves as he followed Garen down to the containment cell. “He’s figuring out the patterns
faster.”

Nobody had suffered disruptions for the first two days of their trip. Then the dreams had started, causing people across the ship to relive their worst moments in a way that was warped and twisted from the actual events. As near as the Healers could tell, Karkko wasn’t able to do more than influence people’s sleeping minds, seeking to drive a chink into someone’s shields. Anyone less-trained would have been compromised immediately; the Healers had been helping everyone on the staff strengthen their shielding, but it was only doing so much good. Karkko had zeroed in on Garen as their pilot and had tried twice before, using different imagery from Garen’s memories each time. This one, blending what Garen knew from Xanatos’ attack on the Temple over a decade before with his current concerns for a missing, Fallen friend, had easily been the worst.

Inside the containment cell, nothing had changed. Karkko remained immobile and apparently unconscious, but everyone onboard the Jedi transport knew better. The man dreamed, consciously and maliciously, seeking access to their minds.

Garen had read Karkko’s file: the Council of his day had written a very precise record of the Anzati’s Fall. His people had the ability to absorb the energy produced by most humanoid brains, via the probosci concealed in pouches under their cheekbones. It wasn't necessary for their survival -- not anymore, just a vestige of evolution -- but it was reportedly highly addictive. Karkko had thought himself disciplined enough to resist; his arrogance had doomed him. After a thousand years with an incurable addiction, Karkko was likely suffering terribly from withdrawal. The Mind Healers had prepared specifically to address the affliction, but there was still no way to walk him back.

He watched the Healer make adjustments to the containment frequencies and the hissing in the back of his head faded. There was still a massive stigma against Anzati -- people called them brain vampires and mind leeches and other reductive names, and there was a particular genre of erotic kink which reduced the Anzati participants to lurking monsters or grovelling animals. The Jedi Order of Karkko’s time had been extremely divided on the wisdom of training a Force-sensitive Anzati, which surely hadn’t helped Karkko’s desire to prove he was better than the expectations.

Garen shook his head. “At least we’ll be arriving in--” he checked his chrono-- “seven hours. I really hope he’ll be a better conversationalist once he’s awake.”

“You and me, both,” the Healer muttered. “Go catch up on sleep, I’ll keep an eye on him.”

“Nah.” Garen rubbed his face. “I think I’ve had enough for the night.” Running his fingers through his sleep-mussed brown hair, he headed for the bridge, as far from the containment cell as one could get.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to start putting links back in the chapter summary, because this story is getting ridiculous @__@

Master Tholme doesn't have a canon first name, however since he was intended to be a reference to Sherlock Holmes, I picked a suitable first name for him. The stuff with Volfe Karkko is Legends comics material, fallout from Quinlan and Aayla's misadventures with glitteryll amnesia (which obviously doesn't happen here).

I've been putting together a spreadsheet for keeping track of all the characters in the
story (sorry it took so long). Should be finished by the time the next chapter is done, and I'll drop a link in the story summary!

**Update:** It's updated to chapter 39 \o/
Intuition

Chapter Summary

Previously:

Jedi Master Renni Kerr presented to the Green Council his concerns regarding the Coruscant Temple's treatment of aged-out Initiates. A resolution was made between the Corellian and Chandrilan temples to quietly investigate.

Whilst on Corellia, Phel and Kate accepted a job to deliver Renni and Jedi Master Sarih to Coruscant without attracting attention.

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan discovered that he has a great deal more to learn. Unfortunately, the best place to learn it may not be the most ideal...

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to jynx and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.07.02
Coruscant

Coruscant was certainly… impressive. A vivid light sculpture in the Force, beautiful at a glance, but when one looked closer it was hard to ignore the sensation that something was very wrong. Renni sometimes caught similar glimpses of Coronet City, but never on so massive a scale. Corruption showed in flickers of red and orange and umber through the happy blues and violets, and that was far too much red for his comfort.

Shaking off his meditation, the Nautolan Jedi Master opened his eyes. Sarih still knelt facing him, her large eyes pinched in an expression of disquiet. Carefully so as not to disturb her, Renni collected himself and slipped through into the cockpit.

The atmosphere mix was somewhat drier here where the human pilot and droid were settled at the controls, talking quietly whilst awaiting landing confirmation. The brassy orb of Coruscant filled most of the viewscreen, urban expansion rings glowing on the night side like magma through stone. The captain glanced up as he entered and took one of the open gunnery seats, expression carefully neutral. “Everything alright, Master Jedi?”

Renni hadn't made the best of impressions on young Phel the year previous, but he was optimistic. The young human was receptive to the Force, if reluctant, and xir teacher had clearly been helping xir to improve xir mental shielding. “Have you ever tried investigating an entire planet through the Force?”
Phel -- Captain Phel, now -- shook xir head. “What I do see in my immediate space is kinda too much already.”

“They're quite beautiful.”

“I'll take your word for it and stick to the little things. We have another ten minutes or so left before they have a spot for us to land. Got your stuff ready?”

Plucking at the unfamiliar texture of his civilian shirt, Renni nodded. “We appreciate your accommodation, Captain.” The human hadn't had to increase the humidity for xir aquatic passengers, but the gesture was appreciated.

“Hey, it's what you're paying me for.”

Renni hesitated. “Have you... have you determined what it is that calls you here?” Phel had indicated that the Force wanted xir to assist the Jedi Masters in their clandestine visit to the galactic capital. Phel shrugged.

“I'll know it when it walks up and introduces itself, I guess.” Xe tilted xir head back to look at him apologetically. “I'm not much for the sitting still and being introspective stuff, sorry.”

He smiled gently. “The Force works in more ways than one. I'm sure you'll find your way, Captain.”

At Renni’s suggestion, the captain had requested to land at a smaller civilian spaceport somewhat further removed from the central government hub. It was inconvenient for their purposes, but that part of Coruscant hosted far more species from aquatic worlds, and with Nejaa’s assistance they’d reserved rooms at a hotel which provided suitable accommodation as a matter of course rather than an additional luxury. The efficiency of Coruscant mass transit made up for the distance; after dropping their bags off, Renni and Sarih caught an airbus toward the Senate District to play at being tourists.

Being out among the common citizens with his status unrecognized was an unusual experience for Renni. Sarih, as one of Nejaa’s occasional partners in shenanigans, had far more experience and guided him with practiced ease through the crowds. The broad concourse leading to the Senate Dome left ample opportunity to sit under shaded benches; several offered a light humidifying mist under the awnings, providing a moment’s relief from the dry air.

Keeping his senses alert for the occasional pickpocket, Renni settled in to watch over Sarih as she slipped into a deep trance.

“I hate cities,” Phel complained to Kate as they picked their way through the spaceport crowds. The droid grumbled agreement as yet another sentient walked into her as if she wasn’t there. “There’s got to be someplace quiet around here, it’s like there’s a whole crowd yelling in my head.” Even Nar Shaddaa hadn’t been this bad -- but it was only a moon, not even a quarter of Coruscant’s size with a tenth of the population. Xe needed to get those shields Bastra had been helping xir with in order, but it was too damned loud to focus!

Kate bumped the side of Phel’s leg, nudging xir in the direction of a droid-operated aircar. Xe grinned and let xirself be pushed around. “Well, you’re the one with the map.” Kate chattered at the droid pilot as they settled in, and the pilot tilted its silvery, wedge-shaped head.
“Quiet place? Would the honored passengers prefer a garden, or a location for dining?”

Gardens sounded boring. Bastra liked them, but *too much* peace was almost as unsettling. And a cup of caff wouldn’t be unwelcome. “Dining, but not, like, fancy? I’m not swimming in credits.”

The droid gave a stuttering chuckle. “Most sentients are not. If the honored passengers would secure themselves, I have a few locations in mind.”

They ended up in a tapcafe in an upper-mid building which had once been an archive or library of some sort; the tables on the upper level balcony, buffered by carved and internally-lighted resin panels which replaced the original databanks, were definitely quiet and offered a real chance to breathe. Phel leaned back into the comfortable bench built into the wall beneath the window, sipped the frothy caff concoction the place was apparently known for, and sighed.

“I gotta get my head in order, Kate. Would you mind doing a check for an outbound job?”

The droid happily plugged into the dataport on the table. #You do repairs, I can keep an eye out for trouble.#

Xe grinned. “Not that I’d expect it here, but thanks.”

The press of so many people in such a condensed space was still the biggest issue, but with the tapcafe’s gentle privacy and subtle soundproofing, it was easier to find that solid core Bastra had helped Phel construct in xir mind. It was an anchor, something to hold onto for stability, and Phel rested against it until xe could focus on xir shields.

This had never been an issue before, but Phel hadn’t spent time really developing the connection to the Force xe now knew xe had. With that development had come increased sensitivity to, well, *everything*. The shields were good enough for being on a quiet place like Takodana, or on a ship with the others -- xe could recognise by now the soft rumbling of Pulkka’s presence, Feid’s brash spikiness, the cheerful bubbles that trailed Zohli. What did Scogar say? Layers, lots of layers. Xe thought about how bulkhead insulation worked and started building a mesh like bubbles in between the existing layers of xir shields. When xe’d finished, xe could still feel the presence of a trillion people surrounding xir, but it was no longer like having them yelling in xir ear.

How weird that simply visualising a thing in xir head could make it real. Phel wondered, not for the first time, what xir life might have been like had xe been raised a Jedi the way Scogar had been. Xe didn't think the lifestyle -- what Scogar had described of it -- would suit xir very well.

There were Jedi here on Coruscant. They were a long way from the tapcafe and its mid-stack neighborhood, but Phel wondered if xe could sense them anyway. The Jedi Master had said an entire planet looked pretty in the Force.

Cautiously, like parting a curtain, Phel peered through xir shields. The glow of everything had been comfortably muted and was no longer so blinding; coloured lights, some much brighter than others, representing individual people and creatures resolved as xe focused. Even the rodents in the walls had their own little glows, and Phel considered warning the tapcafe’s manager they had a pest problem. The planet itself was a dull golden haze in the background, the sheer energy of its existence giving it a presence in the Force. With effort, xe filtered it out.

The Jedi Temple, a quarter of the globe’s curve away, was a small sun on its own: so many Force-strong people in one place concentrated everything, and it was almost painful to look at. Phel circled it without touching, remembering xir experience with Bastra’s kyber crystals. For all that light, there was still shadow. Bastra had been very explicit in showing xir how to recognise and control xir own
inner darkness -- it was only a problem if xe let it control xir actions without reasoning. *This* shadow, however, seemed to feed on the light around it.

Phel frowned and carefully filtered out the lights. It wasn't a shadow so much as a drawing abyss, like a black hole. They’d had the opportunity to look at the Maw from range once, and the memory stuck in Phel’s mind as xe pulled back, careful not to draw attention to xirself.

Xe blinked back into the real world and rubbed xir face. The caff had gone tepid, but xe knocked it back anyway. Kate chirped a question, and xe shook xir head.

“I saw something. Maybe…” Phel stared out the window at the mid-level lights. “I should ask Bastra about it.”

#You want Jedi help? I have Master Kerr’s comm code.#

Xe turned to stare at the droid. “Why would you have that?”

The droid sounded just a little smug. #He seemed too innocent to be allowed to wander without a counterpart.#

“He did have a counterpart.”

#She trusts him too much.#

Phel coughed on a laugh. “Yeah, see if you can get ahold of the Jedi, then.”

Renni blinked as his comm chimed softly for attention. Who would possibly be calling now? The sending ident was just a nonsense line of binary. Frowning in puzzlement, he accepted the call. “Kerr here?”

The voice on the other end sighed with relief. “It's Phel, Ma- Mister Kerr. I'm not interrupting anything, I hope?”

Renni glanced at Sarih, who was still meditating deeply, looking exactly like a Mon Cala woman resting from the relentless dry city air. “Not at present. What can I do for you, Captain?” How had the young human even acquired his code? He guessed it was the sweet-natured gold-painted astromech.

“I've, uh, taken a look around like you suggested.” That raised Renni’s brow ridge: Phel hadn’t displayed that much finesse with the Force, that he’d seen. “There seems to be a nice patch of shade under the Temple? You might find it worth a look.”

Shade? Renni frowned. “Where are you, Captain?”

“Tapcaf near the Dac District spaceport and down a ways?”

That was some distance from the Senate and Temple districts. How had xe even noticed anything from there? The Force was a cheerful riot of sensation. “Would you join us on the Senate plaza? I don’t mean to interrupt your day, but I’d like to see for myself.”

The human sounded uncertain. “I guess I can. You know more about this stuff than I do.”
Sarih had pulled out of her trance, perhaps alerted by Renni’s tight coil of concern. As soon as he signed off, she murmured, “The Temple? That doesn’t sound likely. They don’t have any real strength to speak of, nor training.”

The coil of concern locked in around Renni’s ribs. “The person who taught xir control is… highly unusual. Besides, aren’t we here to investigate why the Coruscant Temple is shipping off its Initiates? If anything is truly wrong, it would be there.”

Rolling her large, pale green eyes, Sarih shook her head. “This entire planet has a pall of Darkness. Surely you didn’t miss that when we were meditating before? Even millennia of political misdeeds can’t account for that.”

He clenched his teeth on a sigh. “And it’s highly possible the Temple is equally as affected. Just because Phel has no formal training, it doesn’t mean we should discount what the Force shows xir.”

His friend shrugged. “We shall see,” she said levelly. Renni leaned against the back of the bench, thinking Sarih had spent perhaps a bit too much time with the Green Cloaks.

The young captain showed up perhaps ten minutes later, trailing behind xir droid. Renni gave K8 a narrow look. “You copied my comm code, didn’t you?” The response he received at least sounded contrite.

Captain Phel took a seat beside him. “I’m glad she did, Scogar’s on the Outer Rim right now and I don’t know if I could get through to him.”

Sarih shifted closer and gave the human her full attention. “That’s fine. Describe what happened.”

Wide-eyed, the human blew out a breath and ran a hand back over their spiky hair. “Okay, so, the crowds were getting to me and Bastra taught me how to shield…”

As the human spoke, sometimes tripping over what xe was trying describe, Renni’s unease grew. Bastra, it seemed, had never bothered teaching Phel to avoid the Darker emotions, only to keep them under control, and xe was very… grey, as a result. Which wasn’t necessarily a problem, but the teachings had clearly increased Phel’s sensitivity. The description of the background radiance of the planet itself in the Force was unlike anything Renni had ever experienced.

Sarih was nodding. “And you saw this after you… created a filter in your shields?”

“Yeah. It was too bright and loud to look at before.”

Renni held out his hand. “May I see? I promise I will do nothing but look,” he said quickly as Phel squinted at his hand with suspicion.

“I guess? I don’t know how you can do that…” But xe clasped xir dry fingers around his.

Trusting Sarih to keep a lookout, Renni relaxed into the Force. Phel’s shields were… crude. Serviceable. Artless but they did what the human needed them to do. Renni tapped on Phel’s mind, seeking permission to look closer.

What happened next made him gasp: instead of allowing Renni through the shielding, Phel created a bubble within the shields for Renni, allowing him into the filter but still keeping him out. The distrust was understandable; the way Phel had managed it was as unconventional as everything else about xir.

Putting aside his astonishment for the moment, Renni turned his perceptions outwards. Through the
odd filter Phel had created, the lights of life were dimmed to a comfortable level, perceptible but not
disturbing. It was rather like being underwater. With the Light reduced, however, the shadows
became more obvious. With a detached sort of vagueness, Renni gestured for Sarih to give him her
hand, letting her see. Her fingers tightened on his to a painful degree, drawing him back.

Phel blinked dazedly at them while the droid made worried sounds. Renni patted the human’s hand
awkwardly. “I see why that was difficult for you to describe. And I thank you for sharing. This is…
deply concerning.”

Sarih was regarding the human with interest. “Why would you find the light so blinding you must
dull your senses to it? Not that we don’t appreciate the unintended result–”

“It’s just bright,” Phel said with a grimace. “Look, I get it: you think I’m doing it wrong, you want to
help me, you’re worried about me. It’s just… not your business, okay?” Xe gave them an apologetic
look, but Renni could feel xir resolve. “Lotta people got dealt worse than me and we all get by. If I
had your job maybe fixing my damage would be a priority. But it’s not my job and it’s not a
problem. I got people to lean on when I need to.”

Sighing, Sarih offered a small bow in apology. “You’re correct. It is my hope that you acquire
instruction in the future, but your life is yours.” She looked at Renni. “I have a friend who resides at
the Temple; she may be able to let us visit without raising a fuss.”

“That sounds ideal.” Renni placed his hand on Phel’s shoulder, giving a reassuring squeeze. “Thank
you, my friend. It can’t have been easy to come to us, but we appreciate it.”

The human tilted xir head to one side modestly. “Didn't know who else to talk to. I didn't think
Scogar would have suggested the Jedi at the temple.”

“Likely not.” Nejaa's description of how the Coruscant Jedi had treated Bastra had lodged pretty
vividly in Renni's mind. It was unconscionable that a promising Initiate might be treated so, and thus
the reason they were here. Other Jedi had been sent to investigate the Corps worlds for testimonials
from the Jedi there; Renni and Sarih were seeking anything out of the ordinary at the Temple which
housed the core of the Jedi Order.

Something out of the ordinary they had found, indeed, and thanks to a barely-trained sensitive raised
far from their halls.

They bade the captain farewell and returned to their hotel. If they were visiting the Temple, they
would need to dress appropriately.

Kate’s search had netted them another passenger-plus-cargo heading into the Outer Rim. Phel leaned
against the blocky fueling station in the hangar while they waited for their passenger. Xe hadn’t
changed xir mind: cities were awful. Too much noise, too many people. Xe missed the familiar
friendly faces around Maz’s.

Lost in thought, xe jumped when xir comm buzzed in xir pocket. “Yeah?”

It was voice-only. “Hey, uh. It’s Val. Dunno if you remember me? Handsome stranger in the
cantina in Coronet?”
Phel grinned at the description. “Well, hey. Didn’t think you’d try calling this soon. Miss me already?” xe teased.

There was an awkward laugh from the other end. “Yeah, actually. How’d your flight go?”

Xe blinked and felt xir eyebrows go up. Really? “Uh, about the usual. The passengers were polite, at least. Can’t say I like the destination, it’s a little big for me.”

“Yes, I hear you, I’m not that fond of it, either. Next time you’re out our way, I can show you what a good city is like.”

That actually sounded like fun. Visiting a place with someone who’d grown up there would be very different from seeing it with their crew. “I’d like that. Dunno when that’ll be, but I’ll let you know?”

Val’s smile was clearly audible in his voice. “I’ll be looking forward to it. Comm me anytime, Phel.”

Xe laughed. “You may regret that invitation.”

The answering laugh was warm. “No, I won’t.”

_Reformation Year 980.07.05
Bandomeer_

Bandomeer was pretty, in a bland sort of way. Lots of fields and trees. Valin squinted as a stiff breeze blew back the hood of his robe. “You really have to be a certain type of person to volunteer to come here.”

At his side, his dad chuckled and tugged his own cloak more tightly around him. “You are definitely a city kid.”

“Darn right.”

The two Jedi set out up the gravel track towards the cluster of low-lying administration and housing barracks. Everything here was as unobtrusive as possible: no durasteel walls or signal towers to disturb the appearance of a simple farming village.

It _was_ a simple farming village, but one run by Jedi which shipped its vast excess of produce off-world. All the tech was hidden away inside the neat plaster-walled buildings, the solar collectors disguised as roofing tiles. Even the droids were hidden, doing the sole work of preparing the produce to ship from refrigerated warehouses.

If Obi-Wan’s words were to be believed, the Coruscant temple had sent far too many unwilling and unsuited Initiates here. Valin’s dad was going to find out, while Val palled around with the younger crews in the hopes someone would talk where the adults couldn’t hear.

Inside the main administration building, an older human woman with her silvering hair trimmed into a soft cap welcomed them. “It’s kind of you to visit us, Master Halcyon. I’m Halla. Your message said you’re here to run a census?”
Nejaa smiled warmly. “Yes, the Green Council has come into a generous endowment and is assessing the apportionment to the different Service Corps.”

“How kind!” Halla beamed. “I’ll have a datadisk prepared for you. Would you and your Padawan like to stay for the evening meal?”

“That would be most appreciated,” Nejaa said with feeling. Val carefully hid a grin. “Shipboard rations are filling, but no substitute for proper cooking.”

On cue, Val said, “If you could use the galley without burning water--”

The woman laughed as his dad gave him a Look -- and a twitch of an approving smile. “I didn’t see you making an attempt, Padawan.”

“There’s nothing to work with because you only requisitioned rations.”

“Well, I’ll see if we can’t send you home with a few days’ worth of real food, and maybe your Master can learn from the expert,” Halla said tartly. Her smile turned knowing as Val let his expression quaver a moment. “In the meantime, would you care for a tour of the allotment?”

Nejaa’s smile was all teeth. “We’d love to.”

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_Reformation Year 980.07.12
The Sunflare_

Sweat ran down her face and spine, dampening the back of her shirt. Feid cursed and ducked again, trying to ignore the stinging of salt in her eyes. The balanced training blade -- dull-edged fibreplast but weighted like the real thing -- skimmed overhead, scraping her remaining forehead horn. The impact jangled the nerves clear down her spine, and she swung back wildly, more intent on gaining range than actually hitting Bastra.

The triple-thump of three soft training darts just below her collarbone made her swear viciously and hold a hand up in defeat. “That off-hand blaster is a dirty trick.”

Breathing hard, Bastra grinned and swiped at his forehead with the back of the hand holding the weapon in question -- one of the training models acquired with Zoh’s skillset in mind, but definitely useful for the adults, as well. “It was a spur of the moment choice which paid off a few years ago, but if I want to use that tactic properly--”

“You gotta train it, yeah.” Feid set her training blades aside and reached for her water bottle. It was a long run out to Dathomir, the idea of visiting the place was making everyone nervous, and they were taking the edge off by sparring each other into the floor of the secondary cargo hold.

Everyone except Pulkka, of course, who handled her nerves by stress-baking. The droid wasn’t too keen on the visit, either -- rancors, native to Dathomir, were known to use mechanicals as chew toys.

The primary hold was full, mostly refrigerated cases of foodstuffs that weren’t native to the planet. The Witches knew better than to plant anything potentially invasive, at least, but there was still a case
of herb seeds that could be grown in isolated pots. Dathomiri Witches didn't trade often, if at all, and made few demands on visitors, but Feid had suggested an offering wouldn't go amiss.

And if the Witches didn't want it, there were other places that would buy the stuff.

Even Bastra’s ghost pal was uneasy. Bastra had made a request with a pilot Kanata trusted to obtain a particular kind of crystal from Cristophsis and bring it back. It had been neither cheap, easy, or entirely legal, and Feid was too smart to ask questions when the answers were that pricey. It had something to do with the evil cube Bastra had acquired on Kodai four months earlier - something about preventing it from leaking. The Force stuff was all way beyond Feid, and she tried not to ask too many questions.

So Spooky was back, and offering unwanted advice. “Limiting your sparring equipment puts both of you at a disadvantage, you know.”

Feid narrowed her eyes at him. “You don’t say.”

Qel-Droma was floating a little above one of the crates, his robes hanging through its lid and making him look like an amateur-produced holosim. “How’s he supposed to be able to adapt to unpredictable situations if you only have the weapons you hold in your hands?”

“Maybe the point was to see if his one vibroblade can defend him against two?”

“How many thugs carry only a pair of vibroblades?”

Kriff it. He was right, but she didn’t want to admit it. She had her mouth open to continue the argument when Zoh’s voice came over the comm. “Um, Dee says we’re leaving hyperspace in two minutes.”

Bastra scrubbed a towel over his face and gestured at the response button near the hatch on the other side of the room; the receiver light blinked on. “Secondary cargo secured.”

The ghost arched an eyebrow at Bastra as the light went off. “That’s rather indulgent of you.”

Feid joined Bastra in tossing the sparring toys back into their box. “It would have wasted time crossing the room.” They braced against the stacked crates as the warning alarm sounded. It was a testament to the quality of the hyperdrive and its upkeep that there was barely a shudder as they returned to realspace. Pulkka and Deesix took their maintenance work seriously, and Bastra hadn’t yet discounted any of their recommendations.

But it was always better to brace than get thrown into a bulkhead.

The comm popped again, and Dee announced that they had an hour before landing. Feid made sure the last of the training darts was packed away and went to shower off the sweat.

By the time she got to the cockpit, Bastra had reclaimed the controls beside Dee; his hair was still damp from his own shower and water darkened his collar. Feid snorted. “You’re presenting yourself to the Witches like that?”

He frowned up at her as she leaned with her elbows on the back of his chair. “Is there something wrong with wearing the armour?”

“I know you’re still new to having long hair, but you should have figured out how to use the sonics to get the excess out.”
Pulkka whuffled in amusement and shook her mane. “Do you know how long it would take me to dry off without the sonics? A full twenty-six hours.”

Bastra grinned. “Humans might be furry, but we’re not that furry.”

“Speak for yourself,” Feid said with a laugh. “We once teamed up with one human who could best be described as shaggy. We called him Ewok.”

“You called him Ewok,” Pulkka snorted from the comms station. “And he threatened to stab you if you kept it up, if I recall rightly.”

“Nobody deserves the nickname Wookiee when they’re less than a metre and a half tall.”

The ghost and Zohli were having a snicker fit behind her and she grinned. Good stories, good times.

Pulkka’s board lit up as they skimmed the atmosphere. “Five beacons. Which one are we going to?”

Bastra glanced over his shoulder. “Third one down, give me the coordinates.”

Dathomir was a deceptively lovely ball of blue and green, similar to Takodana. Unlike Takodana, however, Dathomir’s jungles were nearly impenetrable multiple-layered rainforests teeming with creatures that had seen Republic survey teams as a light snack. Right next to the swamps teeming with creatures that had seen Republic survey teams as an excellent dinner. Followed by the rocky deserts teeming with creatures that would eat anything the jungles and swamps hadn’t claimed.

The oceans were pretty deadly, too.

It made sense that the only people who had successfully settled the planet millennia before were Force-sensitive outcasts from their respective Orders.

Feid stared out the window at the wave of greens and purples so dark they were nearly black in the reddish sunlight. Carnivorous flutterwings that roosted in the jungles’ highest layer burst into the air like a golden cloud as the ship’s bow-wave stirred the branches.

“Hey.”

She glanced over to see Zohli giving her a worried look. “I’m good, kid.”

Zoh arched an eyebrow in an expression she’d picked up from her dad. “If you say so.”

Bastra chose to set down in a clear spot beside a rocky slope with a gentle waterfall tumbling over its face; the gap between the trees was barely wide enough for the Sunflare, and the thin screech of branches on durasteel echoed through the hull. Zohli looked up from her panel. “Weather looks dry and kinda cool out there.”

“Suit up.” Bastra pulled his jacket off the back of the pilot's chair as he got up. He touched Feid's elbow in passing. “You don’t have to come—”

She shook her head and checked the charge on her blasters. “I should be there.”

By the time they opened the ramp, there was a group of women waiting at the tree-line, armed with spears that were a lot more effective than most blaster-wielders assumed, and dressed in hand-stitched leather leggings and jackets over soft woven tunics. Most of the women were humanoid, although there was one golden-furred Wookiee. They didn’t so much as twitch as first Pulkka, then Dee and Zohli, and finally Feid and Bastra emerged from the ship.
The woman at the front, a Zabrak with deep brown markings across her golden skin and around her dark eyes, raised her chin imperiously and barked, “Ulcha natthi, Imdohara.”

Feid sighed with resignation. “Hello to you, too, Mother.”

Feid had been less than thrilled when he'd said that he needed to visit Dathomir. She’d told him, privately, about how she’d never developed any ability to speak to 'the spirits' -- what the Witch clans called the Force. Thirteen, lonely, and feeling useless, she’d said goodbye and stowed away on the ship of a smuggler who had landed to make repairs. Using the hunter skills the clan had taught her, she’d remained hidden until the ship docked at a waystation, then joined the throngs of station-side poor, seeking any work that would buy a meal. She could introduce him to a relatively non-hostile clan, but she had no idea how they’d receive her.

“We don’t have to go to your former clan,” he’d offered. Feid had shaken her head, looking tired.

“It's been seventeen years. They'll sense me as soon as we land, anyway. Might as well get it over with.”

Now, listening to the woman who was clearly not just the Mother of the clan but Feid’s birth mother haranguing her in the local language, Obi-Wan wondered if this had really been such a good idea. The other women had relaxed and were watching with an air of relief and amusement; a glance at Feid showed her rolling her eyes.

“No, he’s not my mate!”

Pulkka chuffed a surprised laugh and Zohli squeaked behind her hands. Schooling his expression into one of shock and disappointment, Obi-Wan propped his fists on his hips and declared, “I can’t believe you’d deny us to your own family, darling!”

The look she shot him was murderous.

Pretending to ignore it, he offered Feid’s mother a bow that was slightly more than respectful. “I'm so sorry, my Lady. My name is Scogar.”

Amusement glinted in the older woman's eyes. “Well met, Scogar. I am Mother Kaiiel. Of course, you may call me Mother. We are the Tumbling Waters clan.” Her accented Basic was heavy on the vowels and slid over the harder consonants. She gave Feid an expectant glare. “Your husband has his manners intact, at least. Did you break yours?”

Feid’s lips were pressed hard into a straight line. She gave Obi-Wan another glare that warned him to expect chili flakes in his tea leaves for the next year. “Of course not. You know Scogar; this is his daughter, Zohli. On my right: my spear-sister, Pulkka, and our protector, Deesix.”

Dee muttered awkwardly at being called a protector, but Obi-Wan’s attention was drawn by Kaiiel looking past them. “You travel with a shadow, too?”

Ulic made himself visible at the foot of the ramp and bowed politely. “I swear by the memory of my ancestors that I mean you no ill. I will remain here and not enter your village.”

Kaiiel squinted at Ulic in mild distaste. “Acceptable.” She handed her spear off to the Wookiee and
stepped forward to grip Feid’s shoulders. “It’s been so long, my dearest. I could feel you still lived, but you never tried to send word—”

Feid scoffed. “Do I need to remind you how effective the we enslave unclaimed men act was in scaring offworlders away? Say ‘Dathomir’ to even the hardest merc and they walk.”

Kaiiel cackled. “Our ancestors knew what they were doing.” She gestured widely to the rest of her party and accepted her spear back. “Come! You are welcome in our village. We may discuss the real reason for your visit.” She gave Feid a sly grin and nudged her with an elbow in the ribs. “I told you you'd be back.”

Ulic nodded when Obi-Wan looked at him. “I doubt there’ll be trouble, but I’ll stick around here.”

He forced a half-grin. “Good luck?”

Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow at him. “No such thing; merely the Force at work.”

The Tumbling Waters village was tucked back into a split in the stone hidden by the trees. It was surprising how close they had landed without seeing a sign of occupation. There were some thirty or so lodges constructed from what looked like mud and dried grass over a framework of woven branches -- primitive but weather-proof, biodegradable, easily built and easily abandoned if the clan had to leave for some reason.

One of the women, a stocky human who seemed close to Feid's age, noticed his appraisal. “Too humble for you, spacer?”

He smiled and shook his head. “Appreciating the simplicity. I don't see smoke holes.”

“We make filters from reeds,” she pointed to what he had thought was just some detailing around the upper wall below the more pronounced curve of the roof. “The smoke and bad airs dissipate while the warmth stays in.” She eyed him for a moment. “The spirits speak to you.”

Obi-Wan nodded modestly. “I've been trained to hear them.”

“But you already had the gift. I am Perin, spear-sister to Naiala and Durrmar,” she said, pointing to a taller human and the Wookiee.

“May I ask what spear-sister means?”

Perin shrugged. “They are a sister with whom you train and hunt, the one you trust to stand at your back. We haven't had conflict with the Nightsisters for many seasons, but if they return, Naiala and Durrmar will be at my side, and I at theirs. You stand at Feid's side?”

He nodded, attention caught by the curious faces peeking around the thick rugs covering the lodge doors -- children and adults of all ages and species.

“Good. The galaxy is vast, and one should never stand alone, spear-brother of my sister.” She clapped his shoulder companionably and split off from the group with her spear-sisters.

Kaiiel led them to a central lodge that was larger than the others, with extensions sprawling from its sides. Warmth and golden light spilled out as someone within pulled the rug aside to let them enter. The middle of the lodge contained a deep metal dish in the earthen floor as a fire pit; squatting over the low flames was a large metal plate on six legs. A Zabrak boy a few years older than Zohli, dressed in similar leathers and tunic to the women, dark hair between his horns pulled back into a tail, tended a steaming bowl on the heating plate. The rest of the floor was covered with more of the thick rugs, woven in shades of dark red, light green, and vivid yellow.
They shed their jackets and sat in a close circle to one side of the firepit; Kaiiel indicated for Feid and Obi-Wan to take seats to either side of her. With an air of ceremony, the boy served each of them a cup of something warming that wasn't quite sweet and tasted vaguely nutty; a cup was even placed in front of Deesix, who tilted its head in confusion.

“I… can't drink?”

Kaiiel and the other Witches in the lodge laughed, and even Feid's discomfited expression cracked into a grin.

“You're not expected to. It's merely a gesture of welcome. One of your friends might drink it, if they choose,” the Clan Mother said with a smile.

“Oh.” The droid paused, then inclined its head, the beads attached to the back of its dome swinging forward. “Thank you.”

“We are acquainted with such creations, although we have not met one who could act for itself,” the boy said as he placed the bowl back on the heating plate. He knelt just beyond the circle, between Dee and Zohli. “I am Thenn.”

“He is training to command the spirits,” Kaiiel explained. “Many can learn to hear the spirits, but not all may command them. It requires a strength of will, of focus.” She rested a hand on Obi-Wan's knee. “You have had such training, and the spirits tell me you seek further instruction. This is why Thenn is here, so he may also learn.”

Obi-Wan gave Thenn a welcoming smile. “I hope you find use for this. I've been advised to sharpen my natural tendency toward precognitive visions,” he said, turning his attention back to Kaiiel. “Feid said you might be able to help me learn.”

“Ohm.” The Clan Mother's eyes half-lidded as she sipped from her own cup. “We can help you with that, but it will take time. Our ways are not the ways you learned, and you cannot simply change such habits in a day.”

He nodded. “I suspected as much. I’m simply grateful you’re willing to help me.”

“Of course. You and your friends are welcome among us for as long as you require to learn what you need. The rules for guests are thus: you are not required to engage in the daily work -- unless you wish to do so,” she added with a wink. “But in the rare chance we come under attack, you will be asked to help defend us. Also, you must stay in the lodgings we provide and not leave the village unescorted, as bumbling about in the forest all unwitting may drive off our game or draw unwanted attention. If you wish to return to your ship for any reason, ask a spear-sister or -brother to guide you.”

Obi-Wan nodded. They might be here for a week or more, easily.

Zohli nudged his elbow. “Am I gonna have to do my schoolwork?”

At’tha did make her do her schoolwork. Zohli kind of figured he would, but it had been worth asking about anyway. After the first day, her portable holoprojector had started drawing some of the younger kids in the village; she ended up with a little circle of younglings listening while she
explained basic astrogation. They asked lots of silly questions, like “Why can’t we touch the blue pictures?” and, “But if the moon is here in your holl-thingy, how can it still be in the sky?” and “How come you have fuzzy ears but I don’t?”

She didn’t get much work done until Thenn showed up to shoo the little ones away. “You have your tasks, there will be plenty of time to ask her later!” He grinned and claimed the spot on the other side of the projector, tracing dark fingers through the blue light. “We have little need of such things. Seeing how others live is fascinating.”

Zoh twitched her ear at him teasingly. “I thought you were meant to be learning with At’tha -- my dad,” she clarified at his confused look.

Thenn chuckled. “Our Clan Mother is teaching him basics, things we learn as children. At least he’s a patient student, most adults might get annoyed at starting from the beginning.”

“He told me once that the last four years have been nothing but relearning things all over again.”

Thenn tilted his head and gave her a look that felt like he was seeing through her to the lodge wall behind. “The spirits see you, too, you know. You could learn with him.”

What a weird thing to say. Zoh glanced out the open door to where Feid and Pulkka were helping the Witches make repairs to one of the lodges. They were as close as aunts to her -- and to Phel, when xe was around -- and as grateful as she was for them, it raised questions. “I could, but not Feid?”

He shrugged. “Our Sister left before I was born. I don’t know why, but they say the spirits saw her and… avoided. They would watch, but never touch, never speak, never respond to the gentlest calls. She makes them sad, I can feel it, but she doesn’t try anymore.”

“From what At’tha said, the Force and your spirits are the same thing. But the way he was taught, it’s just… energy?” She set her datapad aside and powered down the projector.

Thenn pulled a face. “That sounds disrespectful. I’m not saying it’s wrong!” he added in a rush. “Just that denying the conscious will of the spirits seems rude to them. I suppose it still works, if they speak to the Jedi for so many generations? It’s just strange to us.”

Zohli wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her chin on her knees. “The spirits aren’t upset with At’tha, are they?”

The boy shook his head. “They like him, he listens to all of them, not just the ones that say what he wants to hear. It’s hard to do that, you have to be really sure of yourself and your place in the world. Or stars, in his case.” They shared a laugh.

“Can I ask what they look like?” She ducked her head apologetically when he hesitated. “Sorry, if that’s rude--”

“No! It’s just hard to describe.” Thenn squinted out into the afternoon sunlight, golden eyes tracking invisible things. “It’s like… heat shimmer. Or currents in the water. You don’t see the spirits so much as how they affect things around them. Do you know what whuffa are? I guess they don’t bring boring things offworld. It’s like an eel, in the dry season they burrow deep where the soil is moist, but in the rainy season they spawn in deep pools. And you can’t see it, but they release a slime into the water around them to trap prey. But you can feel it, when you put your hand in the pools. It’s thick and soft like the fibers we weave.” He plucked at his pale green tunic. “That’s what seeing the spirits is like.”
Zoh bit her lower lip on a grin. “Like touching eel slime?”

“What?! No! It’s-- oh!” Thenn gave her a dirty look for a moment before they both collapsed laughing. “Alright, not the best comparison.”

“I couldn’t resist,” she gasped between giggles.

“You could have, you just chose not to!” Thenn scrunched his nose at her. “My turn to ask. What’s it like traveling among the stars?

“Oh. Hmm.” Zoh shifted a bit into the half-lotus she usually used when meditating with At’tha, and rested her elbows on her knees. “It’s… boring and exciting at the same time. Like…” She gestured with her hands. “Imagine if this lodge could fly. And you eat in it, and sleep in it, and do all your regular work, but you can tell it to, like, take you to the other side of the world, or to the nearest good place to go swimming. It takes time to get there, days, so while you’re going there, the only people to talk to are the ones who are also in the lodge, and since there’s nothing to see outside, you keep doing your inside work.” She grinned. “But then you get to where you’re going, and it’s a new place you’ve never been, or maybe you’ve been there before, but there’s something new happening. All the excitement happens when you get to the next place.”

Thenn was wide-eyed, his chin resting on his hands. “What do you do when you get there?”

She shrugged. “Most of our work is in bringing things from one place to another, but sometimes they’ll take a hunting job in the new place, and they’re training me to help out. They usually take time to bring me to see things. Planets that are really developed, with big cities, might have tours so you can see the special sights.”

“Siddies?”

“Cities. A city is like, uh.” Zoh bit the inside of her cheek, thinking. “Imagine a huge lodge, but it’s more like… a hundred huge lodges all built on top of each other, and you can climb up inside them. And there’s hundreds of them all close together, with space on the ground to walk between. Cities are huge, you can go to the top of the tallest lodge tower and in every direction all you see are more towers. Some planets are all city, no ground at all anymore.”

He seemed torn between awe and horror. “That’s amazing, but… why would they do that?”

“Because there are so many people, they need the space.” She sketched a square on the rug with her fingertip, ruffling the tufted fibers. “One side of this is one meter; in a square, we call it a square meter. For the best, uh, peace of mind, every person needs a minimum space of sixteen square meters to live in and call their own. Close families might need less, but—” she tapped her datapad, which contained a recent copy of an Aurek-level sociology text among her other course materials—“that’s the general rule when people are building houses. That’s the absolute minimum space, more is better. Now…” Zoh ran the numbers in her head as she measured down the sides of the square with her fingers, then drew a tiny square in one corner that was less than half a tenth of the whole thing, about two centimeters on each side. “If the planet where the Republic is based was not all city, and everyone stood together on the ground, this is how much space each person would have.”

“To stand in?”

“To stand in, to live in. There’s just that many people,” she explained. “So they had to build up, because there’s no room on the ground. At’tha said even the oceans are covered now.”

Thenn sat back, staring at the tiny square. “I can’t even imagine that.”
“And the planet's not that much bigger than Dathomir, either.”

He squinted at her. “Do you only know all this because people tell you?”

“Well, yes and no.” She held up the datapad. “You have books here, right? Well this has books in it, but it can also access information that we get from machines that count things. Lots of things, all the things. And that’s important information. So we’ve had machines measure how big each planet is, and how long it takes to orbit its star, and where systems are moving to among the other stars, because that affects our navigation. We have machines that count planetary populations so the people in charge can make sure everyone has enough food. So, going by those machines, I know roughly how many people live on Coruscant, and then using numbers I can figure out how much space there is on the surface of a planet and how much space each person could potentially have for themselves if everyone shared equally.”

Zoh let Thenn take the datapad. He turned it over in his hands, frowning. “And this information is important?”

“But not to everyone. But it’s important to people who make decisions for other people.”

His frown deepened. “But why would they? That doesn’t sound right.”

The language she thought in her head was stuff she’d heard At’tha, Feid, and Phel use when they thought she couldn’t hear them. “Um. Well, does your Clan Mother make decisions for the clan?”

“Yes, but not without us telling her our feelings on the matter first.”

“Right. So, there are so many people, that smaller groups designate individuals to speak for them. And those people go to the local leader and tell them what their people have said. Then the local leaders go to the larger world leader and tell them what the individuals who have told them what the smaller groups have said. And then the world leaders go to the system leader, and the system leaders go to the galaxy leader.” It was a grotesque simplification of how the Republic’s government worked. How it was meant to work, anyway.

“But… your people are from a different planet from Scogar’s people. And I doubt what’s good for those cities would be good for people like us. So how do they make a decision that’s fair?”

“Unless it’s a matter that affects another world, they’re usually allowed to make their own decisions. Like, if Dathomir joined the Republic, they would probably leave you alone for the most part. But a few times a year, they would send people to talk to your clans and see if you need anything, or if there had been trouble from spacers like us—” Zoh gestured to herself—“causing problems for you. That’s, uh, the simple version, it’s really a lot more complicated.” So much more complicated, it would take her hours to explain it all.

Thenn looked disturbed. “We mostly scare off your Republic people, if we can’t avoid them. Is there anything good that would come to us from dealing with them?”

She shrugged. “To be honest? Mostly just legal protection. If an offworlder decided to come here and harvest all your trees, you could petition the Republic to punish them.”

“It wouldn’t bring the trees back, though. They take generations to grow.” He pulled a face. “That’s why if we find an offworlder doing something like that, we just kill them. We wouldn’t wait until all the trees are gone. And then once other offworlders find out, they won’t come for the trees, either.”

Zoh grinned. “You make a really good point. And yeah, I don’t think Dathomir needs the Republic. The Republic definitely doesn’t want anything Dathomir has: you don’t have any industry and don’t
pay taxes, so any problems would be between you and individuals.”

“I’m not even going to ask what those words mean to you,” Thenn said with a laugh. He handed her datapad back almost reverently. “Don’t you get lonely with only adults around you in your ship?”

Oof, tough question. She enjoyed spending time with her at’tha, her aunts, teasing Deesix. Training was fun, but it wasn’t… playing. She twitched an ear, the small gold hoop earrings chiming together. “Yeah. They’re teaching me to do stuff like they do, but… sometimes I want to just sit with someone and imagine what things would look like if everything was made of food.”

Thenn laughed and climbed to his feet. “Come on, then.” He held out his hand, inviting. “The little ones should be done with their tasks soon. They’d love to have someone to play with.”

She was probably going to end up with kids hanging off her shoulders. Grinning, she grabbed his hand and let him pull her to her feet. “Let’s go!”

Kaiiel had been right about the Witches’ way of interacting with the Force being very different from what he was accustomed to. Obi-Wan sat crosslegged beside a small fire, the flames vivid green from the herbs placed among the kindling, and breathed slowly. Dathomiri magic was less about flashy shows of power and more about grounding oneself in the present -- Qui-Gon would have appreciated it -- and letting it work through you.

The Clan Mother had been quick to insist that he didn’t need to see the spirits the way the Witches did -- it was nothing more than the mind supplying images to fit what it experienced. He already knew how to listen to the spirits and how to work with them; now he had to learn to let his Self sit back and allow the Force work on its own.

“A being is a spirit made flesh, but in becoming so, we lose their perspective. The spirits will know you seek their insight,” Kaiiel murmured. She sat opposite the brazier from him, Thenn to her left and a human Sister named Lanea to her right. “The trick is to feel when they wish to show you something, and how to interpret it. The spirits communicate in feelings, and for them, Time does not flow in one direction like the stream. They know where you stand on your path and can discern past from future, but the past they see is all pasts, and the future the see is all futures. You have questions,” she said, noting Obi-Wan’s frown.

He considered his words before speaking. “I have often been shown visions unbidden. Is what one sees when seeking different from what one is shown?”

“You ask if the spirits have purpose behind their revelations.” Her smile was soft. “It isn’t possible to guess the reasoning behind what the spirits do -- whether they act of their own will, at ours, or at the whims of something greater. If they want us to know what could lie in the future, or if they want us to prevent it. I know you feel you’re meant to act -- and I can understand why, when the spirits show you such horror. Perhaps that is what they want from you, because they understand the empathy which comes from being in this world. Empathy fuels change, after all.

“You saw a distant world, the last time you actively sought insight.”

“I did.” Obi-Wan smiled at the memory. “It was a pleasant change. But if the spirits lack mortal empathy, how do they know to warn us of terrible events in the future?”
“Because such events dominate all futures. Events so inevitable that there are few other options.”

He grimaced. “I’d... like to avoid slipping into quantum theory about multiple simultaneous possibilities—”

Kaiiel and Lanea burst into laughter while Thenn looked confused. “Oh, child,” the Clan Mother said, patting his knee, “you over-think the matter. If you were not there, someone else would be in your place. This is how inevitable such events are.”

That struck a chord in his memory: Ulic talking disparagingly of prophecies and the randomness of fulfillment. “I see.” The implications were more than a little chilling, when he considered the kinds of things he’d received visions of in the past. Best not to think about that too hard.

She patted his knee once more. “They will show you what they will show you. Learning to ask and listen is more important. So. Close your eyes and turn your focus outside yourself.”

Obi-Wan settled into a comfortable trance, letting the crackle of the flames fill his ears. Before, he would have focused inwards, to examine his state of mind and work through his troubles, as he had done with Ulic’s assistance years earlier. Looking outside was difficult: there was nothing familiar to focus upon, just the shifting currents of the Force.

Into that current, he extended a simple request for guidance. There was no way to measure how long he waited, but eventually he felt a tug, gentle, like someone taking his hand. He let it pull him along, past flickers of images too fast to truly register.

It was the sound that changed first: the pop and hiss of the fire became the deep roaring of a waterfall, and the sensation of being pelted with small stones about the head and shoulders brought his head up sharply.

It was raining, a warm, heavy deluge that felt almost like drowning. The drops struck the platform he stood on hard enough to splash back up to shoulder height; Obi-Wan was drenched to the skin in an instant. Beyond the edge of the platform, a dark sea surged, seemingly endless.

I don’t understand. Is this a place I need to find, or a place I need to avoid?

There was no answer, because of course there wasn’t. Obi-Wan pulled back to himself slowly, wondering which piece of the puzzle this was.

Chapter End Notes

I’m not particularly a fan of the original depiction of Dathomir from The Courtship of Princess Leia, which owes more to classic pulp sci-fi than to any actual considered development of an alternative society. But I also recognise that a lot of people enjoy it, so just assume that not all clans are the same and they’re on the other side of the planet here.

Although it is basically Space!Australia.
Chapter Summary

Previously:
Jedi Master Renni Kerr and his friend, Master Sarih, journeyed to Coruscant with Phel to investigate potential issues at the main Temple.

Overwhelmed by the crowds on Coruscant, Phel sought solace only to discover something much more troubling.

In search of training to hone his natural skills in prescience, Obi-Wan and his crew visit Feid’s former clan on Dathomir.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, Junara, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This far down the stack, there was nothing but darkness. Not for the first time, Renni Kerr thought of the deep trenches of his homeworld, how even Nautolan eyes failed to pierce the gloom. There might once have been life this far down, neon signs and the warmth of home and family, but with the developments above cutting off the sky and then rerouting power conduits away, only the scavengers and the truly desperate remained.

Beyond the ragged edge of the ancient landing platform, the world fell away to nothingness; the beam of his lamp barely reached the far side of the urban chasm, casting tiny glints from the edges of broken transparisteel.


“Four thousand years ago, they did.” Jocasta Nu’s voice echoed slightly from where she was occupied with the next door. “This part of the Temple was damaged heavily and then abandoned after one of the many battles against the Sith Empire. It took centuries, and they simply rebuilt over the existing structure, much like they rebuilt over the Corellian Temple. Ah!” A heavy clack announced that the door’s lock had finally given up the fight. “I’m afraid the lifts here don’t have power anymore, but the stairs have been maintained.”

Renni turned away from the yawning abyss. “How often does anyone come down here?”

“Only maintenance droids, to ensure the newer foundations and reinforcements are in good order.” The Temple Librarian scooped up her lamp and tucked her arm through Sarih’s as they started down the long, doglegged stretch of dusty stairs. “I must say, I was rather excited when you said you wanted to study the Old Temple. It isn’t often we have students of antiquity visit anymore, the older structures are very well documented.”
“Well,” Renni admitted with a chuckle. “My interest is less academic and more, eh… hobbyist.”

“Even a casual student is a student,” Jocasta said crisply. “I would so love to bring the Padawans down here, you can feel the Temple’s history in her bones.”

It was definitely palpable. Renni traced his hand over the smoothly carved wall, feeling echoes of pain and blasterfire and joy and peaceful reflection through the poured stone. With daylight streaming through the tall coloured-glass windows, even these little-used stair-wells would have been inspiring. Now the glass was caked with dust and detritus, the colours lost in the darkness. “There was live combat here.”

“The Sith Empire invaded Coruscant and even occupied the shattered Temple remains for a time. Removing their presence was a long and costly battle.”

At the base of the fourth set of stairs, corridors stretched away in three directions, and Jocasta paused to get her bearings. “You said you wanted to see the earliest part of the Temple?”

“If possible. I know it might well be long-buried--”

Jocasta chuckled knowingly. “If it were any other building, perhaps, but the plans for reconstruction specifically indicated making certain the heart of the original Temple remained accessible, and for good reason. The Temple was built around the peak of a mountain that was sacred to the original inhabitants of Coruscant; it contains a natural nexus of the Force.”

“Of course nobody would want to lose access to that,” Sarih murmured.

“Active worship of the nexus died out with the original Coruscanti religions, but the cavern was gradually structured into a sort of shrine. It’s still some levels below us here, but I wanted you to see this next chamber,” Jocasta said with an air of anticipation. “Even in the dark, it’s quite fantastic.”

The next door was noticeably newer than the surrounding architecture and sealed with a modern lock; Jocasta let it scan her and the doors opened with a hiss. Renni’s ears ached for a moment from the change in air pressure. “Access is restricted to prevent further deterioration; everything was left as it was after the Temple was reclaimed, as a reminder.” She raised her hand to levitate her lamp, then sent it up toward the ceiling to illuminate the room.

Renni gasped at the sight. Ancient tapestries, their colours still bright despite the burned edges and the scribbled desecrations of an occupying military hung from the walls. Several bronzium statues lay about the room, the power units for their repulsorlifts long exhausted. Rubble from the collapsed ceiling dotted the floor; the painted metal panels of the central dome lay scattered about a tall piece of craggy black stone which pierced the floor.

Sarih whispered, “Is that…?”

“The Sacred Peak. Yes.” Jocasta moved further into the room. It was difficult to see how the floor tiles had been arranged around the stone, there was so much crumbled duracrete and plaster. The jagged edges of the mountain rose halfway towards the gaping hole in what had once been the roof. “This used to be a training hall, long ago. We are fortunate that the Peak is made of such durable material. There is evidence the agents of the Sith Empire attempted to damage or destroy it, but the most they achieved was some pitting on the surface. Quite remarkable stuff.”

“Is it volcanic?” Renni asked. He yearned to lay a hand on it but restrained himself.

“No, and in fact the stone’s chemical composition isn’t common to Coruscant. The prevailing theory is that the Peak is the remains of a meteorite or some other extrasolar body which collided with the
planet in its youth. Come, Master Kerr.” Jocasta favoured him with a knowing smile. “You may touch it. If the Imperials with their lightsabers and explosives couldn’t harm the Peak, your gentle touch will certainly do no worse.”

The stone was warm beneath his fingers, with a texture like unpolished marble. It felt inexplicably soft despite its strength, and a sense like… affection? “Is that--?”

“The nexus, yes.” Jocasta’s own pale hand brushed the surface beside his green one. “It’s a core of pure Light, and even the most Force-null person can feel it in proximity.”

She led them through another sealed door and back to the remains of a lift; the original car had long since been replaced with an entirely mechanical counterweighted system. Dust puffed from the cables and pulleys as the Librarian threw the heavy activation lever. “The stairs from this level were entirely destroyed, likely during the invasion. The droids maintain the system, but it gets used maybe once a decade, if that.”

The ancient lift tracks made a slow spiral around the cage as they descended past several more sealed levels. It took much longer than a repulsor-powered lift ever would, in deference to the mechanical system’s limitations. It took Renni a moment to realise that their destination would be the very last level. Jocasta stepped on a small pedal and the brakes squealed softly as the car slowed to a halt. “The floor can be unstable down here, please mind your steps.”

Unlike the floors above, which had largely been masonry, pourstone, and duracrete, the walls here were solid rock, black and smooth. Renni ran a hand along one wall and felt that same warmth as from the Peak above.

“If the Peak is so durable, how were these halls crafted?” Sarih asked.

“We don’t know,” Jocasta admitted. “We suspect it was an application of the Force, rather than any sort of carving tools. Surface analysis dates the earliest work back some twelve thousand years, perhaps earlier.”

“I can’t imagine a Force user being able to work this stone in such a way,” Renni said. The hushed tone of his own voice surprised him.

“It’s possible they utilised some sort of connection to the nexus.”

There were no doors here, only narrow corridors a Wookiee might have found uncomfortable. As they walked, it felt as if the stone were thrumming; the three Jedi Masters kept their shields closed tightly but still they could feel the increasing energy in the air around them.

At last, the hall opened into a wide chamber that was lit from within by a pale blue-white light. It shifted, like sunlight through water, and Renni found himself frozen in place at the sight.

It appeared to be a waterfall, an unsplashing column running from the high ceiling into the floor; or perhaps it was a shaft of purest sunlight. There was no sound to accompany it, merely the soft humming which seemed to have sunk into Renni’s bones.

Jocasta sighed happily. “It has been a long time since I have been here. Each time, I feel I could stay forever.”

Sarih hesitated. “Is it… safe to touch?”

“Entirely, although we generally advise only one member of a party do so at a time.” Jocasta’s tone held a note of wonder despite her familiarity. “It’s easy to become lost in the sensations.”
While Sarih ventured closer to the nexus, Renni sank to his knees. He had endeavoured to recreate Captain Phel’s unusual shielding structure; this close to the heart of the Temple, he hoped to get a closer look at the shadow they had seen before.

In the Force, the nexus was blinding. What must it feel like to live and work around such a thing? Or was it such a common presence that the Jedi here almost forgot about its existence?

It took him some time to filter the Light; behind its beautiful shimmer lurked a pit of Darkness so cold it stole his breath.

“Renni!”

Sarih was at his side in an instant; he had fallen onto his side, tremors wracking his frame. Jocasta knelt on Renni’s other side as he gasped for air and pressed her hand to his forehead.

“What did you see?”

Frantically he pushed himself upright; Sarih caught his elbow as he wobbled. “I’m- I’m fine--”

“That was not fine, my friend.”

Clutching her hand, Renni closed his eyes and focused on the memory. “That door there. Where does it lead?”

Jocasta frowned, more pale than usual in the white light of the nexus. “What door?”

Unsteady on his feet, Renni leaned on Sarih’s shoulder and led her across the room. The wall appeared blank, but when he ran his hand over the stone, he could feel the vague outline of an archway, long-sealed. In contrast to the nexus chamber, the stone sealing the archway felt icy.

“This door.”

Obi-Wan’s eyes flew open.

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Dathomir

“Breathe.”

Kaiiel’s hands, warm and firm on his upper arms, grounded him. Obi-Wan drew a deep breath, then another, blinking against the low greenish firelight. Someone handed Kaiiel a bowl; she held it to his lips and made him drink.

“The past is never tread lightly, and you went very far away, child. What did you see?”

Obi-Wan took a moment to sort through the images in his mind. Jocasta Nu. Renni Kerr. A Mon Calamari woman he didn’t know, but he was certain she was also a Jedi. Darkened, long-unused
corridors suffused with Light. “The Temple on Coruscant, but not any part of it I’ve ever seen before. People I knew were exploring it. Looking for a hidden Darkness.” He shivered and accepted another drink of the warm, not-quite-sweet liquid.

Kaiiel waited until his hands were steady before letting him cradle the bowl’s lingering heat against his chest. “The spirits show us many things, but of the past it is only events which relate to ourselves in some way. Witting or not, your actions affected the moment you saw.”

The details were beginning to arrange themselves, and Obi-Wan remembered Renni’s fleeting thoughts of Phel. Something about Phel’s shielding. Why was Renni even on Coruscant? Something to ask Nejaa about if the opportunity arose. “I don't have all the information to parse that. But I know who does.”

The Clan Mother grinned fiercely. “Then you have your answers.” She settled back on her heels and motioned for Laena to draw back the rug over the door, letting cool air into the lodge. “There is little more we have to teach you, child. The trappings we use are unnecessary, merely focusing tools which you don’t need. You have peered into the future and witnessed a past for which you were not present, and can do so without assistance.” She laughed. “And you have brought us offerings in exchange, which we greatly appreciate.”

He grinned back. “And Feid.”

“Ah, Feid.” Kaiiel nodded. “My daughter never fit well among the clan. We love her, but her happiness lies elsewhere.”

Obi-Wan finished the last of the drink. “I've been meaning to ask: is she Force-insensitive?”

“Not as such.” She hummed thoughtfully. “I believe a better term would be *numb*. Feid exists as we all do among the spirits, and they may guide her, but she cannot feel or understand them. It’s an instinctive but unconscious trust she carries.”

It made a certain amount of sense -- his friend had a certain innate luck that usually accompanied sensitivity, but claimed utter ignorance of anything beyond gut feelings. “Does that make her more of a tool of the Force, or less?”

Kaiiel sighed. “That, child, is a question to which we have never found an answer. Come. Unless I am much mistaken, you will be departing tomorrow. Will you and your family join us for a final evening meal?”

Obi-Wan nodded in thanks. “I think we’d all like that.”

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*Reformation Year 980.07.26*  
*Zygerria*

“That is not acceptable.”

“It will have to be. We have suffered extensive losses and repeated project failures due to rampant piracy. You will either extend our remuneration period, or you will not receive any credits at all.”
The Neimoidian wasn’t trying too hard to look apologetic, though: the smile had a bit too much curl and he wasn’t hunching in obeisance the way his people did when they truly respected the person they were speaking to.

Atai Molec snarled at the holoprojector. “Your inability to deal with your troubles in Karthakk are not my problem. If your forces are unable to exterminate a few pirates, perhaps I should contact Viceroy Gunray and renegotiate our terms.” And now he would actually be able to carry through on the threat, with his recent promotion. Molec tugged lightly on the end of his sash, making the new insignia at his shoulder catch the light. “I’m certain the Viceroy would be more than happy to let you know how much your problem it is.”

The Neimoidian got the hint. “Now, ah, Guildmaster, surely it is beneath us to trouble the Viceroy with such… paltry matters? Perhaps we can come to some mutually beneficial agreement.”

“We can.” Molec offered a smile that held no real feeling. “However, until the Trade Federation -- I’m sorry, the Karthakk Development Group -- can catch up on its payments, we cannot justify risking another shipment. These pirate attacks are simply too great a risk. I’m sure you understand.”

The Trade Federation flunky twitched so hard his overly elaborate hat slipped. “Perfectly, Guildmaster. It, ah, may take some time, while we deal with these ‘Lok Revenants,’ but the next payment might be sent by the end of the month?”

“Acceptable.” He leaned forward. “Please do let me know if there are any other… unforeseen complications?”

“Of course, Guildmaster.”

The Neimoidian bowed and cut the transmission. Molec leaned back in his chair, glowering at the holoterminal. The man who had remained seated just beyond capture range for the duration of the call chuckled.

“They are so funny when you pull rank on them.”

“It’s the only thing they respect,” Molec growled.

“I knew promoting you was a good idea. Kyrus never could carry the mantle well enough, and he’s cost us a great deal of money.” Consort Norreka Vadrass stood and tugged the hem of his uniform jacket, still smiling. “Of course, if it turns out you can’t handle our dealings with those toads, we may need to reconsider.”

The newest Zygerrian Slavers Guildmaster glared from under his brows, refusing to rise despite Vadrass’ rank. This was his office now, dammit! “Remember that favour I did for you all those years ago, Vadrass. It would be a shame for the true fate of your daughter to reach the public ear.”

Vadrass’ smile didn’t waver. “We could hardly forget. And that’s why you’ve earned the favour of a warning, Atai. But I’m sure you can handle it.”

Molec watched him leave, stroking his chin-spikes thoughtfully. Vadrass could certainly afford to have him disposed of quietly; the fact that the man and his wife, Princess Dasyre, had left Molec alive meant they viewed him as useful. And if there was one thing Molec was not, it was being so foolish as to bite the hand of his benefactor.

At least, not before he had gained the ability to best them in their own political games.

Speaking of such….
Molec keyed in a new comm code. It was answered quickly.

“Guildmaster?”

“Warun. I want you to arrange for an example to be made.”

His second in command hesitated. “Of anyone in particular?”

“Janus Greejatus.” He appended a file and waited for Warun to skim it.

“Sir, are you certain--?”

“This deal with the Trade Federation is costing us more than money. We cannot touch this 'Lord' Sidious, but we can make an example of his messenger who recommended the deal to my predecessor. Let him and the Neimoidians know that things will be handled very differently from now on.”

“Sir, Greejatus is also an advisor to Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. The Republic might consider it an act of war.”

Molec rolled his eyes. He was well aware the cringing human was a double agent, and a clever one. “Then you had best ensure that we aren't connected, hadn't you?”

Warun muttered something in agreement and closed the connection. Molec stood and crossed to the window overlooking the market. The Slavers’ Guild had long operated in the dark, the Zygerrian Empire providing a pleasant face to the Republic representatives while the Guild processing facility had been moved to Kadavo. With the rise of the Separatist movement, the Empire had never been more prosperous, and Molec would ensure the trend continued. He had higher aspirations, and some miserable human pretending to higher status wasn’t going to usurp them.

Reformation Year 980.07.27
Coruscant

The Supreme Chancellor was busy. Of course he was. Armand Isard gave the secretary in the outer office a withering glare as the man babbled about meetings and appointments. A tall, solidly-built man in his thirties with a streak of natural white through his black hair, Isard wasn’t often given to using his stature as an intimidation factor, but Loweck was sorely testing his patience.

When the secretary finally paused for air, Isard said, “I realise he has a full schedule, but the SBI has come across vital information and this cannot wait. If you do not allow me access, I happen to have my own code for the door. I stopped to ask if he was occupied as a matter of courtesy.” He dropped his volume as he spoke, so that the secretary had little choice but to lean forward to hear him. “Now, I will say again: I need to speak with the Supreme Chancellor as soon as his current meeting is over. It won't take long. Do you understand?”

The secretary puffed up in indignation and opened his mouth to -- most likely -- tell the senior SBI agent to join the waiting list when the door swished open. A tall, elderly Jedi Master swept through the antechamber, trailed by a short dark-haired apprentice, the elder snapping orders at the poor girl.
Isard didn't hesitate, slipping through into the office before the secretary could twitch.

Chancellor Palpatine was standing with his back to the room, looking out the window in apparent contemplation with his hands clasped behind his back. Isard stopped a respectable distance from the desk and bowed.

“I'm sorry for the interruption, Your Excellency, however this cannot wait.”

The older man turned to him with a genial smile. “Loweck gave you trouble again, did he?”

“Your secretary has an overabundance of respect for your schedule.” Isard let a smile twitch the corner of his mouth as he offered the datapad he'd been carrying. “Someone has placed a bounty on one of your advisors, sir. Ordinarily we would simply handle this as usual, but Greejatus is scheduled to attend a symposium next week on the orbital at Kuat. The SBI respectfully requests that this appointment be cancelled.”

The Chancellor studied the file, a small frown creasing above the bridge of his nose. “There's no indication who placed the bounty at all?”

“None, and with it being on the public boards rather than private, it's possible Greejatus may be targeted by more than one hunter. Quite frankly: we don't know who, what, or how many to expect.”

“I see.” Palpatine sighed and returned to his seat; Isard declined the invitation to sit with a small shake of his head. “Unfortunately, there is more than one reason for Janus’ attendance at the symposium, and the appointment cannot simply be cancelled. I hate to prevail upon the Senate Bureau of Investigations, but I would greatly appreciate it if some provision could be made to ensure Janus’ safety during the trip.”

Pressing his lips together tightly, Isard sighed through his nose. *Bloody politics.* “I don't like it, sir.”

Palpatine's answering smile was tight and humourless. “Neither do I, but I have no one else to send in Janus’ stead. He's an established contact with some more… fractious elements I've been hoping to talk around.”

“Is it anyone in particular?” When the Chancellor hesitated, Isard added, “If they are in any way connected to this threat on your advisor….”

“Senator Horox Ryyder, primarily.”

That explained a lot: the Anx senator from Gravlex Med had been a staunch supporter of Valorum and had publicly denounced the handling of the No-Confidence vote. Not in himself a threat, but a connection could exist. Isard nodded reluctantly. “I'll put together a team including myself. And in the meantime, we'll get someone on digging up the source of the bounty.”

“Thank you, Armand. I do greatly appreciate your diligence on my behalf.” The alert on his desk chimed and the Chancellor's public mask returned. “I'm afraid Loweck wasn't exaggerating about how busy today is, and I have yet another meeting to get to.”

“Of course, Supreme Chancellor.” Isard bowed politely and left, cursing silently as he started assembling the logistics of a security team to shadow Greejatus.
At this time of the day, the Promenade was quiet. Quiet-er, anyway: the evening crowds wouldn't be out for a couple more hours. Music still blared from multiple shopfronts and the tapcafes that never slept. Hutt Cartel security representing several clans patrolled the area, enforcing the skyhook platform's neutral-ground policy.

The kiosks in the central square hosted a small crowd, as always. The public terminals advertised everything from live shows to personalized private entertainment, and patrons could order tickets and make reservations on-site.

A slender woman in well-maintained Mabari armour scrolled one listing that was rather less garish than the others. She ticked down a roll of names and credit values with blank-faced disinterest: most of the jobs weren't worth the paltry sums. Bail-jumpers, debtors, people who were on the run from petty criminals and jilted lovers. Most of them could stay on the run, and fortune favour them. Zam was looking for something bigger. Something that could really give her a start on making a name for herself.

One set of numbers made her pause. She hit the link for more information and felt her eyebrows meet the lower edge of her helmet. "Greejatus?" The target was human, a man of middle years with no extended family. It wasn't readily apparent why someone might have a flat kill order on his fleshy neck, until she ran an incognito search on his name. Political bounty, and at that price there would definitely be competition, and the additional security politicians could afford. A challenge worthy of her time.

Zam hit the option to express interest in the job, connecting her license to the bounty. Immediately her comm pinged with a message letting her know who else had tagged in on it.

That was a lot of hunters. No big names she recognized, but the big names would have considered it beneath them. These were young names, new names. Hungry names. Zam would need an edge to get ahead of the pack.

She turned the leave and nearly ran into a man who'd moved up behind her. "Sorry, pal--"

A blue-skinned hand caught her wrist as she tried to push past the skinny Duros. Red eyes narrowed at her. "Going somewhere, hunter?"

Great, the competition was making itself known. Zam rolled her eyes. "Yeah, somewhere that isn't here."

The man -- boy, really; now that she had a good look at him, he was barely an adult despite his height -- shifted to block her again. "Saw you put your name down for the Greejatus job."

"You got a point to make, kid?" As short as she was, Zam couldn't really look down her nose at the Duros, but she managed an approximation. He ground his jagged teeth in a snarl.

"You should let it drop. Embo and I already have a lead on him." He tilted his bald head towards a male Kyuzo who was approaching them from one of the shops. Unlike the Duros with his patchwork gear and ratty longcoat, Embo was wearing nice armor and a broad helmet shaped like a dish. It was probably a great shield against blasterfire.

This was getting boring. She twisted her arm and broke out of his grip. "If you have a lead, why
bother strong-arming your competition? Unless it's because you don't have a lead and you're scared?” she said with a nasty grin.

The Duros growled and started towards her; his companion's hand landing on his shoulder stopped him. Embo jerked his head towards the transports back to the spaceport and the other man snarled again. “Fine. Let’s go.” He aimed a finger at Zam. “This isn’t over.”

Zam waved him off dismissively. “Whatever. Next thing you point at me is getting broken off.” She waited until they had disappeared up to the next level before pulling her comm out and keying in a particular code.

It went directly to the message box. Swearing under her breath, Zam went looking for the nearest comm terminal.

“Time is money, who's this?”

“Zam Wesell. Fett gave me your code.”

The fuchsia Toydarian cracked a laugh and leaned towards the pickup. “That a new face you're wearing? Didn't recognize you. Whaddaya need, honey?”

Zam arched an eyebrow. Her current face was her usual one, a blend of features from several different human women which allowed her to not be identified immediately as a shapeshifting Clawdite. “Who says I need anything.”

Rozatta smirked at her. “Oh, honey, nobody calls me unless they need something.”

She sighed. “Fett's not answering his comm--”

“Yeah, he's got an extended assignment.”

“That's a long damn assignment. I've picked up a job, but there's competition. A lot of it.”

“Hmm. And you're gonna need backup.” Roz sat back, rubbing her chin thoughtfully. “Backup with skills, if you were looking for Jango. I know of someone who might take you up on it. He's trustworthy, by all accounts. A little eccentric--”

“Ugh.” Zam rolled her eyes. “I don’t care, as long as he can do the work and not stab me in the back.”

“Hang tight there, honey. I'll make some calls and comm you back to set up an intro.”

After a week on Dathomir, everyone had been demanding the stodgiest fast food civilization could provide; Obi-Wan had to admit the burger joint had been a good call. It was dreadfully greasy but satisfying. He was slouched comfortably in the booth with one arm around Zohli while she ploughed through a massive ice cream concoction, browsing the local HoloNet for work, when his comm chimed.

“Wonder who that is,” Feid said as she stole another spoonful of ice cream off the back of Zoh's sundae.
“Not Phel, I have a different alert for xir.” He fished the comm from his pocket as it chimed again. “Bastra here.”

“Hello, honey.” The voice was feminine, low-pitched with a peculiar huskiness and an easy drawl. “You don't know me, but I've been keeping half an eye on your work. Name's Rozatta, I run Outland Transit Station.”

On the other side of the table, Pulkka and Feid straightened with interest. The odds of it being a lie were slim: only a fool would try to impersonate someone with Rozatta's reputation. “What can I do for you, Madame Rozatta?”

“Ooh, I like you. Got some work for you, if you're interested. A friend of a friend needs some help. It'd be just you, though. I know you usually work with a team, but she's particular and probably doesn't want to split the payout more than necessary.”

Not that they would demand more than fifty percent -- less, if Rozatta got a cut for setting the other up with assistance -- but it was a reasonable concern from someone who likely didn't know him. “I can work with that. What kind of job?”

“Bounty. The sort where there's a lot of interest. It's DoD, so a little easier than usual.”

“Dead on Delivery,” Feid murmured at Obi-Wan's confused expression. “High-payout DoD means someone really pissed someone else off. Probably either rich or political.”

“Sounds like the whole family's there; hi, kids! Both rich and political, in this case.”

Obi-Wan frowned. Getting involved in politics -- the dirty side of it, the side everyone denied existed -- in this way would definitely raise some alarms about him among the Jedi. If they ever even found out. What troubled him most was that the morality, and being complicit in what was likely an assassination, wasn't actually disturbing to him anymore. The Force was silent so he turned to his next-best conscience. Pulkka shrugged when he caught her eye; Feid nodded decisively. “Alright, Rozatta. I'll at least meet with your associate and see if they want to work together.”

“Brilliant. You're, let's see... on Nar Shaddaa at the moment?”

“I feel like I should be terrified that you even know that. Yeah. Just looking for work, as a matter of fact.”

There was a cackle over the comm. “I know my business, honey. Head on over to the Promenade. Third-level cantina called Raxip's. You're looking for a short woman who only looks human. Behave yourself!” She closed the channel before he could ask what she meant.

On the other side of the table, Pulkka and Feid were both snickering. “She knows you well,” Pulkka said with a grin. “You should go alone, sounds like this contact might spook, and Raxip's is no place for a youngling.” She gave Zohli an apologetic look and the teen sighed.

“Typical.”

Obi-Wan ruffled Zoh's hair and kissed her forehead. “Adults are snobby like that.” He slid out of the booth. “Either way, I'll see you back at the ship. If this goes well, there's some gear I'll need to collect.”

Feid wiggled her fingers at him and pretended to wipe away a tear. “Our baby hunter, all grown up.”

He chucked a used paper napkin at her as she snickered. “Oh, shut it.”
Raxip's was comfortably seedy, the kind of worn shabbiness that took pride in its shabbiness. Zam had been surprised that Roz had simply sent her up a couple levels; she'd half-expected to be sent to another system to meet this Bastra kid. Convenience was nice, if a little suspicious. She tucked in at a booth where the door and bar were in full view, ordered a drink, and waited.

About twenty minutes later, a human man wearing body armour with a look vaguely reminiscent of Mandalorian *beskar'gam* under a dark jacket wandered in. Zam took advantage of the brighter lights around the door to get a good look at him. Not bad-looking despite the nasty scar across his left eye and cheekbone; young, probably ten years less than her, but the short beard framing his face aged him up a bit. The blasters rode his hips like they belonged there, and Zam pursed her lips in reluctant approval. She had no idea where Roz knew the kid from, but he'd walked the road a bit.

He leaned against the bar to order a drink and pulled a casual three-sixty while he waited. Zam felt a tingle run down her spine as he locked eyes with her. That was… okay, there was something off about him. *Eccentric* wasn't the word at all.

At least he was polite. Bastra stopped a respectable distance from her table and said quietly, “I wonder if we have a friend in common?”

As tempting as it was to take the opening and deny it, she was curious where this would go. “Pink Toydarian named Rozatta?” When he tilted his head in acknowledgement, Zam waved for him to sit. “Awfully convenient, you being on the moon right now.”

“We weren't, yesterday.” A wry grin twitched his cheek. “Timing is everything.”

Zam arched a brow with slow deliberation. “‘We’?”

Bastra shrugged. “I have a crew. Roz said it would be best to leave them behind for this.”

She glared at him. “If we work together on this, it's only gonna be you.”

He held his hands up, looking mildly amused. “Another reason I didn't bring them along. Only me. But I barely know anything about the job. You'll have to fill me in.”

“I assume you're not an idiot and have a hunter's license.” You couldn't work a publicly listed job without one, if you wanted to not be accused of murder or abduction by local law enforcement.

“Of course.”

He didn't look offended; she gave him a point for not getting his shorts in a twist. Pulling up the file on her datapad, Zam passed it over. His brows pinched in the middle as he read through the file.

“Something wrong?”

Shaking his head, Bastra said, “No, I just happen to recognize the name.” He stared off into the middle distance for a moment. “Well, now I get why the payout is so high. Greejatus is a member of the Supreme Chancellor's court, from back when Palpatine was a senator.”

Zam snatched the datapad back. “It doesn't say that anywhere, how do you know that?”

He offered a thin smile. “Would you believe I used to be in politics?”
“At your age?” She scoffed, and his smile turned into a grin. “Well, does knowing that help me?”

He shifted, leaning back against the threadbare padding. “Assuming Greejatus wasn't demoted and that the SBI are doing their job, they absolutely know about this bounty, and he'll have a full security complement wherever he is. If they're smart, they won't even let him off Coruscant.”

She cursed under her breath. “I hate working the Core.”

“I don't blame you, it's a logistical nightmare. Finding a single individual in all that will take some effort.”

And dragging the man out of whatever hole the SBI shoved him into would be so much harder. But there was a casualness to the kid’s tone that suggested he wasn’t saying no. “Do you happen to be a slicer, kid?”

“I'm not bad at it. I have a few tools that will help, back at my ship.” He shrugged when she shot him a quick glare. “I’d have to stop by anyway to get the rest of my gear. You're welcome to come along, if you don’t trust me. It's just my daughter, my copilot, our gunner and a droid.”

Zam blinked at him. “Your… you take a kid out on your jobs?”

He must have been asked that before; he rolled his eyes with an exasperated sigh. “It's not like I have a planetside home to stash her in. She’s learning the trade the way I did.”

“I thought you said you were in politics.”

“I was.” That grin came back, but he didn’t seem to be joking. Weirdo.

But it sounded like she was going to need more help than she’d thought, and if he was familiar with how the SBI handled things…. “Fine, go get your stuff, meet me at docking port 24-resh-9.”

As soon as they left the moon's smoggy atmosphere, Obi-Wan asked Zam to wait before jumping to hyperspace. She stared at the slicing kit he and Phel had put together.

“The hell is that?”

“I didn't want to run this from anywhere on Nar Shaddaa, too much chance the Hutts will notice.” The connection amp whirred cheerfully to life, hooking directly into the nearest HoloNet beacon.

“You don't trust the Hutts?” Zam teased. Obi-Wan chuckled.

“They might still be mad at me for last time.” Searching for Greejatus specifically would set off alerts. Instead he worked into the Senate schedule database, pretending to be a new intern. The entire list of Senate and Chancellor's staff loaded into his datapad, and he scrolled through quickly.

Zam leaned over his shoulder, watching as he worked. “How are you reading that fast?”

“Practice. Here we go. Additional security ordered. Transit permits for… Kuat?” He scrolled further. “Meeting with KDY Chief of Security early next week. What's going on at Kuat?”

Zam hit up the regular HoloNet connection from the ship's terminal. “Some conference or other
starting on the fourth. Looks political.”

Obi-Wan hummed thoughtfully. “Makes sense. Things have been tense since the trade route tax. Greejatus’ extra security is going to be there, looks like some senior SBI agent, too.”

“Oh, that'll be fun,” she muttered sourly.

“It won't be easy, but now we have a list of names for the security detail, we can track them better than we can Greejatus. Unless we really want to chance the security on Coruscant, our best shot will be during that conference.”

It would be tricky. Enough people knew he was Scogar Bastra that if his connection to a political assassination came to light, Obi-Wan might have several people demanding he turn himself in.

Nejaa would likely just be disappointed, given what else he’d seen Obi-Wan do.

Obi-Wan couldn’t help a snort of laughter which had Zam frowning at him.

“Something funny?”

He pointed at the slicing kit's databank overview. Five alerts were showing red. “Someone decided to bantha-rush the system looking for Greejatus’ files.”

“Bane,” Zam growled. “Or someone else. If we're lucky they'll get a call from the SBI and have bigger things to worry about.”

He shut the system down before the alerts picked up his intrusion. “Bane?”

“Cad Bane. Rookie hunter, but his partner seems to know what's what. He got in my face after I logged interest in the job, so I looked him up while I waited for you.” She rolled her eyes. “We heading to Kuat, then?”

“In a moment. Let me just…. Got a fake ID you want to use?”

Zam stared at him like he was speaking Shyriiwook backwards. “For what?”

Obi-Wan smiled. “To attend a conference.”

Reformation Year 980.08.03

KDY Orbital Conference Center

Isard was about ready to tear his own hair out in frustration. The Supreme Chancellor's advisor didn't seem to understand what it meant for a political figure to have this sort of bounty on their head, and it took an exceptional amount of convincing every day to prevent him from taking unnecessary risks. As it was, there had been three frankly pathetic attempts on Greejatus’ life in the few days before their departure to Kuat, including a foiled attempt to hijack the transport to the private shuttle.

And now His Loftiness wished to walk the conference centre promenade deck and socialise. If Isard didn't know better, he would think the man was daring any hunters to attack him.
“Sir, please. The area is far too open and exposed. All it takes is a single sniper and one lucky shot--”

Greejatus turned away from the suite’s (blaster-proof, single-direction) window. “Surely you’re exaggerating the matter, Captain. You have KDY’s security going over the centre in tripled patrols, what could possibly happen?”

Isard’s jaw clenched. His rank in the SBI was Commander, which the so-called advisor seemed incapable of remembering. He had to be doing it intentionally. “They haven’t completed the first sweep, Sir. Please at least wait until Commander Hylec comms me to confirm.”

The little man scowled from under his ridiculous hat. “The Supreme Chancellor sent me here to do a job, Captain. He won’t be pleased if you prevent me from carrying it out.”

“He’ll be less pleased if I can’t keep you alive,” Isard said shortly. Before Greejatus could puff up, he soothed, “Let us do our work so we can make sure yours happens in safety.”

He could have sworn that was an eyeroll Greejatus gave him. “I’m sure it’s fine, Captain.”

Isard’s comm went off before he could think of a response -- likely for the best. “Isard here.”

“Commander. Security says the convention centre is clear. For the moment, at least. We’ll run progressive scans throughout the week and keep you apprised.”

“Thank you, Commander.”

Greejatus was already moving for the door. “There! You see, nothing to worry about, Captain.”

Isard suppressed a sigh with extreme effort. At least the personal security detail had been waiting outside and Greejatus couldn’t evade them.

Preparation for the job had taken a day longer than she’d expected, but the human had come through with contacts who had supplied them with a set of matching uniforms, from the dark red jackets and grey pants down to the shiny boots and gloves. Zam switched her face out for the one that appeared on the cover ID, and Bastra hadn’t even blinked as he painted over his scar. They handed their cases off to the concierge droid at the spaceport and joined the throngs in the concourse, quietly gauging the atmosphere.

The conference centre was just a small facility on the Kuat Drive Shipyard orbital platform which circled the entire planet of Kuat. The platform was oriented so the planet was consistently overhead, visible through the transparisteel shielding, the curve of the surface underfoot so shallow as to be unnoticeable. The inner edge of the ring hosted offices and businesses, paying a premium for planetary views; the multiple layers beneath, shadowed and largely windowless, were residential levels for the billions of employees and migrant workers, the factories and shipyards themselves on the outer side. The majority population of Kuat was human, but they would eagerly hire aliens who might unknowingly accept a tenth less pay, and the deliberate social stratification soured in her mouth. She couldn’t be entirely certain, because he had an impressive straight face, but Bastra seemed disgusted by it as well.

They hadn’t gone very far before their path was blocked by a group of muscle for hire, mostly aliens with the look of labourers. The leader, a big human with a shaved head, stepped into Zam’s path.
“Zam Wesell?”

Great. “Never heard of ’em.”

The Aqualish just behind Baldy aimed something at her -- a medical scanner. Now that was just plain rude. “Clawdite. If it’s not Wesell, it’s some other hunter.”

Baldy grunted. “Right. You’re gonna come with us, and you’re gonna come peaceful-like, or in a bag. Your choice.”

Eight against two was terrible odds, particularly with an unknown element on her side. She just prayed Bastra wouldn’t do anything stupid. “You don’t look like security officers, so you’d better have an explanation.” She felt more than saw Bastra take a half-step closer, standing just behind her right shoulder, but the human didn’t make any other moves. Good kid; she didn’t want a fight out here -- not before getting in the door -- without the alibi of they swung first.

Baldy produced a stun-stick from inside his long coat, held tight against his side where most of the surrounding crowd wouldn’t see it. “We’re not gonna ask again.”

Zam raised her voice to carry over the blur of the crowd. “I already told you, you’ve got the wrong person.” Heads turned, passers-by slowed to see what the fuss was about; they quickly had an excessive amount of attention, and the eight muscle boys were starting to glance around in discomfort.

The Aqualish grabbed Baldy's arm, jerking his head to indicate a pair of actual KDY security officers and a hovering droid making their way over. The stun-stick vanished just as the officers got in range.

“Is there a problem here?”

They really were going to try it. Baldy aimed a finger at Zam. “This one owes my brother money.”

Zam rolled her eyes. “Already told you I'm not who you're looking for.”

“She's a Clawdite! They can look like anyone!”

The officers gave her twin squint-eyed glares. One of them asked for Zam's ID and ran it through the droid's scanner. “Who were you looking for?”

Baldy grumbled. “Girl named Zam Wesell.”

The security officer gave him a bland smile. “Says here her name's Mishka Raedu. Employee of Devon Securities?”

Zam shrugged, affecting boredom. “Security consultant.”

“Got anyone who can verify that?” He looked expectantly at Bastra.

“I can, indeed,” Bastra said, affecting a flat, Mid-Rim accent. He offered his own ID to be scanned with an air of boredom. “Roxas Devon, my dad owns the company. We're here for the symposium.”

The other security officer gave the muscle a considering stare. “I think maybe you boys ought to go consider the legal ramifications of attempting extortion on KDY property. Preferably somewhere else.”

The muscle cleared out, although Baldy turned to glare at Zam over his shoulder. She deliberately
looked away. The security officers handed their IDs back.

“Sorry about the locals.”

Zam shook her head. “You'd be surprised how often that happens. People see one Clawdite and assume we're all the same person with a different face.” There was little point pretending: her species was clearly listed on the ID. Bastra had insisted it made their fake security company seem more legit with a shape-shifter on staff, and she had reluctantly agreed.

The taller one offered them an escort to the conference centre, ‘to avoid further inconveniences;’ Bastra cheerfully accepted, playing up the role of a corporate security manager as they headed to where the officers' speeder was idling.

“I'm seeing a lot more patrols than normal. Nothing's amiss, I hope?”

The shorter officer shrugged. “Just regular concerns. Nothing you need to worry about, unless you're bounty hunters?” He turned in his seat to grin at them like it was a joke, and Zam had to laugh. This was so fripping ridiculous.

“Not me, I like my stable job, thanks.”

“Never heard of Devon Securities. It's mostly political types here, what's your score?”

Bastra cleared his throat. “We offer shipboard security and flight escort. It's become a growing industry since the trade lane tax, so this is something of a personal concern. Dad sent us to keep an ear on the general consensus.”

“Too bad we didn’t hear about you guys before now, Commander Hylec might have brought you in as extra support,” the taller officer said casually. Almost too casually: there was a dreamy sort of note in his voice. “One of our guests, not a big name but kind of important, has a bounty on his head. We’ve got tripled patrols and sweeps every twenty to make sure nobody unauthorised gets in. Even the staff for the centre and the hotel are being scanned, just in case. It’s all hush-hush, of course.”

Bastra made a sympathetic noise. “Oh, of course. We do have experts on staff to handle those situations. Shall I give you my card? You can get in touch next time such a situation arises.”

“That’d be great!” Shorty said. He didn’t seem to realise his counterpart had just handed them confidential information.

Zam shot a glance at Bastra, who gave her a beatific smile. As soon as they were safely in their hotel suite fully scanned and cleared of surveillance, she hissed, “What was that?”

Bastra was already opening their cases, popping the hidden interior panels out to retrieve their weapons. “What was what?”

She marched over and took her blaster from him. “You’re not pretty enough to play dumb. You somehow tricked two security officers into giving us intel.”

“I’m persuasive like that.”

Zam prodded Bastra’s sternum with her finger. “Don’t you ever pull that kind of trick on me. Whatever you did.”

At least he had the grace to look offended. “We would never have found out about the extra security sweeps otherwise. That was the whole point of pretending to be a security company in the first place.
If we look like we're on their side, they pay less attention to us.” He moved off to investigate the contents of the bar.

After a moment of glaring at him, she sighed and went back to retrieving her gear. “If I’d had my way, we would have just broken in and bypassed the security fuss entirely.”

There was a snort and the clink of glass. “Why go to the trouble of breaking in when you can get an escort right through the front door with a smile and a--” there was a squeaky popping sound--“complimentary glass of champagne?”

She turned to see him pouring out a glass of said champagne. He offered it to her with a wry smile. After a moment, she took it instead of flinging it in his face. “Do I want to know who we kicked out of their room?”

“No one. Hotels always keep spare rooms off the public listings during high-traffic events like this, just in case someone needs a last-minute booking. I just slipped Devon Securities into an open slot.”

“And how much is that costing us?”

He sipped his own drink and gave it a nod for being at least acceptable. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll be gone before they notice.”

Zam blinked at him. “Wow. That’s pretty bold.”

“The credits won’t be missed.” Bastra shrugged and pulled his slicing deck out. “Bedroom’s yours, I’ll take the couch.”

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Zam went out to casually investigate the convention centre; Obi-Wan settled in to crack the digital security. Teaching Phel to slice -- and then delegating all such tasks to xir while Obi-Wan handled the riskier work -- had been out of a combined interest in getting the teen some skills and keeping xir out of the line of fire. He missed the quiet thrill of easing through a system’s security; it was the biggest adrenaline rush one could get whilst sitting in an overpriced hotel room.

It didn’t take long to find the individual officers assigned to watch Greejatus. Everyone attending the symposium, including any private security, had electronic passes which offered access to their private rooms, public areas, speakers’ halls, and private lounges. Every time a pass crossed a door frame, it registered in the system. Ostensibly it was to enable the organizers to gauge attendance and the popularity of the various entertainments, but it was also useful for security to track authorised users.

Some locations had more security than others: particular parts of the centre and hotel were only accessible to certain individuals and required not only an electronic pass but a scan of the user’s fingerprint and voice. Zam was going to love it. Obi-Wan commed her.

“Please tell me you have good news. This place is a zoo.”

“Sort of. We’re going to have to do a round of gladhanding. There’s an official mingler tonight to kick off the symposium.” He grinned as she cursed under her breath.

“Just make a list of people we need to talk up, I don’t want to spend more time than we need socialising.”
“Heard.” Obi-Wan accessed the slicer kit's stored memory for the base program for a lamprey. With the right instructions, the little programs would attach themselves to an existing codebase and feed the data they skimmed back to his datapad on command -- in this case, information on the movements of Greejatus’ security team. He could have tracked their target directly, but he was leery of the possibility that any search for the man's name might trigger an alert. A single command would dissolve the lampreys into junk binary once they cleared out. In theory, KDY security would never know their door access system had been co-opted.

There was still time to drop a few extra surprises into the system just in case. Obi-Wan hoped they wouldn't need them, but better to be cautious.

“It wasn’t her.”

Cad Bane rolled his head back to stare at the dingy cantina ceiling and shifted the toothpick between his teeth. “Oh really.” Beside him, Embo regarded their hirelings silently from under the rim of his hat. The Kyuzo didn’t say much; when he did, it wasn’t in Basic. He got his meaning across well enough for Bane’s liking.

Bane kind of liked the extra intimidation effect of the hat. Maybe he should get something like it.

The bald human, just one of the many recently-laid-off KDY laborers seeking easy credits, took a swig of whatever piss-water the bar had on tap. “KDY security scanned her ID and everything. Either she’s got a really good forger or she ain’t your bounty hunter.”

He narrowed his eyes, annoyed. “We’ll be the judge of that. Did you get anything useful about her at all, or just waste what we paid you?”

“She’s some security consultant from, uh--”

“Devon Securities,” the Aqualish piped up. “Had a human guy with her, said his daddy runs the company.”

“Hmmm.” Bane flicked his toothpick away. “You can leave.”

The two frowned but got up and left. Embo glanced at him.

“It’s definitely her. That was her ship that landed. So we search the centre’s databanks for ‘Devon Securities’. Tip off KDY that there’s a risk since now they know there’s a Clawdite around.” Bane shrugged. “If we distract the competition and internal security with each other, we’ll have a clear pass.”

Embo’s head tilted thoughtfully and he muttered something about focusing too much on a single threat. Bane shook his head. “The rest of the competition got stupid and caught on Coruscant. It’s just us and Wesell now. And whoever she got to help her. Come on.”

They headed out into the shadowed streets of the workers’ level, never noticing the tall armoured figure that slipped out behind them.
Zam had to admit, having a massive soft bed to catnap on had done wonders for her energy levels. She could almost get used to this sort of subterfuge. While she'd slept off the stress of absorbing so many people’ genetic threads at the pre-conference shindig, Bastra had somehow acquired a pair of KDY security uniforms and an equipment bag large enough to hide his slicing gear. She was a little afraid to ask how, but they were clean and not too oversized, so there wasn't much to complain about. They wouldn’t be returning to their room, anyway.

Changing her appearance never felt pleasant, but she'd long since learned to ignore the sensations. The moustache of the human whose features she was borrowing felt weird on her upper lip, and she rubbed at it while Bastra finished his setup.

“How can you tell which sample of genetics you're working from?”

She turned to find the human looking at her with something akin to professional curiosity. Zam shrugged. “I focus on what I want to look like, my body does the rest.” Even her voice had shifted to a lower pitch with a bit of tabac-rasp.

“All that from just a touch?”

Zam tugged the cuffs of her uniform jacket. “Well, can't replicate clothes. And you saw how draining it can be.”

He shrugged and set about packing his stuff up. “I would never suggest such a talent was easy. You've clearly put a lot of training in.”

So had he. “Where’d you learn to do all this, anyway?”

“I had a very unconventional teacher, growing up.”

“What’d your parents think?”

Bastra accepted the red and grey uniforms from her. “I don’t know.” Everything they couldn’t carry out with them got tossed into the cases. Zam had hated having to leave her armour back on the ship, but there was no way they would be able to return to the hotel room.

“They never said?”

“Never knew them. Got everything?”

She checked her pockets and holsters, glad KDY has some practicality to their security uniforms. “All set here.”

Batra closed up the cases, flipped open hidden panels in the latches, and pressed the buttons inside before stepping back. At first, nothing happened; then there was the stench of heated fibers and plastic. The surface covering on both cases darkened to grey and then fell inwards; in minutes they were nothing but stringy dust on the floor. Zam waited until he nodded and then hit the button on the wall to summon a cleaning droid.

The poor MSE had a moment to squeal in alarm before Bastra zapped it. He took a moment to carefully pop its casing and tuck their access cards inside.

“You think that’ll really fool anyone?”
“Just long enough to distract them.” He set the droid back down and reactivated it. The thing ran through the restart sequence and then gave a squeak of confusion; the human actually whistled back to it, patting its casing. They waited until it had happily vacuumed up the disintegrated bits of their cover identities and followed the droid out into the corridor.

“You’ve reached the Reception desk for the Kuat Grand Hotel and Conference Centre, currently hosting the Galactic Corporate Trade Symposium, this is Cormyn speaking, how may I help you?”

Bane marveled at the woman’s ability to get all that out on a single breath. Without preamble, he announced, “You have a security breach. Your guests from Devon Securities are known thieves and mercenaries; the company doesn’t exist.” He had wanted to put security up Wesell’s tail earlier but Embo had insisted that having things in chaos would work more heavily in their favour. Now Bane had jitters up his limbs like time was running out.

There was a moment of hesitation. “I’m sorry, who is this?” Bane shook his head even though she couldn’t see it.

“What matters is, you have a problem.” He ended the call and stepped away from the public terminal. Turning to Embo, he growled, “You said you know how to get us in. Let's go.”

The moment they walked in the door, they were drawing attention. This wasn't some dockworker cantina but a lounge attached to the convention centre which offered service to the general public. Nearly all the patrons were human and dressed in things that could have fed his family on New Tayana for a month. Bane clenched his jaw, put a casual saunter in his step, and headed for the bar.

The bartender, a pretty Falleen, arched an eyebrow at him. “You in town for the symposium?”

“Yes.” Bane held his hands up and smiled. “Not here to cause trouble, ma'am.”

“There’s a lotta places down a level that are probably more in your price range.”

The smile became a smirk and he dropped a credit chit that he knew was more than enough to cover a pair of mid-shelf drinks and a tip. “They water the drinks down there. We're getting paid well enough on this job to enjoy the good stuff for once.”

The bartender eyed the chit and shrugged. “What can I get ya?”

“Two akatis.”

“Find yourselves a table, server will bring them over.” She smirked back at him. “We don't do bar service here.”

Embo had found a seat with a good view of the room -- in particular, the sealed doors into the hotel, which required a guest access card to get through. Bane settled in, ignoring the sideways glances from the neighboring table. “Anyone come through yet?” he muttered. His partner nodded and said something about it being busy. Good: that meant plenty of marks to choose from.

A felinoid server -- it seemed the staff were all aliens a human might find attractive -- arrived with their drinks. “Anything else I can get for you boys?”
Embo shook his head; Bane pursed his lips. It had been a while since the ration bars, but they might not have time to wait for anything to be prepared. “No, we're good.”

“Allrighty! And—” she leaned closer and dropped her voice discreetly—“don't worry about the other patrons trying to start anything.” She patted his shoulder. “The manager's not complete poodoo.” “Good to know.”

His partner eyed the server as she left.

A few minutes later, a customer who had imbibed a bit too much wobbled into the 'freshers. Embo rose smoothly and followed; when he returned, there was a hotel access card hidden in his hand. They lingered just long enough to not look rushed, then let themselves into the larger building as if they had every right to be there.

Embo looked at Bane; Bane cast a glance around the dimly lit reception lobby and the sleepy-eyed nonhuman staff. Best to do the searching elsewhere. They took the lift as far as the mezzanine and made use of one of the directory terminals. Bane wasn't fool enough to potentially alert security someone was looking for Greejatus; he searched to Grek and scrolled down. “Got him. Special guest suits up the tower.”

He started back toward the lifts and Embo caught his arm. Bane frowned as he tried to parse the Kyuzo's speech.

“If Wesell knows her business, we won't find them in their room. They're probably already moving. Like we should be.” He shrugged. “We'll deal with them when we find them.”

The server watched with narrowed eyes as the two bounty hunters left, then excused herself for a quick break.

In the 'fresher, one of the privacy cubicles was locked tight. The server knocked but nobody replied; not even a shuffle of surprise reached her ears. Biting her lower lip, she pulled out a pocket multitool and forced the lock. Inside, one of the customers slumped, unconscious and drooling on his shoulder, against the wall. Straining against the weight, she dragged him out to lie on the cool tiled floor.

“**I lost eyes on you, where are you?**” The voice in her ear was barely a whisper.

“**'Freshers,”** she muttered. **“They have someone's access card. What should I do? He's unconscious.”**

“**Good. Comm security and then medical, like a good employee, they'll take it from there.”**

The server sighed. “At least I got a tag on the Duros. This is so much harder than last time.”

Isard was quickly coming to despise public protection work. First Greejatus had insisted on attending the social gathering to celebrate the opening of the symposium; now he was talking into the early morning with a clutch of corporate types who uttered slander against the Republic through toothy,
insincere smiles.

The lounge door opened quietly and he turned to acknowledge the short human man with a bushy blond mustache. Commander Hylec nodded back and moved in close; Isard had to bend to the side to get in range.

“We’ve received reports of two security breaches,” he murmured. “We’re in the process of tracking four individuals through the complex but it’s difficult to pin them down. Recommend you escalate to the predetermined security procedures.”

Isard kept his expression bland. Letting political allies of any sort know there was a problem would only cause panic. Unhurried, he approached Greejatus and leaned over. “I’m sorry, sir, but the Chancellor is on the comm and wishes to speak with you at the earliest convenience.” It was a code phrase as well as an excuse.

Greejatus smiled blandly at him. “I’m sure his Excellency has forgot it’s the middle of the night; surely it can wait until morning…?”

“Technically it is morning.” Very, very early in the morning, but still. “He seemed to think it important, sir.”

“Oh, very well,” the advisor huffed. He made his apologies to the others and allowed Isard and Hylec to escort him from the room toward the bank of lifts.

Once they were in and descending, Hylec filled them in. “Someone called in a tip that two of our guests were not only attending under assumed names but the company backing them is fraudulent. About half an hour later one of the tapcafe staff found a patron unconscious in the ‘freshers; he’d been mugged and his access pass taken. The staff suspect a pair of aliens who were later seen entering the hotel lobby from the tapcafe. We’re tracking all four, but we don’t think they’re working together.”

Isard cast a sideways glance at Greejatus, who had the temerity to look bored despite the six hand-picked security officers surrounding him starting to twitch nervously. “It seems you’re popular tonight, sir.”

“You don’t even know they’re here about me, Captain.” Greejatus grinned at him. “They could be here for you.”

“I don’t have a high-value bounty on my head, sir, unlike certain others in this lift car I could name. If they are here for you, we take you to the safe room; if they are not here for you, we still take you to the safe room. Regardless, our job is to keep you alive.” It was all he could do to keep his tone level; he instantly regretted letting the man get under his skin as Greejatus gave him a satisfied smirk and deliberately looked away.

The special guest level was unnaturally quiet; soundproofing layered into the fancy walls gave the air a close, oppressive feeling that made Bane’s eardrums ache. Embo trailed him down the corridor, watching behind them for any signs of security. If there was anyone still awake on the tenth level, they were all tucked away where they wouldn’t hear a thing.

The door to Greejatus’ room was locked, of course. Bane hunkered down to slice it, using a handy
tool he’d picked up on Ord Mantell a few months back. The lock finally clicked without the dreaded shriek of an alarm, and they slipped inside, blasters and bowcaster at the ready.

In the darkness there was nothing, not even the sound of nervous security guards. Empty. Growling with frustration, Bane holstered his blasters. “Great. At least we can set up an ambush for him when he returns.” He wandered forward into the darkened sitting room. The curtains over the wall-sized panorama window were open, the only light the ambient blue cast through the orbital’s shields by the planet below.

The silence was broken by the sharp ping of shattering transparisteel, followed immediately by a heartstopping screech as the hotel’s break-in alarms kicked in. Cursing, Bane tore out of the suite, Embo on his heels.

Two of the lift cars were in use and moving up; the one they’d used was still on the level, but when Bane swiped their stolen access card through, the device made a buzzing sound and flashed an “invalid” error. Embo smacked Bane’s shoulder when he started snarling at the technology and practically dragged him out towards the emergency stair that wrapped around the lift core.

Behind them, the lift cars disgorged two full security teams.

Hotels late in the night cycle on offworld platforms were eerie places -- the lighting forced to lower levels and a redder tone to facilitate sleep patterns that didn’t match the outside environment, soundproofed walls to at least provide the illusion of everyone else being asleep at the same time, ambient music switched out for gentle white noise. The plush carpeting and frequent conversation circles absorbed more sound; the rarely-used furniture gave it a haunted atmosphere, like a show-house that was never intended to be lived in.

Obi-Wan kept half an eye on his datapad as he and Zam moved through the building, both to gauge where Greejatus and his guard detail were located as well as the erratic movements of the MSE carrying his and Zam’s ill-gotten access cards. The last thing they needed was to run into a security team actively trying to hunt them down.

They had only run into one patrol before the alerts started lighting up the system, passing with just a nod of acknowledgment. Zam didn’t find the escalating security issues nearly so amusing.

“Either this is going to go off without a hitch, or we’re going to be dead by the time they turn the lights up.”

“Relax.” Obi-Wan glanced around the corner; down the corridor across from the third floor lift lobby was the security office. Trying to slice that door was guaranteed to set off alarms and possibly lock it down even tighter. “Once they get nervous, they’ll move him down here. All we have to do is wait until they have the door open and then join the group. Once they have Greejatus in the safe room, we can take him out.”

“And be trapped in the security office with at least eight officers,” Zam hissed. She really did sound like a stuffy Coruscant functionary whilst wearing Commander Hylec’s face.

“We can handle them.” On his screen, seven dots lit up as they passed through a lounge door. “They’re moving, get ready.”
In hindsight, he should probably have also been tracing Commander Hylec’s access as well. By the time they realized the Chief of Security himself was in the group, it was far too late to duck out of sight.

Armand Isard stared. “Commander Hylec?”

Two absolutely identical voices, one beside him and one from the second man in the cross-corridor outside the Security office, responded, “Yes, Commander?”

The Phiro Hylec standing beside him noticed the doppelganger. “What is this?!”

The other Phiro Hylec standing beside a young security officer with very non-regulation long hair scowled. “That’s precisely what I’d like to know. Who are you? What sort of game are you playing at?!”

Isard signaled the security detail to shield Greejatus, feeling like he’d stepped out of the lift into a comedy holo. “What—”

His voice was drowned out by an outrageous racket from the stairwell; two tall, skinny aliens burst through the door and skidded to a halt at the sight of the people already there. The Duros’ eyes snapped past Isard’s shoulder and narrowed dangerously when he spotted Greejatus, and Isard made a snap decision. He grabbed the arm of the Commander Hylec beside him, whom he was reasonably certain was the actual Commander. “Get him safe!”

The two aliens opened fire, equally targeting Greejatus’ escort and the two impostor security officers; the arrival of another security detail coming down the stairwell distracted them long enough for everyone to take refuge. Isard ended up behind one of the unused couches with the long-haired impostor security officer, firing back at the taller alien with the bowcaster.

“What is that?” he gritted, not really expecting an answer.

The fake security guard snapped off a shot over the top of the sofa and ducked again. “Kyuzo. Good reflexes, the helmet is a shield and additional weapon, so ducking is advised.”

It was the last thing Isard heard before something struck the back of his head and the world went dark.

Greejatus hunkered down behind a piece of ugly hotel furniture, scowling. One group of bounty hunters might have been funny, but two at once was a potential problem. The hotel’s security chief dropped in beside him.

“We need to move you, sir!”

“And how do I know you’re the real Hylec?” he snarled. Enough games!

The other man ground his teeth under that ridiculous mustache and pulled a security access card from
inside his jacket. “The fake me doesn’t have this.”

He didn’t really have much of a choice. “Fine.” Maybe the bounty hunters would finish each other off and spare Security the effort. It would be disappointing, but for the best. Hylec opened the door and ushered him and half the SBI security detail through, then down the hall to the so-called safe room. There was nothing safer about it than any other room besides the reinforced blast-proof walls, but if it set their narrow minds at ease, he’d at least go through the motions. There were so many more things in the galaxy to fear than an assassination attempt.

The safe room was at least furnished in accordance with the rest of the hotel. Greejatus nodded in satisfaction and turned in time to see Hylec put blaster bolts through the three SBI officers’ heads. The man aimed his blaster at Greejatus with a funny smile. “Hylec's dead. Not sorry.”

Greejatus threw back his head and laughed. Lightning arced from his fingertips and threw the fake Hylec into the wall with a cry.

“Oh, little alien.” He gave a nasty grin as the Clawdite, stunned out of her disguise, struggled to get up. “You have no idea what you're dealing with.”
in enough of a hurry they'd left the access card in. Down the sterile grey corridor, almost a relief after the opulence of the hotel proper, the safe room door was stuck open around a corpse. The sounds coming from inside made his skin crawl.

They still had a job to do. Bane dove through the gap and rolled at an angle, fetching up against a chair as a bolt of indigo electricity crackled overhead. Someone beside him swore softly and he looked over to see the red-haired human merc clutching his chest and looking a little grey around the edges.

“Got you, did he?” He smirked at the human's sour glare.

“Just a bit.” He sounded hoarse. Bane could probably eliminate him, but that would leave them down a gun against… whatever the hell Greejatus was. He peaked around the chair to get a better look.

Wesell, shed of any disguise, was firing both blasters. Somehow, Greejatus was blocking or deflecting every shot; they flew away to burn smudges into the walls and furnishings, and the stench of charred polyfibre was growing. The human's eyes practically glowed a very inhuman yellow.

“Never seen a human do that before. Or shoot lightning. That normal?”

The human beside him wheezed a humourless laugh. “Not a species trait.”

Greejatus was laughing as he directed more lightning toward Embo; the Kyuzo ducked and the sparks sprayed off his helmet. Just when Bane thought it couldn't get more unbelievable, the old human stomped his foot in Bane's direction and a shockwave struck the chair they were hiding behind, bowling Bane and the mercenary over into the wall.

And the fucker was still laughing.

“This is getting us nowhere,” the merc coughed. “We need to coordinate.”

“Fine,” Bane growled. He gestured to Embo, who nodded shortly even as he took potshots at Greejatus. “When I say, you split left and see if you can hit him.”

The human muttered softly -- some sort of comm system to Wesell -- then nodded, shoving his sleeve back to reveal a vambrace of some sort. “Ready.”

“Go.”

Bane rolled right and up to his feet, strafing toward Greejatus. The whirling dish of Embo's helmet intercepted a burst of that electricity and struck the human's shoulder. Something else hit him and he staggered, and then Bane and Wesell's shots finally found their marks. Greejatus collapsed, smoking a bit, and Bane went for a double-tap just to make certain the bastard was down. It might have been overkill, but so was firing lightning from one's hands. Bane felt he was owed it.

The human mercenary groaned and leaned against the wall. “Alright, I think I've had enough excitement for one trip.”

Bane started to bring his blasters to bear but Embo's hand closed on his wrist. The Kyuzo hunter shook his head; snarling, Bane put his weapons away. His partner was right, even if he hated admitting it: they were going to have to share this kill.

“What'd you shoot him with?” Wesell asked. Now that Bane had a good look at her, she was also clearly struggling; Greejatus must have zapped her a couple times.
“Stun darts.” The human held up his arm, showing the vambrace under the uniform. “Figured keeping him dazed was the better option.” He nodded to Bane and Embo. “Much appreciated.”

Bane sneered. “Don't get used to it.” Gritting his teeth, he coordinated with Wesell to label the takedown as a team effort. “Are we done here?”

Wesell smirked at him. “How’d you plan to get out?”

He rolled his head back to eye the ceiling in disbelief. “The door.”

“I know a back route out,” the human said. He pulled a datapad from inside his stolen jacket. “You're welcome to join us that far, at least.”

Hotel security was starting to converge on the office -- one of the officers who'd followed him and Embo must have put the call in. The human, Bastra, got them through a hidden service door into the maintenance network and out into the alley behind the convention centre. Bane and Embo moved away as soon as they were in the open; they'd need to move fast before word got out and the spaceport blocked departures.

Obi-Wan watched the other bounty hunters depart, locking down on the awful head-spinning sickness he'd been fighting since getting shocked with Force lightning. Zam didn't look much better, although she had enough presence of mind to regain her usual human face.

“So what was it you were doing with the security terminal before we left?”

He shrugged and pushed away from the wall. Safety first, vomit later. “Wiped the camera records. Saved a copy. I'll make one for you, if you'd like.”

“Thanks.” There was a funny tone to her voice that made him glance back. She was giving him a measuring look. “You're not just human, are you.”

“As close to full human as anyone can be.”

“He got you three times. You shouldn't be moving after that.” But she followed him to the mouth of the alley, where they were able to catch a droid-operated hovertaxi back to the spaceport.

He held it together long enough to get to Zam's ship and hug the 'fresher for a bit. By the time he emerged and settled into the copilot's seat, they were in space. Now that he could relax, he could bring the Force to bear on his injuries, and mull over the whole thing.

Janus Greejatus had used the Dark side. He'd also successfully hidden that ability, the way Obi-Wan concealed his own; Obi-Wan hadn't sensed anything when they'd introduced Devon Securities to Commander Hylec earlier that night, and Greejatus had been right there.

Janus Greejatus had been Palpatine's advisor -- or one of them, anyway. The odds of Greejatus being a full Sith acolyte, with the skills he'd demonstrated, were high. The odds of him being one of Sidious’ were also high, unless there was some other Sith Master.

Doubtful.

Which meant Sidious had been actively guiding Republic politics. The thought chilled him. Bad
enough when he'd assumed Sidious was maybe a political donor; the Sith Master had had the Chancellor's ear, possibly for decades, given Palpatine and Greejatus’ friendly history.

Which meant Palpatine's rise to power had been orchestrated by the Sith. There was no such thing as coincidence.

“You alright there? Looking a little pale.”

“I'm fine,” he lied. “You… said I must be more than human. You’re partly right: I can use the Force. Once I'm done patching myself up, I can do the same for you, if you'd like.” His mouth twitched on a wry smile. “Spare you a visit to medical, anyway.” He owed her, and it was the least he could do.

When he opened his eyes, Zam was sitting with her feet propped on the edge of the console. “You can use the Force. Why didn't you counter-zap Old and Wrinkly?”

Obi-Wan scrubbed his hands over his face tiredly. “Because I'm trying to avoid being noticed. That kind of fight would be obvious to anyone with training -- and they will send someone with training to investigate.”

“Used to be a Jedi, huh?” She nodded at his surprised glance. “Met a guy like you once. Called himself Tyranus.”

“Older human, tall, fancies refined capes?”

“That's the one.”

“Yeah, I left the Order a few years ago. A bit after he did, actually.” He wondered why Zam had met with Dooku, but it had likely been a job and she wouldn't say anything about it if he asked.

“So how do you do your healing thing? Not gonna lie, my chest hurts like I got kicked by a gundark.”

Sighing, Obi-Wan shifted around and rested his hand on her shoulder. After this, he was going to sleep for a week.

Feid rolled her eyes as the nosy spaceport security guys left. They were only making sure no fugitives from justice were hiding in the Sunflare’s engines, or something, but the delay was irritating.

“Alright, let's get out of here.”

Pulkka set in the departure coordinates Kuat Spaceport Control sent them. Taking off from a ring orbital was significantly more awkward than departing a planet. Zohli settled into the seat at the communications station, looking exhausted. No surprise there, she'd been up all night and was probably going to crash as soon as they hit hyperspace.

“You alright there, Squirt?”

The kid nodded. “Just worried about At'tha. From what they were saying, things got really bad.”

Pulkka shook her mane out. “It could have been much worse if we hadn't been there to help.”
“Could it, though? I know those two guys were gonna cause trouble, but…”

Feid shook her head as she input the hyperspace route back to Outland Transit. “Bastra sent me a message a bit ago. It didn't work out how we thought it might, but it turned out alright in the end. He's just tired now.”

Zohli didn't reply; when Feid glanced back, the kiddo was sound asleep against her seat restraints. She grinned. Bastra's kid was doing alright.

Chapter End Notes

It's worth mentioning that this is well before Cad Bane got his cybernetics!

Next chapter won't be up until 5 April, because I'm up to my elbows prepping a cosplay for C2E2.
If you're around on the Saturday and happen to see Hondo Ohnaka running around, come say hi! xD
Accords

Chapter Summary

Previously:

On Zygerria, Atai Molec had a bounty placed on Palpatine's advisor, Janus Greejatus.

On Nar Shaddaa, Zam Wesell accepted the contract -- but so did several other young bounty hunters seeking to make a name for themselves. Via the Toydarian infomonger, Rozatta, Zam enlisted the assistance of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

On Kuat, Zam, Obi-Wan, and fellow bounty-hunters Cad Bane and Embo discovered that Greejatus was more than he appeared.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumi, sanerontheinside, jynx, and cuzosu

Reformation Year 980.08.04
Zygerria

The chime from the door was something of a surprise: he didn't have anything scheduled that afternoon. Atai Molec glanced up from his work, a curious frown twitching his ears back. “Enter.”

His second-in-command paused just inside the door. “Do you have a moment, Guildmaster?” At Molec's gesture to come forward, Warun let the door slide closed. “I've received an update on that particular assignment you requested.”

Particular…? Oh. Molec accepted the datapad Warun offered. “Already? I'm impressed.” The assassination of Janus Greejatus had been completed by a pair of teams working in conjunction, apparently. The appended report included an appalling number of involved security guards, and the bounty hunters were demanding a modest bonus for the additional trouble. “Why was the security so high?”

Warun grimaced and squeezed his hands behind his back. “In order to keep the client confidential, we were forced to place the bounty on the public boards, and the Republic security services naturally got wind of it immediately. We could have chosen a hunter and offered it privately, but that would have left the hunter as a loose end. Frankly, I don't fancy our chances at eliminating a person who makes a career from killing people.”

“No, you're exactly right.” Molec sighed and signed off on the bonus request, ensuring that the total amount was divided evenly. It was a more than generous sum to begin with, but the hunters had
certainly proven their effectiveness. Displeasing professionals would only lead to problems later. “Very good, Warun. Was there anything else?”

“No, sir. For security's sake I didn't want to send that internally.”

“I appreciate that, thank you.” His spirits lifted somewhat, Molec returned to his work.

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Reformation Year 980.08.04
Coruscant

Lord Sidious was livid. He hadn't yet taken it out on the staff, for which Tuuz was grateful, but their Lord had damaged a wall the night previous in his wrath. The loss of not only an acolyte but one of his political advisors -- and what Tuuz might have quietly hazarded as the closest thing he had to a friend -- was sitting poorly on their Master's mind.

Biting his lip, Tuuz knocked on the door. Maul opened it a minute later.

“Got a question for ya.”

The Zabrak man stared up at him wordlessly for a moment before stepping aside. Tuuz didn't move much further than inside the door, letting it slide shut behind him. “If I gave him some good news, will it do any good?”

Maul dropped loosely into the chair at his workstation; the surface was currently covered in a scattering of droid parts. “What kind of news?”

“I found out who placed the bounty on Greebly.”

A reluctant smile tugged the corner of Maul's mouth. “Don't let him hear you call Janus that. He'll ask why you couldn't find out earlier.”

Tuuz leaned against the wall next to the door. “They did things the proper way to stay anonymous. What they didn't manage to keep anonymous were the names of the bounty hunters involved. I tracked down the accounts of everyone who signed onto that bounty and waited to see where the payout came from.” He shook his head. “It doesn't help Janus, but maybe our Lord will be happy making an example of the client and hunters.”

Maul was silent for a moment. “The client, yes. The hunters? He may want to hire them, himself, if they were good enough to take on an acolyte and walk away. Hunters work for money, not morals, they don't care who pays them or what the job is.”

“As long as he doesn't crispy-fry me for not being able to stop it--”

“I can't guarantee that.”

“Oh, there's your sense of humour. I'd wondered where it went.”

“Do I look like I'm joking?”
Tuuz bared sharp teeth and aimed a taloned finger at him. “Funny! See you in the morning, Maul.”

“Out of curiosity--”

The Twi'lek acolyte paused in the doorway.

“How many hunters did it take to put Janus down?”

“Only four. Our Lord might consider his loss to be for the best.”

The door closed behind him. Maul stared at it a moment longer before giving a soft laugh and picking up the servo he'd been repairing.

It had been a while since Qui-Gon had been summoned to Mace's office. The Jedi Master composed himself as he stepped out of the lift, wondering what the trouble was this time.

Anakin's studies were going well -- having friends among his agemates had been a lifesaver for his academic progress. There were no objections to his continuing therapy sessions -- reduced to once a month, and Qui-Gon was occasionally invited if there were any concerns. His Padawan even handled the odd requests from the Chancellor well enough, although he'd confided to both Qui-Gon and his therapist that he didn't understand why the Chancellor persisted and that he found the lunch meetings dull; they were certainly awkward from Qui-Gon's point of view, with the politician making halfhearted attempts at small talk.

The boy was well into his thirteenth year now, but if they were to be assigned missions, normally it would be done in front of a full Council session. Which meant this summons was for something else.

“It's open.”

Qui-Gon entered and offered an informal bow. “Alright, Mace. What's going on?”

The Head of the Order gestured him to a seat and leaned with his elbows on the desk. He looked tired; harried, even. “Are you familiar with Master Jorus C’baoth, Qui-Gon?”

“I can't say we've met, although I know his reputation. I did encounter his Padawan in the gardens, she was rather distressed.” He frowned and rested against the comfortable seat back. “Is there a concern?”

“When isn't there?” Mace's smile was sour. “He's constantly up to his elbows in Republic politics and if you thought you were a bantha in the political pottery house, well…” The smile turned into a grimace. “In brief, he's been pushing for an expansion project the Republic can't really afford right now. More to the point, it's an extravagant long-term colony ship into the Unknown Regions and beyond, and he's convinced Master Yoda that there must be Jedi onboard. It's become his pet project as a result -- oh, it's being run by corporations, but he's been the figurehead for most of it.”

Qui-Gon's jaw dropped. “The Republic is suffering financial setbacks and leaking systems by the week, and that's his idea of a good investment?”

Mace nodded. “That's how I feel about it, too.” No wonder this meeting was private, if he was willing to be so frank about it. “Fortunately, most of the government agrees that it's a bad time for
expansionism, and the funding has been withdrawn. So our illustrious Master C’baoth took it upon himself to petition the Chancellor directly -- apparently, they’re acquaintances. Palpatine has extracted a promise from Master C’baoth to settle a dispute on Barlok in exchange for forcing the funding through the Acquisitions committees.”

“Did he, now?” Qui-Gon’s brows settled into a scowl. “I don't recall hearing anything about tensions on Barlok.”

“It’s recent. There’s some… disagreement over whether the mines on Barlok are the property of the local Brolfi population or the Corporate Alliance -- specifically the Mining Guild.”

“The mines? As in, all the mines?”

The Head of the Order held up a datapad. “All the information is in here. I want you and Skywalker to go along with Master C’baoth and Padawan Jinzler and just… keep an eye on things.”

The sly bastard had known exactly what to say to get Qui-Gon interested in going along with this. He narrowed his eyes at Mace, who had the grace not to smirk. “You don’t trust C’baoth.”

“I don’t trust him not to be biased in favour of someone he wants something from,” Mace said flatly. “Only interfere if it looks like he’s not giving due weight to all concerns, but you do have leave to interfere.”

Sighing, Qui-Gon accepted the datapad. “You have an explanation ready for our presence? Master C’baoth doesn't seem the type to happily accept others changing his plans.”

Mace’s shrug was deliberately casual. “Oh, we already told him we wanted an additional team along. This is just me giving you a heads-up before you and Padawan Skywalker are summoned in the morning for formal introductions.”

The Head of the Order really had no trust in C’baoth, if that was his stance. Given what poor Lorana had told him about her Master’s temperament, Qui-Gon wasn’t particularly surprised. “I guess I have some homework to do.”

“Just don't stay up too late. We're starting early tomorrow,” Mace said with a grin.

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Reformation Year 980.08.06
Outland Transit Station

En route back to Nar Shaddaa, Zam had received a comm from Roz asking them -- and Bastra’s crew -- to swing by Outland. Zam had still offered to drop Bastra off on Nar Shaddaa first so he and his people could arrive together; he’d shrugged and said they could meet at Outland, since his ship was on their registry. Zam hadn’t been fond of spending more time than necessary with him onboard -- humans smelled a bit odd, not really unpleasant, but it lingered -- but it was a more straightforward route from Kuat to Outland than it was from Hutt space.

The extra day did give her excuses to pry into his weirdo brain, though.
“So where'd you get the armour from? Looks like Mando lite.”

He snorted. “I did some work with the Protectors on Concord Dawn, they told me to keep it.”

She squinted at him. “That stuff still isn’t cheap.”

Bastra’s face was a study of embarrassed regret. “I did, uh, take on a Wookiee despite being warned not to. Maybe they didn’t want my foolishness infecting everyone else.”

“And you still have both your arms?” Zam poked Bastra’s arm above the elbow. Nope, definitely not metal.

“It’s more astonishing I still have my head.” He showed a part of the suit’s collar that had definitely been crumpled by a large hand and later reshaped.

“You have a death wish or something?”

“Hardly. It was an accident.”

“Mmhmm.” Zam narrowed her eyes at him. “Like Bane and Embo running into us right at that moment was an accident?” She’d been rolling the whole thing at Kuat over in her mind, and there were far too many coincidences for her comfort.

He was silent for a moment. “I knew where they were and what they would likely be doing, but I swear I didn't know they would run down the stairs. I was hoping Security would keep them busy.”

When Zam kept staring at him wordlessly, Bastra sighed and held up his datapad. “My daughter got a tracker on one of them in the hotel tapcafe, my copilot tailed them and listened in on their plans, our gunner posed as hotel staff and got the security uniforms for us….” He hesitated at the venomous expression on her face. “… And our droid climbed the outside of the building and smashed a window in Greejatus’ suite to activate the security alarms once Bane and Embo were inside.”

“Are you karking serious?” She reached over and snagged the lapel of his jacket. “I told you it was just gonna be you. When were you planning on demanding a bigger cut, asshole?”

He barely blinked, letting her yell. The calm demeanor merely made her more angry.

“Were you gonna wait til your pals showed up to back you up? Or maybe you'd just pull a fast one in the middle of the night--”

“If you stop for a moment, you’ll realize how ridiculous that is--”

Zam swung at his head with her free hand; Bastra deflected it with a quick backhand that snapped her grip off his jacket, but made no other moves. “I was never going to ask for more. Hells, I wouldn’t have told you if you hadn’t asked.”

“But you weren't gonna lie about it, either,” Zam seethed. He shrugged.

“You would have figured it out anyway, and then been even more angry with me. What would be the point?” An embarrassed grin crossed his face. “Considering what Greejatus did, I'm glad to have left my crew out of it. They don't need more attention than we already have.”

The hyperspace alert went off, and Zam reached over the push the lever forward; the viewscreen filled with the rounded shapes of Outerland II and she set the computer to accept docking guidance.

“Next time, Bastra, you're gonna be honest with me. Got it?”
The human raised his eyebrows at her. “Next time?”

Grudgingly, Zam muttered, “We did work pretty well together. Even if you left out half the fucking plan.”

“No more secrets,” he agreed. “At least, none that are relevant to the job.”

His crew had apparently been caught in Kuat Security's lockdown. Zam wasn't exactly certain how she ended up choosing to keep the other mercenary company while they waited, but Bastra turned out to have a wonderfully dry sense of humour. They occupied a table in one of the flashier tapcafes and spent the time passing idle judgment on the other patrons.

“Now this is a failed date if I ever saw one.”

Zam turned to see a gold-skinned Zabrak woman sauntering over, followed by a teenage Zygerrian girl. From the grin on Bastra's face, they were obviously part of his crew; he opened his arms and hugged the girl tightly.

Tearing her eyes from the quiet family reunion, Zam held her hand out, introducing herself. The other woman arched a brow and kept her thumbs hooked into her hip pockets. “Feid. Hope you don't mind if I ask how real those gloves are, first.”

Typical.

Zam pulled a face at the other woman and tugged her right glove entirely off, proving that it wasn't a part of her human guise. She wiggled her fingers. “What's the matter, don't trust shapeshifters?”

“You're a mercenary. I don't trust you not to use any advantage, including borrowing my face for a disguise.” She gripped Zam's regloved hand easily.

“If you don't have a security clearance I need to access, your pretty face is safe,” Zam replied sourly. Feid smirked and dragged a spare chair over, leaving Zam a respectful amount of space as she offered her captain a datapad.

The teenager was crowded in beside Bastra with his arm around her shoulders; it answered a lot of Zam's private questions regarding how the younger mercenary could have a kid old enough to get involved.

Her daughter Sone would be about the same age now. It made Zam's heart twist a little at the thought of the family she'd left behind on Denon. “You're Zohli, right?”

The kid grinned and shook her hand. “Yep!”

“What do you think of the business?”

Zohli wrinkled her nose. “It's tough. But it's fun, too? I was right up close to the guys who were trying to mess with you and they didn't know it!”

Alright, that was impressive, especially for someone barely legal for that kind of work. Zam nodded. “That's good, I bet you're good with people, huh?”

“Not really? But it's like pretending to be someone else for a little bit. Nobody pays attention to the staff.”

“Your dad teach you that?” It felt weird to refer to Bastra as a father to a teenager, but the kid didn't even blink.
“Yup. He and Feid and Pulkka have been teaching me a lot.”

“Pulkka?”

Zohli pointed behind Zam. “That's Pulkka, and that's D6.”

Zam wouldn't have expected a person that immense to be so quiet, but somehow the Whiphid matriarch had been standing just behind her left shoulder for who knew how long. It was a strain to not jump as she received a tusky grin. “And now I see how you got Bastra the security uniforms. People think you're a big idiot, don't they?”

Pulkka nodded cheerfully. “Our captain likes to use people's expectations against them. It's very satisfying.” The droid standing in her shadow snickered.

“Well, speaking of expectations,” Bastra said, “now that we're all here, shall we go see what Roz wants?”

Zam rose in unspoken agreement. Pulkka shook her mane out where it fluffed from the collar of her coverall. “You go, Dee and I have some resupply to see to.”

Zohli bit her lip and tugged on Bastra's hand where it dangled over her shoulder. “Those meetings are kinda boring. The arcade is only down a couple levels.”

The human gave her an offended look, hand pressed to his sternum. “I can't believe you'd rather play games than sit in a stuffy office with the adults for an hour!” His daughter's eyeroll was long-suffering and fond, and Zam coughed to cover a laugh. Bastra relented after a moment, pressing a kiss to the girl's temple. “Of course you may. Try to be back at the ship in four hours, unless one of us comms you with other plans.”

“Thanks, At'tha!”

Zohli hugged him around the ribs and practically skipped away. Zam raised an eyebrow at Bastra. “This is a big station, you're actually fine with her being on her own?”

“The arcade staff know us by now,” Feid said with a shrug.

“Gotta let her stretch her wings a bit, anyway.” Bastra shook his head as he pushed their chairs back under the table. “She can't possibly find worse trouble than I did at that age.”

“Oh, now you've jinxed her,” the droid said. Where had it found a vox mod that handled sarcasm? Zam wasn't usually interested in droids, but this one had definitely had some tweaks.

“You really don't want to know the sorts of things I got up to when I was thirteen.” Bastra led the way out. “When I said I used to be involved in politics, I wasn't kidding.”

“That sounds like a dangerous combination,” Zam said.

The droid laughed. “Yeah, that's him, alright.”

It left with Pulkka, and Zam was almost sorry to see it go. Luckily, Feid gave Bastra just as much shit, and it was entertaining as hell to listen to them snipe each other. The group had clearly been working together for a while and were more than happy to share each other's embarrassing stories. The droid had been with him the longest, which explained a few things.

Like the complex whistle he'd made to the repurposed B1 unit that ushered them to Roz's office. The
thing had twitched in surprise and then laughed like a mynock.

“You and droids, Bastra,” Zam griped as the door opened.

He chuckled and shrugged. “I was a very bored teenager and decided to learn Binary for a class in advanced AI. Once you understand how much shit they talk, it's hard to not relate.”

Roz leaned back in her desk chair and bared her tusks at them cheerfully. “Well, it's your fault we shelled out to retrofit them all.” At Bastra's surprised blink, she twirled her stylus between her fingers. “Cost a bit, but we haven't had anyone able to snatch 'em since then. Smart kid.”

He tilted his head modestly. “I just didn’t want to risk someone trying to steal Dee. To be honest, I'm surprised the droid I spoke to here bothered to mention it.”

“Are you kidding? They hate when people co-opt them.” The Toydarian reached over to shake hands with Bastra and Feid. “Good ta finally meet you, by the way. Imdohara, right? Have a seat, have a seat.” She hit a few buttons to activate the holoprojector in her desk and brought up a bunch of news pages and holo clips. “I've been keeping tabs on the media about the Kuat job; so far the only person who seems to have you identified is your client, so that's good. You weren't trying to ghost, so the erased sections of security footage don't alarm them any further than everything else does.” She aimed beady eyes at Bastra. “I'd love to know how you managed that, though.”

Zam glanced at the human, who grinned. “When I was poking through their systems setting up the ID trackers, I dropped a wormhole into the security pickup network so I could access it without logging in through the security office terminal. It was simple enough to find all cameras that had visuals on us -- and Bane and Embo -- and erase half an hour of memory.”

Roz pulled a face. “Don't you go messing with my systems like that, mkay?”

“I have a detector program that watches for that kind of intrusion,” he offered, and winced as Feid's elbow found his ribs. “What?”

The Toydarian woman grinned at the interaction. “My slicers would love to talk shop with you, I bet. But business first: you got paid properly?”

“They didn't even complain about the bonus we asked for.” Zam pulled out her datapad, transferred Roz's cut over, and split the rest between her account and Bastra's. The human raised an eyebrow at the amount but said nothing.

“Excellent!” Roz propped her clawed feet up on her desk. “That's all I had for you, Zam; but I wanted a word with your new friends here, if they don't object?”

The other mercenaries glanced at each other and shrugged. Zam smirked: Roz was probably going to ask them to join her list, if she was reading the Toydarian's speculative expression right. “See you later, Roz. Bastra, Feid.” She nodded to them; Bastra offered his hand to shake.

“Nice working with you, Zam.”

He even seemed to mean it. She clasped his hand firmly and headed out, mentally running down her resupply checklist.
Outland II was a big place, but Zohli had quickly memorized the important transit stops, and the security droids were super helpful if she got lost. Since their first visit, the Sunflare crew had been back several times for trade runs, work, and even just to relax for a few days. Once when she'd been bored, Zoh had drawn up a map of their primary hubs; with Takodana on the southwest side of the galaxy, Outland in the southeast, and Hondo's base on Florrum in the northeast, they only needed something on the northwest to really get a comfortable cycle going. She'd pointed out Ord Mantell -- the known smuggler hole where Feid and Pulkka still had a good reputation -- and At'tha had agreed it was worth looking into.

It might have been a good idea to go to the meeting with Rozatta -- Zoh aspired to follow At'tha's path into mercenary work -- but she also just wanted to relax for a little, and if Roz had a job on the hook already, they'd be leaving fast.

And then she wouldn't have a chance to do what she'd really planned.

Saving up enough credits had taken a while; technically she'd had enough months ago, but Zoh's childhood tutors had been adamant that using up all savings at once on a purchase was irresponsible, and her new family had indicated the same. At'tha had started letting her sit with him while he managed their accounts, and had even talked her through the details of ship maintenance and supply costs and crew upkeep. It was a lot to take in, but it got the point across.

The credit exchange was down three levels and toward the middle of the ring; it was all automated, a number of computer terminals designed to accept and dispense credit chips. She waited her turn, stepped up to the next available terminal, and punched in her account number and access code. A minute later, Zoh carried twenty percent of what she had earned from her role in their various jobs tucked safely away in a pocket of her jacket. It was a lot of money -- not more than she might have had access to in the past, but for her life now the amount was significant.

The shop she was looking for was on the same level; the owner, a thickset older human man with a bald head and fluffy ginger beard, arched a skeptical eyebrow at her as she entered.

"Can I help you?"

Zohli pulled out her datapad and cleared her throat. "I'm looking for a heads-up-display scanning package for the--" she checked her notes-- "Merr-Sonn GX12-K series, please."

The man's expression had opened as she spoke; now he nodded. "Just got the latest. You need just the upgrade or the full package?"

"Full, please."

"Single or multiple copy?"

"Multiple, please." She was relieved the man had asked, she wouldn't have thought to ask for it. At'tha had made certain they all had the same combat equipment both to ensure as few contradictions as possible and also to make upgrades easier.

The merchant pulled a datacard and plugged it into a computer behind the counter. "You have the credits for this, kid? It's not cheap."

Remembering how the others handled such questions, Zoh let him see the number on the credit chip without actually handing it over. He merely gave a satisfied nod and went back to initializing the datacard. "Yer folks know you're here?"

"Of course." He didn't need to know this was a present for everyone except Deesix, who upgraded
its own software.

“Just wondering. The GX is a combat system. Don't see many traders using it.”

Was he prying for information, making sure she was okay, or just making conversation while they waited? She erred on the side of *bounty hunters don't discuss their work.* “We see enough action.” When he glanced at her again, she hooked her thumb into her belt the way Feid did, drawing the man's attention to the blaster strapped to her right thigh. She'd once asked why nobody in their crew used a cross-draw like they showed in the holos, and Pulkka had explained that it was showy but not very practical, and it took too long to actually draw if you needed a blaster in a hurry. Holos weren't big on realism.

The man's bushy eyebrows bounced once and he turned back to his computer. “Alrighty. One combat scanner package for multiple units, hot off the press.” Datacard and credit chip changed hands, and he handed over a much smaller-denomination chip with the remaining amount. “Nice doing business with you, kid. Watch out for the crazies out there.”

Zoh wiggled the datacard in its protective fiberplas case. “Well, this'll help with that.” She made certain it was secured inside her jacket before leaving; losing that expensive piece of software in the arcade would suck.

She made her way toward the arcade, enjoying being just one person in the crowd. Nobody gave her a second glance as she walked, pausing occasionally to admire items in display kiosks and shop windows. Zohli was just another spacer in a station full of spacers, and it felt great. It felt like belonging.

It felt like a small hand grabbing her jacket cuff.

Zoh looked down in alarm. A little human boy with huge brown eyes and wild dark hair tugged her hand. “Excuse me, please, where are the games?”

She drew him into the lee of a kiosk, out of the foot traffic, and crouched down at his level; she didn't have much experience with human kids other than Adité and Jhono's little Lando, but this one couldn't have been more than four Standard. “Are you lost?”

The boy's tiny face scrunched up with frustration. “I was trying to find the games but I missed the stop on the train.”

Zoh bit her lip. Little kids were single-minded about things sometimes. “Where's your guardian?”

“Buir is meeting with Auntie Roz, but I was bored and there are games here,” he explained, as if it was perfectly reasonable for a kid his age to be wandering alone.

He was familiar enough with Rozatta to call her 'auntie,' though, so maybe his guardian was fine with it? The kid looked on the edge of a frustrated meltdown, so Zoh plastered a big smile on. “I was just going to go find the games, myself. Want to come with me?”

The boy brightened immediately, bouncing on his toes. “Yeah! Um. What's your name?”

“I'm Zohli Bastra, you can call me Zoh.” She straightened and held her hand out for him to grip. “What's your name, buddy?”

He let her lead the way toward the tram, practically skipping. “I'm Boba!”

She shook her head in exasperation. If he'd gone to anyone less trustworthy, Boba might have been
Roz pinned them both with a measuring gaze as Zam left; Obi-Wan got the sensation that the Toydarian infomonger knew more about him than he was particularly comfortable with, but knowing things -- and keeping secrets -- was her job. “So! Now that we're finally chatting face to face, I have an offer for you. You get to hear all of it before you decide, and it won't hurt you to decline or take some time thinkin’ it over.”

Obi-Wan had a feeling he knew where this was going. He nodded pleasantly. “We’re all ears, Madame Rozatta.”

“Ah, psh.” She flapped a hand at him. “Call me Roz.” She was pleased, though. “Here's the deal: I don't work with a lot of private mercenaries, but there are a few whom I offer exclusive services to: information, work… protection, if necessary. You're a little green, as a crew, but I got a good feeling about you. Not a lot of freelancers prefer the subterfuge route without being, well, Zam. Most of the folks on my shortlist prefer a straightforward approach to their work; they live and die by their reputation, and carry the firepower to back it up. You lot--” She poked another button and a short dossier of everyone on the crew, including Phel and Kate, appeared in the holoprojection. “You kids do your damnedest to ghost, and I like that. I'm pretty certain you've been involved in things I couldn't even find, given the difficulty I had compiling this.”

Obi-Wan and Feid exchanged amused glances. None of Roz's information connected them to the Red Sun cover in any way.

“There's always work where the interference needs to at least appear to be minimal. Trick is, they're mostly political jobs at that level, some corporate espionage, cartel power grabs. Risky business,” she added with a grin. “Does that sound like something you kids would be interested in?”

Feid tilted her head; Obi-Wan drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair in agreement. “It sounds like a step in the right direction, although we'd want to run it past the others to get their take. What do you want in return?”

Roz shrugged and settled back in the cradle of her chair again. “I take a thirty-percent cut on the jobs, but I factor that into the fee when negotiating with the client. As long as the quality of your work stays up, we're good. I don't insist on exclusivity: you're free to arrange your own work whenever you want. I can just get you some good private contracts you otherwise wouldn't have access to. Also, all your docking and maintenance fees here would be waived, not just for when you're on the job.”

That actually sounded like a good deal, and Feid was willing to consider it. The Force, when he checked, showed nothing but genuine honesty from Rozatta -- she could scheme with the best of them, but she wasn't seeking to take advantage of a potential business partner. He smiled and said, “I like the sound of that. As I said, I'd want to get the opinions of the rest of my crew. Is there a contract involved?”

“Yep. You're welcome to go over it before signing anything.” She handed over a datapad. “Take all the time you need, Bastra. I'll be here.”
Dismissed, they returned to the lift and headed down. Obi-Wan glanced at Feid. “What do you think?”

“Her rep is good. Real good.” His co-pilot shrugged easily and leaned against the wall as the lift descended. “The only real smudge on her record is when the first Outland got blown up, but from what I heard the asshole who did that also tortured and nearly killed her. She's bounced back well.”

He frowned. “I seem to recall Pulkka saying it was a personal attack on one of her assets?”

“Something like that. Of course, that's just rumour. Roz isn't talking about it, and we dunno who the asset in question might have been.”

The lift opened, and Obi-Wan nearly walked into someone on his way out. “Oh! Pardon me--”

Jango Fett's expressionless mask glared back at him, and Obi-Wan got the distinct impression the other man was displeased to see him. The other bounty hunter brushed past without a word; Obi-Wan found himself blinking at his own mystified reflection as the lift doors closed between them.

“Well that was awkward,” Feid drawled. She draped her arm over his shoulders and steered him down the corridor toward the concourse.

“I'm not certain what I did to earn that?”

Feid patted his shoulder. “Do you want my take on it, or do you prefer to stumble around in the dark?”

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “Do you even need to ask?”

“I mean, you've seemed happy enough to just bumble into things. It's kinda adorable, really.” But she took pity on him. “Fett thinks you're reckless and foolish, and liable to get the people around you in trouble. Remember that his only experience working with you was that one time on Ki'an Tol where you were playing at being a political fop,” she said when he opened his mouth to protest. “You threw him in the deep end of your banthashit without warning him it was an act. So maybe you want to consider apologizing before you land on the shit list of one of the galaxy's most dangerous bounty hunters?”

He gaped at her. “It wasn't that much of an act!”

His friend stopped and turned to face him, gripping his shoulders; green eyes stared him down solemnly. “Scogar, you're my spear-brother and I love you, so I'm gonna be honest. You wear so many masks I think you forget they're masks, sometimes. Sometimes I wonder if you even know who you are without them. But that's something you can think about later.” She slipped Roz's datapad from his hand. “I'll go catch up with Pulkka and Deesix. You go be responsible for yourself.” She patted his cheek lightly and Obi-Wan scowled up at her.

“Would it not be creepy if I hung around here waiting for him to come back?”

“No more so than you've already done.” She smirked at his expression. “It's not like you have his comm information, anyway. Try not to get yourself shot.”
Roz glanced up as her favourite asset stormed in; the scowl on his face once he pulled the helmet off would have curdled bantha milk.

“What in Kad's name was he doing here?”

She hid a smirk and went back to her files. “Gonna have to be more specific than that, honey.”

“Bastra.”

Hah, bingo. She liked winning bets with herself. “He was helping Zam with a job, I offered him and his crew the usual contract.” Roz studied Jango as he dropped into the chair the other man had recently vacated. “What crawled up your ass and died?”

“You're not seriously going to work with him? He's an idiot.”

“You think so.” Roz turned the holoprojector on. “You remember that Davine contract Porla was offering before he got whacked?”

Jango blinked at the apparent change in topics. “What about it?”

The dossier on Gav Davine was pathetically thin, but it did include an intake holo from Krayn's organization of a young adult human male with long dark hair, cybernetic left eye, and a heavily scarred face. She popped up two other holos beside it for comparison: former Jedi Kenobi and the mercenary identity he'd buried his past beneath, Scogar Bastra. Jango had informed her of the connection between Kenobi and Bastra awhile back, but she doubted he'd connected Davine. The shifting expression on Jango's face as he stared at the holos -- from irritation to bafflement to incredulity -- was priceless.

“You're shittin' me.”

Roz gave him a grin of satisfaction: it wasn't often she was a step ahead of him. “You said you ran into Bastra on Nar Shaddaa and they appeared to be on their way out. Only a couple days before that, someone effectively dismantled Krayn's entire operation from the top down, and Davine was involved in it. I checked the \textit{Sunflare}'s landing records and they were on Nar Shaddaa almost constantly for several months. Bastra doesn't often linger, so he was definitely doing something on Nar Shaddaa for an extended period. Which ended about the time Krayn went down.” She shrugged and leaned back. “Could be coincidence, but considering how similar these men appear to be, I doubt it.”

His scowl abandoned in favour of contemplating the possibilities, Jango scrubbed a hand over his mouth. “Davine is involved with a cartel called Red Sun, which took out both Krayn and then Porla, after Porla put the bounty out. Are you telling me an ex-Jedi is running a paramilitary cartel?”

“I haven't even \textit{started} speculating on that, there isn't nearly enough information about Red Sun to draw conclusions. He could be subcontracting with them, he seems otherwise independent.” She turned the projector off. “But if I'm right, Bastra is a serious asset I'd rather have on my side than against it. And if I'm wrong, he's still a serious asset who can keep up with Zam and avoid notice through misdirection, and I still want him on my team.” Roz leaned forward and pinned her friend with a glare. “Do you not like him because of his past, or do you not like him because he helped when you didn't ask for it?”

Jango's face locked down again. “I don't trust him.”

“Honey, you don't trust anyone. But you're making this personal when it doesn't have to be.” Personally, Roz suspected Jango actually liked the kid -- he had a major competency kink which he
would roundly deny if anyone dared to suggest it to his face -- and was angry at himself for the interest. Which he was unfairly taking out on the other merc. Roz didn't care about her assets’ interpersonal conflicts, except when they started to interfere with the job. “So why don't you Mandalorian up, cut the kid some slack, and focus on something more fun. I got a contract here that's right up your alley.”

The gears turning behind the man's eyes shifted to cold professionalism. “Let's hear it.”

The plan to go to the arcade and amuse Boba with the games there had lasted about as long as it took for him to notice the swoop racers zipping past the tram; the boy had raced down the car to try to keep up and made them miss their stop. Zohli's ears had gone flat, expressing her exasperation despite her best efforts, as she'd wrangled the child off the tram. Instead of waiting for the next car going the opposite direction, Boba had taken off running, looking for a place to get a 'flyer'.

She was starting to understand why some humans strapped their little ones into carriers of some sort. Where did all that energy come from?

In desperation, she looked around for something, anything, to distract the kid. The bright colours and sparkles of a toy shop drew her eye and she snagged the first suitable object she could. “Hey Boba! Look at this! It's as big as you are!”

His eyes went huge at the sight of the enormous plush nexu kitten with comically exaggerated features. It really was large enough to obscure his torso and head, and a charmingly unrealistic shade of green that glowed under the ultraviolet lamps. Boba squeezed it in a hug, triggering a mechanism inside that created a purring effect, and shoved his face into the neon fur.

Zoh winced and hoped he wasn't at that stage where little kids got snuffy and sticky.

Trying not to look as self-conscious as he felt, Obi-Wan spent about fifteen minutes browsing outgoing jobs on his datapad before Fett reappeared leaving the lift. The man hesitated for a moment upon seeing Obi-Wan waiting, but moved straight forward toward the concourse instead of trying to avoid him. Obi-Wan waited until he was within discreet earshot before asking, “Can we talk?”

Fett's strides didn't slow. “Only if you can keep up.”

It was the closest thing to an invitation he would get and Obi-Wan took it, matching his pace to the bounty hunter's easily. “It seems we got off to a bad start, and that's mostly my fault. I'm sorry.”

Fett stopped dead with the barest flicker of surprise in the Force. “What?”

Obi-Wan sighed. “I apologise for being a complete prick at Ki'an Tol. I was… caught up in the role I was playing and dragged you in without thinking to ask if you were comfortable with it. The fact that it ended in both our favours doesn't excuse my methods. I'm sorry.”

The other man regarded him a moment, impassive behind his helmet. Tilting his head towards the
concourse hall, he simply said, “Let’s talk.”

They ended up in a quiet tapcafe of Fett’s choice; the bounty hunter removed his helmet to give Obi-Wan the full strength of an intense stare. “So what the fuck was going on with you at Ki’an Tol?”

The drink in front of him was a sort of Dubrillion whiskey Obi-Wan was unfamiliar with; he turned the glass between his hands, admiring the deep reddish hue of the liquor. “People are more likely to underestimate you if you seem foolish and gullible. It’s an act that’s worked well for me.”

Fett arched an expressive eyebrow at him. “You learn that from Ohnaka?”

“No, but he does naturally make excellent use of it.”

“It does naturally make him obnoxious as hell.”

Obi-Wan laughed softly; it wouldn’t be the first time Hondo had been called that. “It’s true. People are also more eager to be done dealing with someone who’s obscenely irritating, which means they’ll agree to the first deal you offer.”

The other man snorted. “That’s even more obnoxious.” Before Obi-Wan could say anything else, Fett sighed and pressed his lips together in an expression of resignation. “I get it, and you couldn’t easily have dropped the act once you started it, what with all the security. I was already having a less than stellar time of things and in a bad mood.”

Blinking, Obi-Wan asked what had happened. Fett studied him for a minute. “Nearly got kicked out. They didn’t like the reputation a set of beskar’gam carries, and that’s partially my fault to start with.”

That seemed a tremendous amount of blame to take on oneself. “There are a lot of Mandalorians--”

Fett sent him a withering look. “I wouldn’t expect you to understand.”

Narrowing his eyes, Obi-Wan replied, “Ni tayl’bajur, Vhett.”

The other man considered him for a long moment before saying in a low voice, “The Kyr’tsad is out there ruining the work Jaster Mereel did in bringing some respectability to the image, and when was the last time I tried to do anything about it?” Fett glared at the wall. Obi-Wan swallowed hard at the banked rage in the man’s eyes.

“Galidraan.” He hadn’t been aware of it at the time -- there had been far more pressing issues, like being temporarily enslaved and bombs -- but he’d read into the recent history when preparing for that first mission to Mandalore. Galidraan had been a horrific mess that had drawn the Jedi into the conflict based on false information, used as a tool by Death Watch to eliminate the contingent of True Mandalorians and shatter any potential hope for an accord between the Jedi and Mando’ade. The Council had held heated arguments for weeks about policy changes afterwards. Dooku had been particularly outspoken in favour of changing things, given that he’d been the one in charge of the Order’s task group.

Fett nodded. “And that makes it partially my responsibility, because I’ve been free for a decade and haven’t tried to pick up the pieces. I’m the Mand’alor, that’s what I’m supposed to be doing.” He snorted. “The guilt trip hit pretty hard. So I was already off my stride. I probably could have managed just fine on my own if you hadn’t also taken a job, but that’s hardly your fault. Working together was… the best way to handle it,” he said reluctantly. “I didn’t appreciate the assist as much as I should have.”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “We had a job to do, no gratitude needed.”
“I know.” Fett looked at him as of memorizing his features. “But thanks and appreciation are different. And I shouldn’t throw out a potential ally just because I was… grumpy.” A little half-smile twitched the corner of his mouth. “So let’s get a few things straight and call it a fresh start. I know who you are. Kenobi.”

Obi-Wan’s chin lifted slightly in response, but he didn’t interrupt. There wasn’t much point in denying it.

“I know what you are, and frankly I don’t trust you because of that. But I want to know something, and I want to hear it from you.”

The other bounty hunter’s expression hadn’t changed from reluctant amusement -- which was still fairly intense, but everything about Fett was intense. Obi-Wan raised his eyebrows to show he was interested in hearing it. Fett nodded.

“All your file says is that you were dismissed from the Jedi. After, I notice, you apparently fought and killed a Sith on Naboo?” The man leaned closer. “One would think you’d have been rewarded for that, so I have to wonder if you’ve been placed undercover for a reason.”

That almost made him laugh; Obi-Wan let the smile show and nodded, leaning back a bit in his chair, folding one arm easily across his chest with the drink in his free hand. “Okay, Fett. I’ll answer that one, if you answer one of mine.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“How did you know?” If there was some piece of information on Obi-Wan floating about where just anyone could find it, he had a great deal more to worry about than an irritable Mando’ad.

Fett’s expression didn’t change although there was a faint ripple of surprise through those impressive shields. If the man wasn’t Force-sensitive himself, Obi-Wan would eat his helmet. “I know, in detail, where your blasters came from. Because I sent them to Jinn after he saved Roz’s life a few years back. Simple deduction, but I’m probably the only person who’d know it.”

Some of Obi-Wan’s tension eased. “Have you told anyone else?”

“Only people whom I’d trust with my own secrets.”

Nodding, Obi-Wan finally took a sip of the whiskey and rolled it over in his mouth, testing the smoky sweetness and the burn that followed. It wasn’t unpleasant at all, although not his usual preference. “I can appreciate your wariness about me -- the Order has actually done that with some of its agents in the past. But I’m not one of them.” He frowned briefly as he wondered why not. There was nobody who could answer that save Council members. “I was kicked out of the Order because I fell to the Dark side during that fight. I don’t know how much you know about the Jedi, but it’s a pretty serious offense. They could have chosen to imprison me instead, or execute me.”

Fett made a soft noise of what was probably surprise but didn’t interrupt. Obi-Wan continued, “I don’t know why they didn’t, but I stopped wondering about that a long time ago.” He shrugged. “I have a new life. It’s taken a while to put together but I’m actually happy.” A smirk tugged at his cheek and he let it. “I’m pretty certain if the Jedi could see me now, they’d be horrified.”

Fett had straightened in his chair as Obi-Wan talked; now the hunter was giving him a measuring look. “You remind me of someone else. She’s not nearly as… extravagant as you are--”

He scoffed. “Extravagant?”
Fett smirked back at him. “Aurra is pure hunter, kid. Nothing against you, but you’ll never reach that level.”

He recognized the name. “I don't think I’d want to, anyway. I have a family to take care of.”

“Can't do what she does and have attachments,” Fett agreed. He’d noticeably relaxed, although Obi-Wan doubted the man ever let his guard down. “So here's where we stand, kid: I don't like you.”

Obi-Wan shrugged; he rather liked the other man, but you couldn't win everyone over. “That's fine.”

“I don't trust you, either.”

“That’s fair.” It was understandable: knowing what he did of the True Mandalorians, Obi-Wan knew how far Fett’s honour went. But Fett had no such gauge on him.

“I don't want you to ever drag me into another one of your kriffing cons. Got it?”

He grimaced. “I can’t promise that, because I can't read the future. Not in that way,” he added when Fett gave a mocking scoff. “I can promise to warn you in advance if it happens.”

Fett gave him a sour glare. “I’ll take it.” His comm beeped and he rolled his eyes as he unclipped it from his belt. “Yeah?”

Obi-Wan missed what was said as his own comm chimed for attention. He turned away from Fett to answer it. “Bastra.”

“Station Security, Captain. Can you please come to the main office and collect your child? She's not in trouble, but there were some upset shopkeepers involved.”

He resisted the urge to facepalm. Oh, sweetheart, what have you got up to this time? “I’ll be right down, thank you.” He glanced over to see the other man putting his own comm away. “I’m sorry, I have to go deal with a minor situation.”

Fett’s eyebrow arched. “Same, actually.” They simultaneously tipped back the remains of their drinks and headed for the lift. It was just a little ironic to still be walking alongside someone who’d professed to dislike him, but Fett seemed to want to keep things professional. Obi-Wan could live with that.

Fett hesitated as they both departed at the same level. “You’re heading to the Security Office, too?”

Obi-Wan blinked. “Apparently so.”

That impassive mask stared at him again for a moment before Fett gave the smallest shrug and joined him on the walk. Obi-Wan glanced around and couldn’t help a grin.

“The last time I was in a Lucrehulk control centre, we were trying to escape from a swarm of battle droids.”

“When was that?”

“Naboo.” He marveled for a moment at the lack of pain accompanying the memories. Old wounds had finally scarred over.

After a moment, Fett said, “Tell me about it sometime.”

Obi-Wan smiled tightly. “Do you really want to hear it, or are you just humouring me?”
“It’s a war story, Bastra. War stories are meant to be shared: the victories and the losses, both. Others can learn from it. And the retelling often helps keep the ghosts at bay.”

The door to the Security Office opened as they approached and a young Rodian at the main desk looked up. [[Ah, Mister Fett, thanks for being quick.]] Xe glanced at Obi-Wan and said, [[You’re Captain Bastra?]]

“That’s right.” He reached for his identification and the officer waved it off.

[[You came in with Fett, I’ll believe you.]] Xe pushed a button on the desk. [[Fett and Bastra are here.]]

There wasn’t a response, but the officer didn’t seem to need one as they went back to their work. A moment later one of the side doors opened and a human woman in something that was a little too casual for a uniform emerged. “Thanks for being quick, guys. I think you misplaced these?”

Behind her was a little human boy with curly dark hair clutching an immense green stuffed toy, followed by Zohli, who looked embarrassed. Fett pulled his helmet off and stared.

“Boba, where’d you get that?”

The boy perked up immediately and scampered over as Fett dropped to one knee for a hug. “Zozo gave it to me!”

Obi-Wan suppressed the grin he wanted to show and looked at his daughter. “Is that right?”

She bit her lower lip and blushed. “The woman at the shop insisted we had to buy something if we were going to be there, and then she called Security on us anyway.”

He wanted to sigh, remembering how difficult it had been at thirteen to get anyone to take him seriously, too. Some things just never changed. He settled for resting a hand on her shoulder. “So what’s the story here?” Boba was chattering away with a rather muddled account, and Fett looked up at Zohli with interest.

She took a deep breath and dropped half of it in a sigh. “He was on the concourse by himself trying to find the arcade, and I was going there, too, so I figured I’d stay with him, you know? To make sure he stayed safe. But then he saw the swoops—”

“Can I ride the flyers, buir?!”

Fett seemed torn between exasperation and amusement. “Maybe later, ad’ika.”

Zoh’s ears had flattened down. “I just tried to keep him focused on one thing, but I guess shopkeepers don’t like having kids playing with the display models for a long time.”

Obi-Wan did sigh now. “Yeah, unfortunately. They’re like that. I just have one question for you, and how you answer won’t upset me. Okay?” When she nodded, he let the grin show. “Zoh, why didn’t you just comm me?”

Her green eyes got huge. “Oh. Um. I didn’t think of it?”

The poor kid’s face was flaming pink now, and he hugged her, letting her hide in his shoulder as he chuckled. “I’m just glad you’re alright, sweetheart.”

There was an unreadable expression on Fett’s face as he hooked the buy’ce to his belt and picked the
“Oh!” The two officers both laughed and the woman said, “Not at all, we just wanted to keep Boba safe. This really isn’t the best station for a little one to be roaming around, and the young lady seemed reluctant to just let him go.”

Zohli nodded without moving her face from Obi-Wan’s shoulder; he smiled and stroked her hair. “It’s alright. Just remember that you have a comm, and you could have called Dee or Pulkka, too. Ready to go?”

She nodded again and peeked out. “I just want to know if it was okay for Boba to be by himself on the concourse?”

“No.” Fett gave his son a stern look. “I suspect someone got bored and sliced the lock on our quarters.”

The little boy glared stubbornly. “The holo said the station has games!”

“It does, but you’d have a hard time reaching the consoles, shorty.” Fett scrubbed his son’s thick curls affectionately. “We can go some other time together, alright? I kinda like the games, too.” He led the way out and Obi-Wan and Zohli followed together; Obi-Wan left his arm wrapped around Zoh’s shoulders for comfort, and she leaned in against him.

“Can Zozo come, too?” Boba was making Fett’s job awkward by squeezing the enormous toy between them; Fett set him down and took his free hand instead. The bounty hunter glanced back at them and Obi-Wan shrugged.

“That’s up to her. We have a few days to spare.”

Zohli ducked her head. “I’d like to. I never did get there today.”

“Maybe your dad should come along? It’d look a little odd if you were just some kid with us.” He was making a show of nonchalance but there was definitely an awkwardness to the offer.

Well, he had just said he didn’t trust Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. “Am I going to end up carrying all your prizes again?”

Zoh gave him the most ridiculous, wide-eyed look of innocence. “Would I do that to you?”

“Yes. Twice,” he deadpanned, and she exploded in relieved giggles.

Shaking his head, Fett chuckled. “How much did the toy cost?”

“It’s alright,” Zohli said. “I didn’t mind buying it for him. If he didn’t want it, I would have kept it, myself.”

The bounty hunter nodded and glanced at Obi-Wan. “I gotta get this little menace back home, but I guess we’ll be contacting you tomorrow about… the arcade?” He seemed a little baffled at the idea of a group outing, and hesitated. “I may not trust you, Bastra, but I’m willing to work with you. And apparently let our kids hang out together.”

Smiling, Obi-Wan offered, “You can always say no.”

Jango pointed at Boba. “Have you seen this face? I should weaponise it.” His son giggled and swung from his hand.
“I know what you mean.” Obi-Wan squeezed Zohli around the shoulders; her arm tightened around his back in response. “See you later, Fett.”

Chapter End Notes

Don't think Jango cooked that joke up on the fly; he just has new people to inflict it upon.

C2E2 did not happen, for a variety of reasons. On the plus side, there's always next year. If anyone's going to Star Wars Celebration next week, I am not, but since I live in Chicago I can point out some better (cheaper) places to eat than what's around the convention centre.

I wonder what Ulic's been up to...?

Update:
I drew a picture of Boba with his nexu plushie
Observation

Chapter Summary

Previously

Alongside bounty hunters Zam Wesell, Cad Bane, and Embo, Obi-Wan Kenobi assisted in the assassination of Chancellor Palpatine's advisor, Janus Greejatus, unexpectedly discovering that Greejatus had been trained as a Dark side adept.

Upon returning to Outland Transit Station, Obi-Wan's daughter Zohli happened to make friends with Jango Fett's son Boba.

At Mace Windu's request, Qui-Gon Jinn and Anakin Skywalker accompanied overbearing Jedi Master Jorus C'booth and his Padawan, Lorana Jinzler, to negotiate a trade settlement on the planet Barlok.

Chapter Notes

I want to preface this with a warning: I do try to do my research wrt the EU/Legends/Canon material, but in this case there's practically nothing available for the political situation on Barlok, and I didn't have time to read the novel it occurs in. I've taken a bunch of liberties with the material in an effort to make it make sense.

Beta credits to norcumii, sanerontheinside, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.08.07

Kuat

Following quietly behind the rest of the Senate Bureau of Investigations team, Quinlan chafed at the unfamiliar feel of the official uniform. The sleeves of the borrowed jacket were just a bit too short, the jacket itself almost too tight across the shoulders. At his side, Aayla was quiet as she scanned their surroundings.

The Jedi had been asked not to intervene in the investigation of Janus Greejatus’ demise at the hands of a team of bounty hunters -- there were concerns about hysteria and possible accusations of interference -- but the SBI had reached out to Master An-chul for cooperative assistance with the Shadows. She'd been only too happy to send Quin and Aayla, and the SBI team were thrilled to have a Kiffar along. Quinlan resigned himself to touching unpleasant shit once more.

The scheduled trade symposium was actually carrying on as planned, despite the assault on the Supreme Chancellor’s representative and live fire combat in the hotel. The atmosphere was somewhat subdued and tense, and several guests had either demanded transfers to other hotels on the
orbital platform, or refunds for the distress the event had caused. Kuat Grand Hotel management was severely displeased.

Their group was led straight through the hotel to the third-floor security office with a minimum of chatter. The cleaning droids had clearly been banished from this section: portable force fields blocked casual access and furniture and walls still bore blaster scorch marks. The synthetic upholstery was melted in places from higher-powered shots, probably a bowcaster or heavy blaster.

In the control room, the table was covered with evidence secured inside force containment units: a used gas grenade casing, an MSE droid warbling softly in distress, three access cards in a protective evidence case, shattered bits of blasterproof transparisteel and a holoprojector currently displaying a reconstruction of a window being broken by a sharp impact in slow motion.

The Acting Security Chief, a young agender human who seemed unprepared for the scale of the situation, gestured to the table and its contents. “As you can see, the bounty hunters didn't leave much behind, and there are no fingerprints or other biospoor to work from. We're not even certain how some of these things are connected, at this point -- the broken window was in Greejatus’ suite, but it happened after the security team had begun moving him. Most confusingly, the window was broken from the outside of the building rather than by the two bounty hunters who gained access from the inside. It was actually the window breaking which alerted security, after the lock had been sliced. The suite has been secured for investigation as well--”

The lead SBI agent, an older human woman named Li-Wen, held a hand up to halt the Acting Security Chief's babble. “We already know the identities of two of the bounty hunters -- payouts were received by their accounts after the deed was done. Their accomplices are thus far unknown, but we're working on it. What I would like to know, Chief Nurut, is why you requested--” she cleared her throat and glanced at Quinlan and Aayla-- “specialists.”

Well, that explained a few things. Quin focused on Nurut as xe bit xir lower lip and pulled a remote for the main holoprojector from xir pocket. “All the security footage which could have been used to identify the bounty hunters was erased. But this was left behind, almost as if they were making a point.” Xe dimmed the lights and activated the projector. Clearly visible in what was likely the hotel's Safe Room, Greejatus could be seen firing a spray of crackling electricity from his fingertips while he laughed. Blaster bolts rebounded centimetres away as if blocked by a shield. At one point he stomped his foot and a shockwave rippled outward, throwing furniture against the walls.

Quin's breath caught hard in his throat, and he exchanged a glance with Aayla as Nurut said, “These don't conform to any known base-human species abilities -- or any compatible species base traits, for that matter. While the electrical discharge and shielding could be explained by security technology, the guest's gestures suggest otherwise. The shockwave effect is entirely baffling. We have no answers for this, and felt it best to ask… eh, experts.”

With barely a glance, Li-Wen gestured for Quin and Aayla to -- as she had stated on the shuttle to Kuat -- do their thing. They quietly left the briefing while Nurut stuttered, followed by one of Li-Wen's people with a holorecorder. The SBI agent didn't say a word, merely glanced at Quin for permission to activate the recorder. Quin cleared his throat and faced the camera.

“It's pretty obvious that what's in play in the surviving security footage -- which I assume we're getting copies of?" He kept his voice low, projected only to reach the holorecorder's pickups.

The dark-skinned young man nodded. “You get copies of that and this recording for the Order's investigation.”

“Thanks for the confirmation. Right. In the surviving security footage, the Supreme Chancellor's
advisor appears to be making use of some Force-based abilities. We're going to take a walk into the Safe Room where the fight occurred, and see if we're able to sense what, exactly, happened. It's possible he was using some form of technology, which will have a distinctly different feel in the Force than Force-use has. It's also possible -- distantly, but I won't discount it -- that Janus Greejatus was replaced with a decoy, and he's still alive somewhere.” He caught Aayla giving him an incredulous stare and smiled tightly. “Believe me, weirder things have happened. At any rate, I'm guessing it caught our hunters off guard, and that bit of footage was left for us to find. Very thoughtful of them.”

One of the hotel security officers led them down the corridor to the Safe Room. The bodies had been removed but everything else had been left as it was. Quin's face pinched at the smell, and Aayla covered her nose with one hand.

Blaster-scored furniture lay broken and scattered where it had been thrown. Because the effect was recent and not targeted at anything in the room, the cloying feel of the Dark side was faint and fading. While Aayla slipped into a working trance and made a quiet circuit of the room, Quinlan made his way over to the spot where the carpet had singed and partially melted from the electrical discharge and pulled a glove off.

He didn't even have to touch the floor to get a good impression of someone who definitely considered themself to be one of the Supreme Chancellor's advisors. Grim amusement, arrogance, disdain for… aliens? Eager acceptance of what he perceived as a challenge, but one he could defeat.

The sharp shock of a physical blow, followed by the warm lassitude of a narcotic injection, followed swiftly by death. Quin dragged his mind out of it and turned to the security officer. “Were there any, uh, darts or other injection tool recovered?”

The man shrugged. “I can check.”

“Please.” He exchanged a glance with Aayla as the officer commed a question to Nurut. “It seems my decoy theory was incorrect,” he said for the benefit of the recording. “It was definitely Greejatus himself. He was apparently slowed by a combination of a physical strike and a dose of drugs, from different sources. It was enough for the shield he was creating to drop and opened him up to the shots which killed him.”

Aayla turned to face the recorder. “The feel of Force usage is present; more to the point, it is Dark in nature. We suspected it might be, given that the projection of lightning is extremely uncommon among Light-side adherents, but it's best not to jump to conclusions.”

The security officer cleared his throat to get their attention; the SBI agent turned so the pickups would catch his voice. “I'm sorry, sir. The presence of a narcotic commonly used by bounty hunters to induce sleep was noted in the victim's blood, but no darts or other source were located.”

Quinlan sighed. “Thanks for checking. That would have made it easier, but there's still the evidence bits in the other room. We could speculate about this all day but I'd rather leave that to the people in charge. Let's go back and see what they have for an incident re-creation.”

Li-Wen was already insisting that there had been more people involved than just the four bounty hunters; she tossed the fiberplas case containing the three ID cards to Quin without looking. He pressed the pads of his index finger and thumb to the access plate on side of the case, leaving a contact record, and popped the lid.

The first card he touched had been stolen recently from an unsuspecting guest, the second had been issued to the Clawdite bounty hunter -- how she had even considered revealing her species was
The third card answered that question. Quinlan looked at the recorder and gestured for it to be turned off. “I need to contact the Master of Shadows, secure frequency. Right now.”

Reformation Year 980.08.07

Barlok

C’baoth’s displeasure at Qui-Gon and Anakin’s presence on ‘his’ mission to Barlok had been palpable from the moment he’d seen them in the Council Chamber. The elder Jedi Master had offered a smile that would have given Master Dooku fits for its unconcealed insincerity. Qui-Gon had spent the majority of the trip out meditating in his and Anakin’s quarters, seeking a point of clarity.

None of this sat well with him.

Mace had provided a short list of Jedi who knew Lorana fairly well, all Knights or Masters, none her age. All had confirmed what Qui-Gon had suspected: Master C’baoth had largely isolated his Padawan and kept her from forming friendships unless he had deemed them ‘useful’. At his quiet suggestion, Anakin had made certain to be a visible presence in the common areas, usually tinkering with his current project -- a smarter cleaning droid for his mother’s shop -- and engaged Lorana when possible. It seemed to be helping somewhat: the older Padawan was no longer wandering around the ship with her shoulders pulled in, as if afraid to take up space.

How had she ended up paired with someone like C’baoth?

Focus; the matter of Lorana’s treatment was a symptom, not the problem. C’baoth’s assignment at the Supreme Chancellor’s request worried Mace, who suspected some ulterior motive from the Chancellor. Unless he wished to press Lorana, there was no way of knowing what instructions Palpatine had given C’baoth; Anakin had offered to find out, but Qui-Gon felt it best to let Lorana choose to open up on her own.

There wasn’t a lot to go on. The Corporate Alliance was trying to claim exclusive ownership of Barlok’s mines -- not just the mines but every mineral product from the planet -- which were under the purview of the Mining Guild and hence, the Commerce Guild, the Corporate Alliance’s somewhat contentious ally. The Mining Guild had long had a cooperative agreement with the indigenous Brolfi, including allowing them to manage the produce of Barlok under their own Guildmaster.

The Corporate Alliance’s claim was painfully thin -- a contract to introduce droid-operated mining equipment and phase out the indigenous workers from more hazardous operations had been poorly (deliberately?) worded so as to look like the Corporate Alliance had rights to all products mined by their droids without having to purchase them from Mining Guild. The local magistrate wished to settle the matter peacefully, but a number of rebellious factions had camped within and blockaded the mine entrances, preventing all access.

Had Qui-Gon been in charge of these negotiations, he would have ruled in the Brolfi’s favour and called for a revised trade agreement. There had to be a reason Palpatine wanted C’baoth to be in charge. He recalled all the research he and Obi-Wan had done with the aid of Kardin Lo: all the
shady transactions through the Trade Federation and its affiliates, one of which was the Corporate Alliance.

He spared a moment to wonder what had become of that. Obi-Wan had ceased all direct communication since the last time they’d seen him at Dex’s. It was frustrating to be cut out of the loop -- the little bits that had arrived since via Quinlan and Siri hadn't done much to reassure Qui-Gon that his former padawan was not deep in some kind of trouble.

The cabin’s comm chimed and the captain announced they would be dropping from hyperspace momentarily. Qui-Gon roused himself in time to brace against the cabinet at his back for the transition to realspace, then went out to find Anakin.

“--and then there was this big party with all the racers,” Anakin said. His tone of voice indicated he hadn't found the experience very thrilling, and Lorana wondered how this little adrenaline junkie had wound up paired with a diplomat like Master Qui-Gon. They seemed well-balanced, anyway, but the boy had already admitted he was bad at knowing when to stop talking.

It was frightfully cute, and Lorana grinned at him. “They made you dress up, didn't they?”

“Ugh!” The thirteen-year old pulled a face of disgust. “Rich guys like Gondel need to have someone telling them the truth every time they spew bantha poodoo everywhere. I've seen Hutts with more shame.”

She raised a sceptical eyebrow at him. “Have you really?”

Anakin didn't even look up from the MSE he was working on. “Of course. Someone gave Gardulla a protocol droid once and she had it reprogrammed when it was too nice to her.”

*When did he meet Gardulla the Hutt?*! “Too nice in what way?”

“Oh, you know…” Anakin straightened in a credible mimicry of a droid and said in a high-pitched, mincing voice, “*Oh! You're so wise, Mistress! I do agree, feeding that ruffian to the krayt dragon was absolutely the best idea you've ever had! All hail the bounteous glory of my Mistress, Gardulla the Hutt!*”

They collapsed in giggles and Lorana admitted, “Yeah, that would get really annoying.”

“From what I heard, Jabba loves that stuff.” He scrunched up his nose and went back to his work. “Too bad somebody killed Gardulla. Jabba's going to leave slime all over Tatooine.”

She poked him lightly. “I think you understand politics better than you think you do.”

“Don't be mean! That's so mean!” He swatted at her hand, laughing. “How can you say that!”

“Say what?” came Master Qui-Gon's deep voice. The Jedi Master was grinning as he entered the lounge.

Anakin pouted, although the effectiveness was spoiled by the grin yanking at the corners of his mouth. “Lorana said I understand politics! It's insulting!”

“If that's all she's accused you of, then we're off to a good start.” The Jedi Master winked at them as
he set the kettle to heating. “Do you happen to know where your Master is, Padawan Lorana?”

He was always so polite to her, it took some of the sting out of being reminded why they were there. “He’s in the cockpit to open communications with the Brolfi representative as soon as we’re in range.” They had come out of hyperspace at a safe range from Barlok, and it would be a few hours yet before they reached the planet.

“Then he likely will not be in the mood for tea,” Master Qui-Gon mused. He shuffled around the galley setting up a pot of the Chandrilan red Lorana preferred -- the one that reminded her of fresh-fallen leaves on the cusp of winter -- and a cup of juice for Anakin. Master Qui-Gon seemed to have given up on the fight to instill an appreciation for tea in his padawan. Lorana accepted her cup with a smile in thanks.

The Jedi Master seated himself next to Anakin and prefaced his words with a grimace. “I hate to be all serious, but I’d like to know what Master C’baoth's initial judgment of the matter is, before we walk into things. He has a reputation for being unpredictable, and we should present a unified face in public.”

Master C’baoth definitely would not appreciate being contradicted publicly. She sighed and slumped over her cup, breathing the steam for comfort. “He rarely discusses such things with me, but my understanding is that he weighs in favour of the Corporate Alliance's initiative to replace the miners with droid workers, but not the way the Brolfi are being blocked out of their own economy. I wish I had more details to share with you.”

Anakin set his droid aside and reached for the juice and one of the spiced biscuits his Master had brought over. “What do you think of it?”

Lorana hesitated. “I think I need to see more and do an investigation before making any judgment call. It feels like there’s something being left out.”

“Fortunately,” Master Qui-Gon said with a small smile, “our first order of business is to investigate. Magistrate Argente wanted to get right to the discussions, but your Master insisted.”

Her Master did certainly like to do things by the book, even if the results might not change his opinion. “I’m looking forward to seeing what else is involved.”

“Politicians never give all the truth up front.” Anakin scowled at his biscuit. “Of course something is being left out.”

“Padawan.”

“It’s true, though!”

Master Qui-Gon smiled patiently. “It is, but just because one has such thoughts, it doesn’t necessarily follow that it’s productive to voice them. Always remember: people with political power can and will use it against you. Particularly if you point out their flaws in public.”

“If they can’t accept people pointing out the truth--”

Lorana pinched her lips against a grin. She’d had similar opinions when she’d been young and learning. “Do you like it when someone points out that you're doing something wrong? Especially in front of others?”

Anakin scowled at being lectured by both of them now. “No, but that's not the point!”
Master Qui-Gon sat back and cupped his mug between his hands. “Tell me what your perspective is?” He glanced at Lorana in an unspoken request for her patience, and she nodded.

The younger Padawan pressed his hands flat against the table as he considered his words; when he spoke again, his tone had softened somewhat. “When a person takes a role in a political office, they should be open to criticism of their behaviour and their policies, particularly from the, their-- the people they serve--”

“Their constituents?” His Master supplied.

“That's the word, constituents, and from their colleagues. Because they can't do their job right if they won't accept criticism and consider if it's true or not.” His face twisted. “Politicians who won't accept criticism or who attack people for being critical are often only interested in keeping their own power and not in serving their constituents.”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “A reasonable stance. However, people's pride often interferes with their acceptance of criticism; even when they mean well, it can be difficult to accept and consider a reasoned critique. And most critiques are rarely calmly reasoned.”

“People could do with more mindfulness training, then,” Anakin joked.

He was shifting the topic, and Master Qui-Gon let him, chuckling. Lorana grinned. “Had a lot of that, have you?” Her friend groaned and rolled his eyes.

“So much mindfulness!”

Lorana had opened her mouth to tease him when Master C'baoth entered and frowned at her. “There you are, Padawan. I want you with me when I open communications with the Barlok representative.”

He gestured shortly for her to join him in the comms booth, and Lorana gave Anakin and his Master a look of regret as she set the remains of her tea down. “Duty calls.”

Garen stopped Anakin before he followed Qui-Gon down the ship’s ramp; the Jedi pilot twitched Anakin’s tabard back up onto his shoulder. “Don’t sweat it, kiddo. You’ll be fine.” Anakin grinned and bowed cheekily to him before hurrying out into the glaring sunlight of the landing platform.

What Tiilcatt City had for a spaceport was located in the middle of the Patameene District’s market, and the midday hubbub of hawkers and customers could be heard beyond the pourstone walls. Lorana and her Master were already bowing politely to the Barlok representative, a portly Brolfi with patchy golden fur and a twisted spine who used a hoverchair to get around.

C'baoth glanced at Qui-Gon with impatience. “--Allow me to introduce my colleague, Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn, and his Padawan. They are here merely to observe the proceedings.”

Anakin might have been the only person to pick up on Qui-Gon's twinge of annoyance at C'baoth's presumption, but he and his master bowed easily. “It's an immense privilege to witness Master C'baoth's work,” Qui-Gon said warmly. “The Council has every confidence that he will be able to build a satisfactory resolution to the present situation.”
That was evil, reminding the other Jedi Master they were there at the Council’s request. He was going to get a lot of practice maintaining a dead face in the next couple days.

C’baoth merely arched a bushy white eyebrow and turned back to the Brolf, who was nodding pleasantly. “We are gratified at your presence, Masters Jedi. I am Gilfrome, Guildmaster for the Mining Guild on Barlok.” He maneuvered his chair around and led the way off the platform. “I understand you wish to conduct an independent investigation. I cannot join you, myself, but my aide, Jeveffe, has offered to escort you to the nearest mining sites.”

“I greatly appreciate your cooperation,” C’baoth said. “It is my hope that we can resolve this matter quickly.”

Most of the Brolfi were short, stocky beings with broad flat heads, large jewellike eyes, and thick, wrinkled hides where they weren’t covered in green- or gold-toned fur. The top of Jeveffe’s head barely cleared Anakin’s shoulder, and she moved with a confident, rolling gait as she led them from the speeder to the first mining complex.

“Nearly all the mines have been shut down,” she croaked. “Our miners acted independently and then contacted Guildmaster Gilfrome to speak for them. He does support the use of droids in mining, but not the rest of the Corporate Alliance’s claims on the mines. It is not often that the Mining Guild disagrees with the Corporate Alliance, but in this we are at odds. The loss of the mines would cripple Brolfi economy irreparably.”

Master C’baoth simply nodded; Lorana looked like she wanted to speak but was afraid to. Anakin glanced at Qui-Gon and received a quick nudge of support through the Force. “If I may ask,” he started cautiously. C’baoth spared him a glare, which only made Anakin more determined. “Why does your Guildmaster support using droids for mining?”

Jeveffe bobbed her head. “Our mines and crafting may be the historic foundation of Brolfi society, but it is also dangerous. Collapses, gas pockets, flooding, and injury are less common since the Republic provided the technology to detect and avoid such hazards, but they still occur. Moreover, we have been made aware of…” Her hands described circles in the air as she sought the words. “I am sorry, we would say it is the gods’ influence but your researchers say it is mutations in our genetics, sometimes hereditary, from exposure to our products. It is why many Brolfi including our Guildmaster experience reduced mobility. Our thick hornskin provides some protection against this, more than your human skin would, but three hundred generations of exposure has had lasting effects.”

Poisoned. The Brolfi were being poisoned by the mines and processing. If they’d been less careful at the start, some of it had likely leached into the water supply. Anakin resolved to look up what exact products they were extracting once they had a moment to sit down.

“The Mining Guild decided it was in everyone’s best interests to withdraw the Brolfi from more hazardous work and leave it to the droids. It has taken many years and much work to shift our economic foundation so that Barlok does not suffer. All displaced miners have been offered training and placement elsewhere; many have remained and learned to maintain the droids instead.” Her wide carnelian eyes squinted in irritation and her fur rippled. “The Corporate Alliance’s move will damage the Mining Guild’s profits here, to say nothing of the damage to our culture and planetary economy. It perhaps sounds callous to focus on that, but the Corporate Alliance only cares for its own interests, and not even broken relations with the Commerce Guild sways them.”

The entrance to the mine was far too small for the human Jedi to enter; instead, Jeveffe spoke to one of the blaster-wielding guards, who shuffled into the darkness and returned a minute later with another Brolf who introduced himself as Mining Chief Norrkan. He described how the Corporate
Alliance had sent battle droids in an attempt to force the miners to leave this particular mine -- he couldn’t speak for other sites, but Jeveffe confirmed that similar incidents had occurred elsewhere. They had been under virtual siege for nearly a week when the Corporate Alliance’s Magistrate, Passel Argente, had agreed to arbitration and withdrawn the droids.

It all sounded very similar to what Anakin now understood of what had happened with Naboo four years earlier. The difference this time was the Brolfi had a corporate ally to support their case.

They visited three other mines which reported similar encounters -- one site had had their operational water supply cut off by the Corporate Alliance’s droids -- and then returned to Tiilcatt to speak with the local crafting guilds. The crafters reported being unable to export many of their products due to haulers being scarce, whether they were encouraged to go elsewhere or paid off was unknown. Barlok was under a virtual blockade without a single warship in orbit.

Jeveffe brought them to the City Hall, where Guildmaster Gilfrome awaited. “I hope your investigation has provided you with enough information?”

Master C’baoth stroked his beard thoughtfully and nodded. “It has been most enlightening, Guildmaster. However, we have heard merely one side on this matter. I would not want to pass judgment with biased information. Magistrate Argente will be arriving in the morning; I would like the opportunity to speak with him before the negotiations start.”

Gilfrome’s disappointment didn’t register visibly, but it was palpable in the Force. “Of course, Master C’baoth. We will extend your request to the Magistrate.”

Anakin had been right about getting practice in keeping a dead face; he could feel that Qui-Gon had a great deal more sympathy for the Brolfi and the Mining Guild, and Anakin agreed. His master’s impatience and irritation with C’baoth hummed an unsettling counterpoint beneath the smooth tones of his apparent serenity. Lorana also felt uneasy but she masked it well.

C’baoth himself didn’t seem to care how the rest of them felt, as long as they publicly supported his decisions.

Tomorrow was going to be exhausting.

Reformation Year 980.08.07
Outland Transit Station

Outland’s arcade was a blissful change from those found on Corellia or Coruscant, carefully designed to prevent the sound of machines and happy children from becoming overwhelming to species with more sensitive hearing. The flashy lights on a number of the machines had been switched out or removed entirely, and the red-hued atmosphere was cheerful. Durrabal, the Zabrak who ran the place, suffered migraines but didn’t want to lose what he enjoyed most: helping others have fun and making money at the same time.

Bastra had gone to get drinks from the bar while Jango introduced Boba to how the arcade worked; Bastra’s kid already knew what she was doing and was messing with a shooter game while she waited on her dad.
Jango dropped enough credits for two hours and hefted Boba onto his hip. At almost five Standard years, the kid was getting a little heavy to be carried, but the counter was too high for him to see over. “See what Durra's doing? That's a token. Make sure you keep it with you, alright?”

His boy nodded solemnly. “What's it for?”

Durrabal leaned forward on the counter and handed the plug-shaped object to Boba. “See the side with the square on it? Each game has a circle next to the Start button. You put that square-side down on the circle, turn it til it clicks, and then you can start the game. It's good for two hours, and it'll track your points so you can get a prize once your time is up. When you're done with a game, twist the token until it pops out. Got it?”

Boba was already squirming to be let down. “Yeah!” He scampered off and Durrabal grinned, the dark lines inked into his face accenting the crinkles around his eyes.

“Bet he only caught half of that.”

Jango shrugged and accepted the case of deep blue and bright yellow balls Durrabal handed him. “He'll work it out, or Zohli will help him,” he said, tilting his head towards the Zygerrian teenager. “Thought they might have been with you. Jango Fett, making friends? We're gonna see banthas flying next.” He smirked cheerfully at Jango’s scowl.

“Boba's making friends. We're just here to make sure they don't tear the place down.”

Durra arched a tattooed brow-ridge and glanced at the case in Jango's hands. “And playing a few rounds of katak just to be polite, huh? Staves are against the back wall. No sparring with 'em.”

He found Bastra handing out the kids’ drinks, covered securely to prevent spills. Dressed in normal clothes -- although still with the armoured jacket -- and with the long white scar across his left eye concealed by a bit of makeup, the younger man looked completely unremarkable. Jango couldn't help comparing him with the flamboyant ostentatiousness he'd been sporting on Ki'an Tol; Bastra was the type who somehow managed to look completely at ease in any situation, as much of a shapeshifter as Zam, in his own way. A useful trait.

Bastra offered one of the remaining drinks to Jango. “Are we playing something, then?” he asked, indicating the katak balls.

“Not familiar with katak?”

“I've heard of it.”

The place was relatively quiet at this time in the afternoon; Jango led the way back to the tables without having to dodge too many people. “It's pretty straightforward. The balls get set up down one end of the table, the first person breaks the set with the white ball. Whichever colour falls in a well first, that's their colour, and then you focus on getting all your own colour balls off the table first.”

Bastra watched him set up the table intently. “The white ball is used to hit the coloured balls? What's the black one for?”

Jango tucked the ball in question into the middle of the arrangement in the rack. “Once all your own colour are off the table, it goes in last. If you tip it into a well before you've cleared your colour, you lose.” Satisfied with the setup, he tucked the rack back into its slot and nodded to the array of metre-and-a-half long staves hanging along the wall. They weren't the best quality by a long shot, but nobody came to an arcade to get competitive unless they had their own gear. “Find one you like the
Bastra frowned. “You don't need one?”

Grinning, Jango unslung the narrow case he'd been carrying across his back and slid the sections of glossy black plasteel into his hand. “Brought my own.”

“Ah, you take it seriously, then.” Bastra grinned back, genuinely amused, and went to test his options. Jango shouldn't have been surprised that he managed to find the best-balanced of the cheap fibreplas staves within a couple minutes.

The last section of Jango's stave clicked into place and he gave it a twist to secure it. “Can I trust you not to use the Force, Bastra?”

Ah, that was where Zohli had learned that massive eyeroll. Bastra gestured to the table. “It's a game, Fett. You might as well show me how it's played.”

Jango set the white ball at the opposite end of the table and slightly off-centre; a brisk tap with the narrow end of his stave sent the ball into the setup, breaking it apart with a crack and a flurry of lights where the balls impacted each other and the sides of the table. None of the balls went into any of the wells, and he motioned Bastra over. “Pick any colour, shoot the white at it, try to sink it.”

The other man squinted at the table and fumbled a bit as he tried to replicate how Jango had balanced the end of the stave on the back of his left thumb. “You're still calling me Bastra, then?” he asked as he cautiously poked the white ball towards a tight cluster of yellow balls. One of them teetered on the edge of the side well before dropping in, and Jango nodded.

“Not bad. You succeeded, so go again.” He took a sip of his drink, an inoffensive meiloorun thing that was deliberately kid-friendly in case Boba decided Jango's was better than his again. Accidents only happened once. “And yeah. Names have power, don’t they? Bastra is the name you chose, because somewhere out there, someone is looking for Kenobi. Am I wrong?” Knowing Bastra’s real name gave Jango a kind of power over him: if an actual bounty for him ever went up, Jango would know exactly where to look. It was why people feared bounty hunters and kept them at arm’s length to start with.

The next target bounced off the projecting corner and across the table; Bastra stepped back. “You’re not wrong. Your turn?”

“Yeah.” That wild careen had split up the biggest cluster of blue on the table and left the white ball in an awkward position near the side. Jango squinted and used the wider weighted end of his stave to measure the maximum space between the ball and the side. “Mind if I ask how you met Zohli?” One of the blue balls behaved itself and dropped into the corner well, and he spared a glance at Bastra as he circled the table.

The other man was frowning at the question, not unhappy but considering. “Most of it isn’t my story to tell. The short version is, we knocked over a Zygerrian slave convoy in Maramere a couple years back, and she was one of the prisoners.”

The next shot ticked too close to another ball and missed the well; Jango sighed and stepped back. “A prisoner.”

“In a separate room. Chained to the wall.” Bastra hit the white ball a little too hard and it gained a bit of air; the yellow he’d been aiming at missed its goal by a klik. Jango couldn't blame him: anyone with a lick of sense could do that math, and the answer was ugly. “It took a lot of medical care to
repair the damage. She still has regular therapy sessions to help with recovery."

“Good.” Therapy was good; having solid support around her was even better, and Bastra was clearly doing his best to provide that.

The arrangement on the table sucked; if he didn't know better he'd have suspected Bastra of deliberately making Jango's shots difficult. He bounced the white around a corner, sinking another blue. “I'm surprised you let her stay.”

Bastra shrugged. “Her odds of being taken care of properly by someone else were slim.” Zygerrians had a nasty reputation across the galaxy and particularly in the Outer Rim, where their raiding fleets prowled. Jango nodded understanding and Bastra offered a halfhearted smile. “As they say, if you don't trust anyone else to care, you have to do it yourself.” His eyebrows arched as Jango landed a second shot and circled around for a third. “But by the time we got her to a station, I wasn't willing to see her go, anyway.”

The smile turned real and a little… shy? It was an incredibly sweet expression that lit his entire face as Bastra glanced across the room to where Zohli was helping Boba remove his token from a console game. “She's the best part of my life, now. I never thought I could love someone so much.” He glanced at Jango. “May I ask about Boba? Does he have another parent?”

Jango's third shot missed the well and he stepped back. “Just me.” It was skating a little too close to the truth, but what else would he say? This was why he had rejected the idea of connecting with other parents in the first place: too many prying questions. In fairness, he had started it by asking about how a Zygerrian teenager ended up being raised by some ex-jetii less than twice her age.

Bastra glanced up from his lineup on one of his yellows, and a lock of copper-blond hair fell into his eyes. “I thought as much. You don't seem the settling type.” He had that grin back, the wicked, playful one, and Jango rolled his eyes.

“Getting personal, are we?”

The white ball followed the yellow into the corner well; the bumper flashed red and Jango fished the offending ball out. “You keep the sink but lose the turn.”

The other man nodded acceptance and rested his stave against the next table before pulling the elastic from his hair. The copper-blond mane fell around his face as he shook it out and set about re-tying the high knot he preferred. “You're a busy man, but you keep Boba with you. It's not difficult?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes Roz looks after him.” Boba's little adventure yesterday had woken him up to the fact that his kid was probably lonely; he spared a glance to see Boba on Zohli's lap on a speeder piloting sim. The teen was managing the pedals while Boba steered, and they were both giggling like still. “How did you manage?”

“Our crew is large enough, someone could always be spared to mind the ship until she was legally old enough to be included.” Bastra shrugged, blue eyes gauging the table as Jango dropped another of his balls; two to four now. “Even then, we were teaching her how to shoot, how to fight, how to pilot in an emergency.” He shook his head with a frown. “I never had parents. I don't always know what I'm doing, if it's… too much for her yet. I'd like to have some down time, let her just relax and be a kid for more than a few days at a time.” His sigh sounded unhappy. “But there aren't that many spacers who linger, even in places like this. I'm afraid she wouldn't have much in common with dirtside kids anymore. It's a different culture.”

Two to five; Jango was halfway through his set while Bastra still had eight balls on the table. “She's
“A few times, yes.” Bastra studied the situation Jango had left him. “No less than I’d done by her age. But can you imagine the reactions from parents who don't live out of a starship, if she told their kids about that?” he scoffed. One of his yellows rebounded across the well's lip before tipping over. “Her therapist says she's doing well, but I'd rather not have well-meaning but misguided adults undoing all the work xe's put in on her behalf.”

“I'm guessing your other usual haunts are much the same.”

“Hmm.” Bastra prowled around the table, eyeing an ugly mess with the white ball stuck in a cluster and the black ball dangerously close to the nearest well. “I could adopt a couple more kids, but then we'd need a bigger ship.”

“Tough call.” There was barely room for both Jango and Boba on the Slave I -- the only real privacy was in the bunk with the shutter down or in the 'fresher, if Boba remembered to knock first -- and despite the much larger capacity of Bastra's freighter, he did have two other full adults on crew. “You'd want to get a place dirtside to go home to.” Someplace near other people with a similar history and culture.

“Too dangerous.” He figured out how to lightly tap the white ball just enough to free it, and the nearest yellow scooted across the table into a well. “It's better to stay on the move.”

For someone with at least three alternative identities, that either indicated an unhealthy level of paranoia, or hinted at some very persistent enemies. Porla's now-defunct bounty aside, how many enemies might an ex-jettii make?

How many enemies had he already been running from?

A third yellow ball went in and Jango arched an eyebrow at the way Bastra was handling his stave. Either he was a quick learner, or-- “You've played this before.”

Bastra grinned and sank another two yellows with one shot. “I never said I hadn't.”

“Gar mir’sheb.”

“Tion’gar narsir at gan’epar te Stril, ra shi chayaikir?”

Jango's eyes snapped to the other man's face at the blatant challenge. Bastra met his glare with that unrepentant smirk and sank another yellow with barely a glance.

He finally gave in to the smile yanking at his mouth and stepped forward into Bastra's space as the other man straightened, face to face. “Firstly, you are nothing like a strill. And secondly, you're going to regret those words.”

Bastra shrugged easily, not intimidated in the slightest. “Best two out of three?”

Jango rapped the other man's breastbone lightly with his knuckles. “Challenge accepted.”

The younger mercenary cleaned up the first round, but now that Jango wasn't holding back out of politeness, the second and third rounds were his. Barely -- the third round saw them both pursuing the final black ball across an empty table.

Bastra chuckled as he helped Jango put the balls back in their case; when Jango glanced up, the younger man rolled one of the dark blue balls across the back of his hand in a move that required a
lot of dexterity and looked like magic. “Blue does suit you, you know.”

Jango blinked at him and than glanced down at the black shirt and brown leatherette jacket he wore when he was trying to not look like Jango Fett. “I’m sorry?”

That damned grin was back as Bastra twitched his fingers, making the katak ball bounce in explanation before letting it roll off to join the others. “That outfit you were wearing on Ki’an Tol was striking. You clean up well.”

Before Jango could think of an appropriate response, Bastra slipped the case from his hands and walked away to return it.

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Reformation Year 980.08.07
Coruscant

“...It was definitely him, Master An-chul; I know Obi-Wan too well. How do you want us to handle this?”

Master of Shadows An-chul nodded as she listened to Knight Vos’s report. The assassination of one of the Supreme Chancellor’s advisors was a grave matter; the evidence suggesting the man had been both Force-sensitive and trained in use of the Dark side was damning.

In light of that, knowing a former Jedi had been involved was almost a relief. It was clear to her -- and to Knight Vos -- that Kenobi had left that piece of security footage knowing the Order would send people to investigate.

What had led Kenobi to participate in an assassination was quite a different matter. Had the Force had a hand in things, guiding him to that point? Had he somehow learned that Janus Greejatus was a Dark acolyte of some sort, and acted independently? If so, why had he not thought to contact the Order?

That was a naive thought, and she crushed it. Kenobi was no longer a Jedi and held no responsibility to warn them; that he’d left a single piece of visual evidence was more than she should have expected. But the Order was too close to the Senate, to the Chancellor, and thus to Greejatus. If the Order had taken action against the Chancellor’s advisor, it would have been seen as hostile and likely prompted adjustments in the Order’s relationship with the Senate, as if things weren’t strained enough as they were.

There was also the lingering question of the hidden Sith Master, who was still out there somewhere. She was certain of it. The implications of Janus Greejatus having been connected with the Sith Master in any way were dreadful, never mind the possibility that the Master had more than one acolyte. She considered whether Greejatus had been a new Apprentice, but the notion felt wrong -- his positioning close to the Supreme Chancellor suggested a spy rather than an heir. And if the Master became aware that the Order knew of Greejatus’ association, they might recede further.

An-chul wanted to draw the Master into the light.

Fortunately, she had her contingency plans. “I want you to copy the security footage and then delete
it entirely from their databanks. Erase all copies other than the one you make. And I would like to speak to Agent Li-Wen, now, if possible.”

In the hologram, Knight Vos nodded to someone outside the pickup field -- likely his padawan. A few moments later he shuffled over to make room for Li-Wen beside him.

“Master An-chul.”

“Li-Wen. Has Knight Vos brought you up to speed yet?”

Vos shook his head. “We didn’t have time, too many ears.”

An-chul nodded. “This goes no further than your own, then. One of the bounty hunters involved is known to us -- a former Jedi. For obvious reasons, this information needs to be left off the record.”

Li-Wen frowned and nodded. “I understand. How should we proceed?”

“How many of the hunters have been identified?”

“Two, from the bounty listings and other evidence: a Clawdite known as Zam Wesell, and a Duros named Cad Bane. The security officers report Wesell had a human partner, whilst Bane was accompanied by a Kyuzo who has been tentatively identified as a known hunter named Embo.”

“No ID on the human, then?”

“That would be our former Jedi?” Li-Wen shook her head. “His image in the databank with what we assume is an exceptionally good false ID, but… there are so many humans who match the same profile, and human appearances can be so easily altered.”

“Then make note as standard and move on.” Vos was looking confused; An-chul clarified, “The SBI has a… complex relationship with the bounty-hunting culture. We like to keep tabs on them, know what they’re involved in so we can separate out paid work from serial murder and terrorist activities. It’s not the hunters themselves who matter so much as the people who hire them, anyway.” She glanced back to Li-Wen. “Start the usual file, but make certain it’s handled by Vecis par’Resit, they’ll know how to handle it.”

“I’ll notify them immediately.” Li-Wen departed and Vos turned back to the pickup, squinting at the Weequay Jedi Master.

“Since when did the Master of Shadows give orders to SBI agents?”

An-chul leaned back in her seat, grinning, and steepled her fingers. “For a thousand years, Knight Vos. Let’s just say we have intertwined interests.”

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Reformation Year 980.08.07

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It had taken a very long time, and a great deal of what little power he had, for Ulic to finally get it to work.
He had hoped that, in the process of acquiring Victis’ grimoire, the Sith spirit would have a route to communicate -- with him, if not with Obi-Wan. Unfortunately, the book appeared to be one of the few things she hadn’t imbued with a piece of herself. It did, however, contain enough of an impression that there was a connection back to her. He’d spent months studying her work, her experiments and theories, before trying to pull on that tenuous little thread.

The damned thing had rebounded, yanking him into a grey in-between space for who knew how long.

It wasn’t that he couldn’t return -- the thread connecting him to his crystal was strong and trailed off into the darkness behind him. He could go back any time he wanted.

But he needed to speak with Darth Victis. The lines of communication had been silent for too long.

He had no idea how long he’d been following that faint little line of connection before something noticed his presence. It circled him and prodded curiously before the impression of laughter bubbled up. It wasn’t kind.

*How amusing. Hello, Qel-Droma. What are you doing here?*

Projecting a physical form here was pointless, but Ulic rolled his eyes. Just his luck. *Hello, Pyrra. Looking for your sister.*

*She’s busy. I can take a message.*

*Pfft, no you won’t.* He knew Pyrra would never bend himself for anything, and the other Sith’s smug amusement prickled along his shields.

*Still pinning your hopes on that little failed Jedi, are you, Qel-Droma?* Pyrra scoffed. *He’s not worthy and you know it.*

*In your opinion, maybe.* Where the hells was Victis? Ulic tried to follow her thread again, only to be blocked by the force of Pyrra’s will.

*The Sith will be restored the proper way, the pure way,* Pyrra hissed, pushing him back. *Not through some weakling efforts at compromise with the Light.*

*You know as well as I do that Sidious’ apprentice won’t be able to change things,* Ulic growled. He cursed his own limitations: at half his former strength, he was unable to fight back.

*Oh, his apprentice might not,* Pyrra responded airily. *But his acolytes aren’t bound to the same restrictions. Sidious’ apprentice Tyranus listens to reason.*

*You know that wrinkled old fuck is angling to replace Tyranus; the man’s usefulness is only temporary.*

*It will be enough.* Pyrra’s confidence made Ulic want to slam his incorporeal skull into a wall. The other spirit always did view others as disposable.

*This is how we got to this point in the first place, asshole: traditionalists like you assuming the world will change to match your ideals. It doesn’t fucking work that way.*

*The Dark side will see to that. Through the Force, all things are possible.* Pyrra seized Ulic’s connection to his crystal and *shoved*; the line jerked and sent him reeling back. *You’re weak, Qel-Droma. For all your Darkness you’re still too attached to the Light.*
The pain was incredible; if he’d had lungs, he would have been gasping for air. The familiar organized clutter of Obi-Wan’s quarters resolved around Ulic and he cursed in disgust. Even in death, the Sith couldn’t fucking agree on anything.

Reformation Year 980.08.07
Barlok

Tiilcatt City was only a ‘city’ in terms of its relative population size and central location. It still shut down almost entirely at night, the only real activity quietly puttering away in the industrial district, where the processing machines ran, overseen by a handful of nighttime cleaners. The streets were empty of even security patrols, scavengers rustling about the rubbish bins in the alleys in search of scraps; the animals would flee or freeze at the sound of approaching footsteps or the flash of a lantern.

A stray pittin scuttled into the shadows as she approached, its pastel fur fluffed in alarm. For a planet in a state of temporary upheaval, there were no guards or security sensors on the outside of the City Hall. The three-storey building, crafted of pourstone over the original masonry structure, was alarmingly easy to scale, and the air gaps beneath the eaves more than large enough for her to slip through. The karfs nesting along the edges shifted sulkily out of her way, reluctant to give up their nighttime roosts.

Her comm clicked, softly, and Caliiga tapped an acknowledgment back. Tomorrow was going to be fun.

Chapter End Notes

Mando’a:
Gar mir’sheb. -- You smartass.
Tion’gar narsir at gan'epar te Striil, ra shi chayaikir? -- Are you going to feed the Strill, or only tease? (courtesy of LucidDreams)
Contention

Chapter Summary

Previously:

Providing oversight to trade negotiations on Barlok, Qui-Gon Jinn, Anakin Skywalker, and Lorana Jinzler discover that not all is as it first appeared. But can Lorana's Master, Jorus C'baoth, be trusted to mediate impartially?

On Outland Transit Station, Jango Fett and Obi-Wan Kenobi share a mostly friendly game while their children enjoy the arcade. The conversation leaves Jango with quite a bit to consider.

Chapter Notes

Beta credits to norcumj, DragonHoardsBooks, and cuzosu

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reformation Year 980.08.08

Barlok

It was raining, heavy fat drops splattering on the trees and paving stones, dark clouds sagging low over Tiilcatt City. Anakin wrapped his cloak around himself as he waited with Qui-Gon and the others for their aircar to the City Hall. As a kid on Tatooine he would have danced in this weather happily, but now it felt miserable. Qui-Gon caught his eye and offered a sympathetic smile and nod of understanding.

He was probably remembering how Anakin had run out into his first Coruscant rainshower, laughing and cheering while everyone else meditating in the rooftop garden had stared. At least A'sharad had admitted to doing the same, so Anakin didn't feel too embarrassed about his reaction.

Standing in C'baoth's shadow, Lorana seemed to cringe as her Master fumed at being made to stand in the weather. Anakin wanted to remind him that they could have waited inside the hotel foyer, but it was kind of fun to watch the older Jedi seem to melt in the deluge, his long white beard quickly becoming sodden. He followed Qui-Gon's example, standing straight with his hands tucked into his sleeves as if the rain didn't exist. The glares C'baoth shot their direction were worth the cold dampness oozing down his back.

The aircar finally arrived and C'baoth broke off his grumbling to pretend to some level of composure, and he brightened considerably when they were met beneath the Hall's overhang by a humanoid wrapped in brightly coloured robes with a scarf draped around the broad, spiraling horn on the top of his head.
Anakin squinted as introductions were being made, trying to recall the briefing details. Passel Argente, Magistrate of the Corporate Alliance, was a Koorivar, a species that rarely bothered trading personally on Tatooine, given their discomfort in dry climates. Argente spoke Basic as well as his own language, but there was a lot of gesturing involved that seemed to mean something more. There was a pattern to it, and Anakin felt like he might almost have figured it out when he realized Argente’s bodyguard -- a human former bounty hunter named Jerv Riske, according to the briefing material -- was staring at him.

The blank look that had served him so well as a kid still worked well enough: Anakin looked back at the helmeted man until the head turned away. The politicians finished their insincere pleasantries, and when the Mining Guild staff -- largely species other than Brolfi -- guided their group into the City Hall, the bodyguard moved in real close next to Anakin.

“Do you have a problem with Magister Argente?” He spoke quietly, but Qui-Gon noticed; Anakin’s Master flicked his eyes over in a silent question.

Anakin tilted his head, letting Qui-Gon know he had it under control, and murmured back, “He moves a lot when he talks.”

“Do you have a problem with that?”

Giving the former bounty hunter an incredulous look Anakin said, “I was trying to figure out how it affected what he was saying.”

There was a slight easing of tension in the Force and Riske nodded. “Koorivar language is strongly gesture-based. That palm-up wave when he greeted Master C’baoth meant he sees him as someone who can provide something and that he hopes it will go well, the hand over his brow when he greeted Master Jinn acknowledges him -- and you -- as observers.”

Anakin threw a grin at Qui-Gon who was listening with quiet amusement. “See, now you can't say I didn't learn anything on this trip.”

“Give it time, Padawan. We have a few days left for you to forget,” Qui-Gon replied with a smile. Beside him, Riske gave a snort that was muffled by his armoured headgear.

“Can't win 'em all, kid.”

Anakin would have bet anything the man was trying not to grin at the exchange and called it a victory.

As they entered the conference room that had been designated for the negotiations, a little flutter of unease shivered its way down his back. From the corner of his eye he saw Qui-Gon and Lorana both glancing around the room, taking in the large open space. One wall was full of skinny windows, with a door in the middle that led out to a shaded balcony. Like the rest of the Brolfi architecture, the room was oval-shaped with a shallow transparisteel dome in the ceiling; slender, curving columns that were more decorative than structural were positioned a couple metres in from the walls and made the transition from ceiling to wall to floor seem continuous. An array of guards in Mining Guild uniforms stood back against the walls, unobtrusive in the shadow of the columns. The details Anakin had read indicated the delicate glass tiling covering every surface had been done by Brolfi artisans; what could have been garishly ostentatious gave more of an appearance of subtly glittering cave walls.

C’baoth was focused on introducing Guildmaster Gilfrome and Magister Argente as if the two men had never met -- and from the flat stares they were giving each other, they had definitely been in the
same room together before now.

Gilfrome, Argente, and C’baoth took seats at the table; Lorana stood a bit behind C’baoth’s chair while Riske took a position near the wall that let him watch the room and its three doors. Qui-Gon gestured with his chin for Anakin to stand by the door they’d entered through, near a pair of Mining Guild security guards; Qui-Gon himself lingered by the balcony door.

_You just want to feel the breeze, don’t’cha?_

His Master’s lips quirked under his mustache. _Imp. I’m also standing behind C’baoth. He doesn’t need more reminders that I’m here right now._

The uneasy feeling wasn’t going away. Anakin ignored the talky stuff going on and let his eyes slide half-closed, focusing on the sensation. There didn’t seem to be any particular direction or source, just a nebulous feeling that something might happen. It continued through the morning as Argente and Gilfrome tried to work out some sort of compromise; it didn’t sound like C’baoth was doing much to help, but Anakin would also be the first to admit he wasn’t a diplomat. Maybe there was some method behind it, but it just sounded like C’baoth didn’t want them to agree on anything. Maybe there was some alternative?

In Anakin’s mind, Qui-Gon grumbled, _There are alternatives but he’s not offering them. Gilfrome is open to negotiation -- they need the droids and automation badly -- but Argente won’t be happy with anything short of full acceptance of the Corporate Alliance owning the planet._

Anakin frowned. _If you were doing the negotiation, how would you handle it?_

_The Mining Guild is beholden to the Commerce Guild, whom the Corporate Alliance takes far more seriously. I don’t understand why they haven’t sent a representative in the first place, but I would suggest to Master Gilfrome to appeal to Presidente Shu Mai to have the Barlok mining contract redrawn. Magistrate Argente is repeatedly referring to the contract as if it’s immutable, but contracts can be renegotiated at any time._

_Is there anything in the contract that suggests it can’t be renegotiated?_ Anakin didn’t recall seeing anything like that in the exhaustive document, but a lot of it was written in a legal language that made about as much sense as dewback gurning.

Actually, dewbacks were more understandable.

_No, I checked it quite thoroughly for that._ On his side of the room, Qui-Gon was stroking his beard in a way that was meant to look thoughtful but was really concealing a scowl. _It sounds like Argente is trying to treat Guildmaster Gilfrome like an ignorant fool, and Master C’baoth is not helping._

The meeting dragged on until lunchtime -- Argente wanted to put it off until a decision was made, but the Guildmaster insisted it would be beyond rude for him to not provide for his guests. Anakin had to cover his urge to laugh with a coughing fit, which fooled absolutely nobody. Argente stared at him mildly before following the staff down the hall to the dining room. The Guildmaster’s gemlike eyes sparkled with amusement at Anakin’s reaction while C’baoth gave him a death glare. Anakin really envied Riske for his face-concealing helmet: the bodyguard could have been pulling faces at the politicians the whole time and nobody would have known.
Jerv Riske had a bad feeling about this.

The problem was, he didn’t know what was setting off his nerves. It might have been the weird tension between the four Jedi -- the two older men definitely weren’t on the same page, although they were polite enough not to say anything about it in front of everyone -- or it could have been the fact that his boss wasn’t being challenged.

Riske wasn’t being paid to have opinions on Argente’s deals, but it was pretty obvious their Jedi mediator, C’baoth, had a conflict of interest somewhere. Argente was pleased enough that he didn’t fight too hard against a midday recess.

The whole thing stank of a setup.

He opened the sensor suite in his HUD while the negotiation party had lunch and pretended to be friendly with each other. The whole place had been swept that morning, both by himself and the Mining Guild’s own security, but it never hurt to check again.

His sensors had barely picked up on the anomalous energy signature when the ceiling caved in.

The first thing that struck Lorana was the surreality of what she was seeing: a bow-wave of pure energy slicing through the wall below the ceiling, like a holographic art piece.

The second thing that struck her was the table.

When the world came back, the lights had gone out and rubble was pattering down over her. Lorana found herself curled around her bruised ribs on the floor, wheezing for air with her arms wrapped around her splitting head. There was an awful high-pitched ringing in her ears; after a heartstopping moment she realised that was all she could hear.

The Force shrieked in her mind and she rolled to the side just as another chunk of broken pourstone dropped from the dining room ceiling, shattering into jagged fragments on the floor beside her.

A hand touched Lorana’s shoulder and she flailed, startled. In the dim light filtering through the dusty haze, she could just make out the armoured shape of one of the Mining Guild’s security officers. The Twi’lek woman’s lips were moving but the ringing in Lorana’s ears drowned the sound out; she shook her head and pointed to her ears. The security officer checked her quickly for injury and helped her stagger upright, and Lorana hunched as her abused stomach muscles twinged.

The room was a shambles, one wall and half the ceiling blown out entirely, revealing other rooms -- offices, apparently -- through the gaps. Above the dining room, the dusty cavern of the roof space was exposed to the sky, and rain was trickling down through the hole to form cold puddles on the floor. Magistrate Argente had been protected by the mass of the dining table, although some piece of shrapnel had opened a cut on his forehead; his bodyguard, covered in dust but protected by his armour, was checking the Magistrate for injury. Guildmaster Gilfrome’s hoverchair had saved him: the friction-less device had been shoved across the room into the opposite wall by the shockwave before the ceiling had fallen in, and the Brolfi was dazed but unharmed.

Master Qui-Gon and Anakin were helping her Master to his feet. Master C’baoth seemed disoriented and upset; through her training bond with him, Lorana felt his angry confusion.
The Mining Guild guard was tugging at her arm. Dimly through the ringing in her ears, she heard the woman saying, “We have to move you for safety!”

“She’s probably yelling; she didn't care.

“In case there are more bombs, Miss.”

“But my Master--” She glanced over to see another of the security guards talking to Master C’baoth, who was arguing stubbornly.

The female guard nodded. “We need everyone out of here, now. We’ll see to him.”

The Guildmaster was already being ushered out by a pair of guards; Lorana let the other woman help her over the chunks of fallen ceiling material to the group, trusting the security to get the others out. If that had been a bomb -- she had sensed nothing amiss until the danger of the collapsing ceiling -- a Jedi should stay with the Guildmaster for his safety.

Despite his splitting head and the aches from being thrown to the floor, Anakin dragged himself upright and joined Qui-Gon in helping people who'd been caught in the blast. The first person they shoved a chunk of wall off had been a Mining Guild guard, helmet knocked askew and unconscious. They handed him off to one of his compatriots and followed the Force to the next signs of life.

Master C’baoth was unbalanced and visibly upset, his long white beard caked with dust and the hearty soup they’d just been served. Qui-Gon steadied him.

“Master C’baoth, can you walk?”

The older Jedi Master glared at Qui-Gon. “Of course I can walk! Look to your own Padawan, Jinn.”

Qui-Gon glanced at Anakin, who shrugged. He was going to have some fantastic bruises, but nothing felt broken. “The guards said we need to move for security precautions--”

“Nonsense!” C’baoth barrelled over Anakin without even glancing at him. “We need to find the source of that explosion, Jinn--” He continued issuing orders even after one of the Mining Guild guards came over to escort them to safety.

Anakin rolled his eyes, glad the lights were out. Qui-Gon touched his shoulder.

“They're escorting Magistrate Argente out. Stay with him, I'll handle Master C’baoth.”

Now wasn’t the time for attitude. “Yes, sir!” He climbed over the table, which lay toppled on its side, and winced as his knee twinged. Katas were going to be fun for the next week. Riske gave him a nod of acknowledgement as he joined them in the corridor. The lights were out here, too, but one of the two human guards had a lamp in his helmet lighting the way.

“Where are we going?”

The security guard at Argente's elbow glanced at him. “Outside, in case the structure has been damaged by the blast. An aircar will take us to the Magistrate's hotel.”

Riske hesitated, pulling the group to a stop in the darkened hall. “That's not standard procedure. If
someone is waiting outside with a sniper rifle--"

“The back exit is covered,” the other guard reassured him. “It's more defensible than it looks.”

Riske had his blaster out. “No it isn't. I checked the place over, myself--”

The Force blared a warning in Anakin’s head; his hand flew to where his lightsaber--

*Should have been.*

Something struck the back of Anakin's head and sparks burst across his vision as he staggered. Blaster shots split the eerie silence; when his vision cleared, Riske and Argente were both on the floor and the female guard had her blaster aimed at Argente's face. She fired twice more and then pointed the weapon at Anakin. “We're not here for you, kid. Don't make a mistake you'll regret.”

Anakin stared at the woman in shock and flung his hand out. A statuette that looked at least somewhat heavy flew off its plinth toward the assassin, who barely dodged in time to avoid it. She fired at him and Anakin threw himself to the side.

Where was the other one? He could only see one of the fake guards. She fired again, forcing him to duck into the shitty cover of a doorway as she backed down the hall.

*Qui-Gon!*

The reply was immediate. *I sensed it. Master C’baoth is on his way.*

*No time. I'm gonna follow her!*

*Be careful, Padawan!*

*Who, me?* He grinned fiercely and hurled himself down the darkened hallway after the assassin.

Caliiga couldn't help a hysterical giggle as she skittered down the City Hall's rear stairs. The Jedi kid wasn't far behind, but what was he going to do?

She toggled her comm. “Got one of them following me. You be alright on your own?”

Sheyvan's derisive sneer was nearly audible in his voice. “*I don't need help from you. Just keep the kid busy.*”

She rolled her eyes and shouldered through a pair of doors into the rain. They both knew how damn lucky they'd got that Jedi Junior had lost his lightsaber in the chaos; as soon as he'd noticed the kid was unarmed, Sheyvan had made the call. Caliiga had to admit she was having fun playing at bounty hunting again.

The best part was in the wait, the anticipation. Wrapped in shadows, he hugged the cover of some
decorative Brolfi sculpture. The Magistrate was well and truly dead, and his bodyguard lay bleeding out beside him, his Force presence growing faint.

It was a fantastic tableau to present to the Jedi Master, who arrived a minute after Caliiga had led the Jedi kid away. The old man dropped to one knee, checking Argente, even though the Koorivar politician was definitely missing half his head.

With no more sound than a silk scarf drawn across glass, Sheyvan slid his knife from its sheath under his stolen uniform jacket and drifted forward.

It was only a warning flare in the Force that saved him. He dropped beneath the scything blue blade of C’baoth’s lightsaber and lashed out with a kick that should have knocked the Jedi’s feet from under him. The elder man evaded the strike, and Sheyvan was forced to roll to the side as the lightsaber dropped again. The point of the blade melted a divot through the low-pile carpet into the pourstone beneath.

The Sith assassin was back on his feet in an instant, eyes narrowed as he and the Jedi Master circled. The old man should never have felt him; clearly Sheyvan needed to practice more. He eyed the glowing plasma blade warily. His armour would be protection enough, but he regretted having to leave his own lightsaber on the ship he and Caliiga had used. No sense showing their hand too early, after all.

“Well sent you?” the Jedi demanded.

Sheyvan bared his teeth in a fierce grin. “Bounty hunters never discuss our work, old man.” He faked a slip to the right, and when the lightsaber came around, Sheyvan raised his left arm to block. There was a brief, blinding spark as the blade connected with the cortosis vambrace and then vanished, the energy feedback through the metal triggering the weapon’s overload breaker.

The moment of confusion was enough for Sheyvan to bury his blade in the Jedi Master’s back.

When he wasn’t playing politics, Guildmaster Gilfrome was a pleasant, grandfatherly sort of person. After he’d shaken his initial disorientation off, the Brolfi had happily engaged Lorana in chatting about the decorations around the interior of Tiilcatt City Hall, which had apparently all been donated by the local crafting guilds, right down to the handwoven rugs. It amused her how the Guildmaster thought she would need to be soothed -- as if it wasn’t part of her job to face danger on a daily basis.

Not that she had to, definitely not daily.

The room they had been taken to by the security guards was Gilfrome’s office, and he was in the middle of explaining the folklore depicted in a tapestry on the wall when he broke off, frowning. “Friend Jedi? You look pale.”

Lorana’s heart was pounding so fiercely she could feel it coursing through her limbs. Clutching her chest, she leaned against the desk. “Something dreadful has happened.”
The Force was roiling, shot through with fractures in the normally smooth surface. Visible through
the cracks was a void so deep it hurt to look at.

Qui-Gon poured everything he had into speed as he heard the unmistakable hum of a lightsaber
down the darkened hallway. He rounded the corner in time to see C’baoth’s lightsaber spark and die,
followed by a sharp, choked gasp and a man's grim chuckle.

“Jorus!”

The fractures splintered and split.

The laughter cut off with the sound of something heavy striking the wall. In the dimness, Qui-Gon
could just make out Master C’baoth standing like a statue with his hand outstretched. Darkness
seethed around him in a haze and kept a second, smaller figure pinned against the wall.

Oh, he knew that feeling. Naboo had not been so long ago that he would forget.

The smaller man, dressed in a Mining Guild security uniform, writhed against the invisible grip;
something metallic dropped from his hand and bounced away across the floor.

He could save the assassin for questioning, but the odds of C’baoth turning on Qui-Gon, or
continuing to pursue the assassin were too high.

Qui-Gon’s shoulder caught C’baoth in the stomach, sending them sprawling onto the other two
bodies already on the floor. The assassin dropped like a bag of rocks, coughing, and scrambled away
into the darkness; Qui-Gon was too busy fighting to keep C’baoth down to care.

“Jorus, it’s me! Stop!”

“You fool!” C’baoth snarled, pushing at him. “We need him!”

“We need him alive, which he would not be at all if you had continued what you were doing,” Qui-
Gon growled. “Are you alright?”

Shouts and beams of light from the security guards’ helmet lamps bobbed around the hallway, and
the searing cracks of Darkness vanished, less gone so much as hidden. C’baoth groaned and sagged,
and Qui-Gon realised his right hand was wet. He turned towards the new arrivals. “We need a medic
here! And I need to speak to your supervisor, now.”

By the time she returned to their hotel, it was so late it was early. Lorana wrestled her boots off and
collapsed face-first onto her bed, feeling drained.

Master C’baoth had been taken to the Tiilcatt hospital for treatment, along with Magistrate Argente’s
bodyguard. Anakin had come dragging back at Master Qui-Gon’s call, but he’d never had a chance
of catching up to the first assassin; they were more worried about the second one stumbling across
the younger Padawan and taking him as a target of opportunity.

Master Qui-Gon said that wasn’t really the usual modus operandi for a bounty hunter, but there was
no point in not being careful.

The cooling bodies of two Mining Guild guards had been found locked in a storage cupboard in the
basement level, stripped of their gear. So that answered that question. The security supervisor had had no idea they were missing two people until it was too late. Among the shattered remnants of the wall and ceiling they found the casing for a standard mining-grade seismic detonator, of the same type used by the Brolfi’s mining teams.

It certainly looked as though someone who opposed the Corporate Alliance’s presence on Barlok had hired assassins to attack Passel Argente.

Lorana wasn’t buying it.

The Corporate Alliance was sending a ship with a stand-in negotiator and a team to properly collect Argente’s body. Master C’baoth would likely not be out of the medical facilities in time: the internal damage was severe but immediate medical attention had kept it from becoming life-threatening. But that meant the task of mediation fell to Lorana.

She was so not ready for this.

Someone tapped at the door softly, and she felt Master Qui-Gon’s quiet presence outside. Lorana sat up and shoved her hair out of her face. “It’s open.”

The Jedi Master had a tray with a tea service in his hands; he set it on the tiny table between the chairs squeezed into the corner of her room. “It’s herbal, something to help us all sleep.”

Lorana rubbed her forehead. “Thank you, Master Qui-Gon.” She shifted only enough to fall into the nearest chair and watched him pour in a haze. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

He didn’t look up but smiled as he dropped a piece of sweetener into her cup. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s… Master C’baoth was requested specifically to deal with this by Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. Obviously my Master knows more about this situation than is readily apparent. I can’t go into this without all the information.”

“Did he not give you any notes to read on the matter?” Qui-Gon was very carefully not watching her at all, and she felt a surge of gratitude. He was a seasoned diplomat, and here he was, giving her a moment to voice everything so she could process it, without putting any pressure on her performance.

Lorana blew gently against the steam rising from her cup. The tea smelled undefinably fruity but with a hint of green sharpness. “He assigned me to put together the research material on the situation.”

“Then he knew as much as you did. Was there a reason the Supreme Chancellor gave him for the assignment?”

She nodded. “The Outbound Flight project is suffering a lack of funding, and a lot of people whose opinions matter are starting to doubt Master C’baoth because of his insistence on the project’s importance. This was both to show that Master C’baoth hasn’t lost his touch and to unlock a funding source for the project. Also, the ore they mine here is makarcite—”

“Ahh.” Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows in understanding. “Which is refined into venitinol—”

“Exactly, which would be what they need to fuel the dreadnaughts for the Project.” She sighed. “So Master C’baoth had a personal stake in things.”
Master Qui-Gon frowned. “Unfortunately, that’s grounds for accusations about a conflict of interest.”

“I know.” Lorana set her cup down and absentely braided her hair back while she considered things. “The Corporate Alliance is already demanding the Mining Guild be forced to rescind their claims because it looks like their miners hired the assassins. I’m not sure I have enough evidence to prove it wasn’t them -- or at least, that it was an independent actor. Guildmaster Gilfrome is as honest about his confusion as anyone else might be.”

Nodding, Qui-Gon hummed under his breath thoughtfully, then reached into one of the pouches on his belt. “This might help us.”

He withdrew an object wrapped in a piece of fabric; inside, still crusted with blood, lay a dark, matte-black dagger. The blade was about the same length as the grip, leaf-shaped and honed to a razor-fine point -- not a combat knife, not with that guardless grip.

“Our mysterious friend dropped it when Master C’baoth pinned him to the wall.” He smiled tightly. “A pair of Jedi Shadows will be arriving, hopefully before the Corporate Alliance relief does, and they might be able to wrest some answers from all of this.”

Reformation Year 980.08.11
Mandalore

It had been a long time since he’d last visited Keldabe -- really visited, not just stopping by to recruit individuals for a dangerous and isolating but lucrative contract. The city had both remained the same as always, and changed entirely. Shops had moved to venues better or worse, some had closed. Part of the sprawl by the riverside was being rebuilt or shored up after a minor subsidence had damaged foundations. Places that had been scruffy were now clean; an upscale neighborhood had fallen into disrepair.

Even outside the market district, the city was a riot of colour: banners, streamers, the smooth-faced duracrete paving stones laid in mosaic patterns, laundry hung out to dry, kids playing games in the alleys. The Mando’adë loved their bright dyes, an almost aggressive answer to the Sundariise’ grey habits. He’d left Boba in Roz’s care, after parting ways with Bastra and his kid, but caught himself thinking his son would absolutely love the place.

Jango let his thoughts drift to Bastra, his concerns for Zohli not having kids her age to hang out with. Mando’adë grew up fast, were expected to be able to handle adult duties if not all the responsibility by age thirteen or the species equivalent. And yet….

He glanced at a team of kids about Zoh’s age circled around a saggy, fist-sized bean-sack they were keeping in the air with their feet. They still had time to play -- and a lot of skills and motor coordination was developed in those silly games. Bastra wasn’t wrong: she could benefit from that.

First things first. He turned down a side street, seeking out an understated sign. The bright plastoid bore an image of a traditional yaim -- a hut made of sticks and other forest matter which blended easily into the trees, before duracrete and transparisteel came into use -- and he ducked through the open door into the shadowed cantina.
The T’adyc Yaim wasn’t anything like as fancy or well-known as the Oyu’baat in the middle of the city. The mercenaries who frequented it preferred it that way: a place to put their buy’ce aside and just relax for a while. Three steps led down to a floor paneled in actual wood, and the U-shape of the bar claimed the majority of the floor space. Padded bench seats lined the walls in a style three thousand years out of date, with barely enough room for the tables and low stools opposite.

It was too early for the lunch crowd, which was good: Jango wanted to get a feel for the general atmosphere first. Only one table near the target-board at the back was occupied, by a pair of younger women and a strill on a heavy leatherette harness. One of them was slipping the six-legged canoid bits of her meal as it rested its head on her knee, drooling happily. Jango slid onto one of the tall stools at the bar and set his buy’ce aside.

"Well. Jango Fett." The bartender, a rangy human woman with red hair in a long braid down her back, gave him a sly grin. Her cybernetic right arm whirred softly as she set one of the taps on a cleaning cycle. "Never thought I'd see you in here again."

He shrugged easily. "You're worth coming back to, Neve."

She tsked and leaned forward to rest her forehead against his. "Been too long, vod. You never come back to Keldabe just to come home."

"It's not my home," he said without heat. Neve Uresgai knew he'd grown up on Concord Dawn.

"Home is where the people you miss are. You want your usual?"

He sat back and rested his forearms on the duraplas bartop. "Bit early yet, but caff would be good." Her first statement wasn't worth trying to brush off -- there wasn't anyone in Keldabe he really spent time thinking about.

For just a moment, his memory taunted him with the image of a different redhead, leaning over the katak table with that wicked grin. Jango blinked and shook his head with a muttered curse. Bastra wasn't worth even that much time. "Any of the regulars still around?"

Neve bobbed her head cheerfully as the caff maker hissed. "And I guarantee you that they'll be around in an hour or so, because I got a real excited comm from a certain kiddo who recently got a job at the spaceport and saw your Firespray land."

Jango felt a grin spread across his face. "Tisra actually being responsible for once?"

"He's grown up a lot. Rasmal is real proud of him." She deposited a mug and a service of various sweeteners in front of him and mirrored his lean. "So what brings you back to Keldabe?"

He chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully and took a moment to fix his drink. "Thinkin' about getting the family back together."

When Jango glanced up, Neve's blue eyes were huge in her tanned face. She leaned towards him over the bar. "You said never again, Jango," she hissed softly. "Do you remember that?"

He nodded. "Just been thinking things over lately." The caff was good, a rich, heady blend grown locally. Kriff, he’d missed this. "I, uh," he hesitated. "I have a son. He’s nearly five--"

Neve’s elated gasp cut him off. "You?! Really?"

The two women in the corner glanced over at the bartender's squeak, and the strill made an attempt for its owner’s sandwich in her hand. Jango chuckled at the shenanigans. "Yeah. He's a good kid."
“You didn't bring him with you?” Neve pouted at him and prodded his arm with a metal finger. “Kids are always welcome here, you know that.”

“Not this time. Left him with a friend.” He sipped his caff. “Right now, I'm just… getting the lay of the land, seeing where everyone's sentiments are at.”

She frowned and brushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. "You know that if you called, Jango, we'd come running."

"Maybe you would. The others?"

Her bio hand, dry and rough from work, landed on his and squeezed. "You're still our Mand'alor. If they don't answer--"

"Don't finish that." He shook his head, scowling. "Jaster was trying to reform that cultish shit. It's why we have the current mess we have today. Three Mand'alorë declaring those who follow the other two to be dar'manda? There's no chance of unity in a climate like that."

"It's the Resol'narë, Jango. Kryze edited it to suit her ends; if you do the same--"

"What good are tenets that can't evolve? Every Mando'adë alive who still accepts me was unable to go to Galidraan -- everyone else was killed. We already accept that the Mand'alor's call isn't absolute -- and a good thing, too, or you'd all have been wiped out."

Neve scoffed. "If everyone had gone, maybe you would have won." Neve herself had been floating near-death in bacta at the time, and had never forgiven herself for it.

"It was a trap, Neve. We were never gonna win it." He sighed, staring into the depths of his mug. "And I have to accept my responsibility in not getting better intel before walking into it. It was always Death Watch's goal to fragment the Mando'adë, and I played into their hands twice. First by even going to Galidraan, then by allowing my own shame to drive me away." He turned his hand up under hers and squeezed her fingers. "That's gonna change."

Neve had been right: a bit before lunch hour people started trickling in, largely in work clothes although there were a few sets of beskar'gam in the mix. Most of them came over to greet Jango personally, and seeing familiar faces was… well, it was a relief.

Jango moved from sitting on the barstool to sitting on the bar -- with Neve’s permission. There wasn’t nearly enough seating in the place for the numbers that filled it, but they were trying. He waited until the murmur of the crowd quieted, everyone looking at him expectantly, took a quick sip of the ne’tra gal Neve had handed him, and cleared his throat.

In both Mando’a and traditional handspeak, he said, “I see you all live. It’s good. I’m gonna keep this short.” Jango sighed. It had taken him hours to figure out what he was going to say, and how to say it. Public speaking wasn’t his thing, but it was expected of him, so he shoved the nerves away to be dealt with later and continued, “I’m not happy with how the reputation of the Mando'adë has dropped. We used to be respected out of fear; Jaster’s dream was for us to be respected for our honour. The Kyr’tsad want the days of conquest back, and you can see that affecting our reception across the galaxy.”

He soothed the tightness in his throat with another sip of gal and continued, “That’s partly my fault. Instead of standing upright, I went and disappeared. A lot of you will be right to question my ability to lead after that, and I’m willing to accept the criticism.” An unhappy smile crossed his face. “Believe me, none of you can be harder on me than I am.
“I’m here because I want that dream back. I’m here because I want to ask each one of you to give me the chance to honour Jaster’s legacy, and follow me into a better future for the Mando’adë and Manda’yaim.” He shook his head. “We used to be a community. It’s because of me that we’re not. But we can fix that. It’s not too late.”

In the silence that followed, a solidly built teenager, who had likely been no more than a child when Galidraan happened, rose to speak. “Why come back now? Are you really here for us? Or is this still about you?”

In any other situation, nobody would have dared to voice such a question; but that was then and this was now. Jango nodded. “I should have come back sooner. Maybe I just wasn’t ready before now. But… things have happened recently. For the first time in a long time, I’ve been looking toward the future, not just for myself but for all of us.”

A voice rose from the crowd, accent thickened by pain and anguish. “So you want us to just trust you now? After what happened on Galidraan?” An older Zabrak man stood up from his table, glaring in his direction. “What did you get out of that, anyway? Why did my riduur have to die for you? Why did I have to lose my son?” His voice arched over the growing rumble of discontent. “You didn’t even have the decency to die alongside them!”

Jango squeezed his eyes shut and raised one hand, signaling for quiet. “If I’d had my way, I would have. I would have died with them. I would have left you leaderless, with a power vacuum large enough for Tor Vizsla to step in and claim my place.” Which had clearly been the original plan. It was a credit to his people’s unspoken belief in him that none had allowed for that to happen. He wasn’t sure he had deserved even that much, and he wasn’t going to thank them for what had to have been a terrible set of options: the choice between an opportunistic conqueror or an absent disgrace. “I failed you all that day, and you now have only my reassurance that I have learned from the mistakes of my youth and intend to dedicate myself to serving the Mando’adë better.” Had he really only been twenty-three when he’d made that disastrous call? Twelve years felt like three lifetimes.

A mutter swept through the crowd -- not hostile, but in tones of consideration. Before Jango could say anything more, another woman who had arrived late and remained by the door due to the press of the crowd pushed forward. Midha Krirr, dark hair swept up out of the way in a tight braid coiled around her head, had a lot to hold against him; it was only by fortune she and her wife hadn’t been on Galidraan with him. She stared at him for a moment before her creaky, broken voice filled the silence.

“You have a lot to atone for, Jango Fett,” she said gently, her hands speaking for her to those who couldn’t hear. “But you know it. The commander who feels justified feels no need to ask for the faith of his troops. Like Tor Vizsla. Like his whelp, Pre.” She was looking at one person in particular when she said that, and Jango wondered what kind of discussion had led to that. “You come to us not with entitlement but in supplication. For that alone, we should at least hear what your plan is.”

She paused, her tanned features creased in a grin. “You… do have a plan, right?”

Jango took a deep breath; time for the hard part. “We need to be seen. The Kyr’tsad are an opponent to be faced, but not yet. First, we have to re-establish the Mando’adë as the fighting force we were in the past.”

A voice in the crowd mocked, “And how are we supposed to do that without taking planets again?”

A smile tugged at Jango’s mouth. “I’ve spent the last few years building a list of contacts. I know some people who have need of a mercenary fighting force on occasion. Even better: they can afford
“There’s no need to make a call now. Talk among yourselves. Take some time to consider it. A return to the company life means possibly being away from the lives you’ve rebuilt for months at a time. It’s not an easy decision and I won’t pretend it is. Neve has my comm, if you want to yell at me personally. Otherwise, I’ll be here for a couple days.” He glanced around, catching nods of understanding from around the room, and nodded back. “Ret’urcyë mhi.”

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Reformation Year 980.08.16
Kamino

“I’m not sure I understand what the problem is here.” Cort Davin looked up from the stats displayed on the datapad. “Why are these cadets slated for reprocessing?” The word tasted foul across his tongue: ‘reprocessing’ could mean one of five things and none of them were good.

Ko Sai folded her hands primly and looked down her nose at him. Behind the Kaminoan scientist, a rank of over a hundred cadets, three years old but twice as grown, stood at solemn attention in their blue uniforms. Cort hadn’t missed the fear flickering in their eyes, but what choice did they have?

“They refuse to accept their designators, Sergeant Davin.”

Time to play dumb. Cort looked at the cadets. “You want names instead of numbers?”

A sea of wide young eyes glanced over at Ko Sai as she said, “Their designator as male, Sergeant.”

He made a show of looking over the stats for the group again -- all of them. It took a while. “They’re all performing to spec or beyond, I don’t see a problem here.”

“The progenitor--”

Cort hooked the datapad to his belt instead of giving it back, and Ko Sai gave a small huff of irritation. “We’re concerned about performance. They meet your genetic quality standards--” another phrase that tasted vile-- “and their performance is unquestionable. You’re dismissed, Ko Sai.”

Human and Kaminoan stared each other down for a tense moment before Ko Sai turned and marched out in a snit. Cort turned to the cadets, still standing unnaturally still for a bunch of six-year-olds, and studied them. When he finally spoke, it was just loud enough for the ranks at the back to hear him.

“When I was eight, I decided I didn’t want to be a girl anymore. My buirë were surprised, but they gave me time and space to figure things out. Eventually I decided I wanted to be a boy instead.”

All those little eyes stared at him, and one somewhere in the middle of the group ventured, “We’re not defective, sir?”

His heart wanted to break; Cort held it together by getting angry instead. “You’re all completely normal. Return to whatever activity your batches are scheduled for. Give it some thought, and when you know what designator you want, request to see me or Sergeant Maihl. We’ll make sure it goes
through. And pass word to the younger ones so this *osik* doesn’t happen again.”

He was still steaming over the incident -- and typing a strongly-worded notice for the other trainers from the terminal in Jango’s office, which was nominally Cort or Kal’s when Jango was away -- when Jango returned from Mandalore. The older man took one look at him and closed the office door behind him.

“What’s got you in a mood?”

Cort tossed the datapad in Jango’s direction without looking and continued typing, his fingers stabbing the keypad as if it had personally offended him.

The outburst of enraged Mando’a had Cort smirking viciously as he worked.

“Do we have data on how many other such cadets got reprocessed already?”

“No, and I don’t really *want* to know, because then I’d be strangling myself a longneck or two and making myself *very* unpopular around here.”

Jango leaned around to see what Cort was typing and nodded in satisfaction. Cort and a few of the other Cuy’val Dar had quickly banded together as an oversight group to protect the clones whom the *Kaminiiisë* might have otherwise discarded -- Mij Gilamar had pointed out that the ones who were unsuited to physical combat could still perform in a support capacity, and Sikkaah Maihl had nearly come to blows with Ko Sai over the clones who exhibited anything other than human-standard male attributes. They’d taken the incredibly limited testing parameters the *Kaminiiisë* had designed -- parameters which would have seen countless perfectly normal children destroyed -- and expanded it, shifting clones to more suitable training groups as appropriate. The *Kaminiiisë* had been less than pleased, but Jango got the final say.

For Cort, it was something of a relief. When he’d first arrived, the sheer quantities of wasted innocent life had hung around Tipoca City like a shroud; he’d felt choked on the stench of it. It was still noticeable, but nowhere near as bad as it had been a few years before. Of course, the *Kaminiiisë* only understood profit; the Cuy’val Dar had had to swallow bile and couch their arguments in terms of product loss. But it had paid off, and even Ko Sai had agreed that they were able to afford a greater range of genetic adjustments without having to accommodate for the loss in numbers.

*Hut’uunyc demagolkasë.*

Cort let Jango read the instructions and edit them a bit before sending them out, then let his boss reclaim the desk chair. “So how’d it go with the *Mando’adë*?”

Jango heaved a sigh and drummed his fingers on the desk, but when he looked up at Cort, he was grinning like a nexu with a prize convor under its claw. He knocked his vambrace against Cort’s.

“*Oya manda.*”

Chapter End Notes

Mando’a Translation:

Beskar’gam - traditional Mandalorian armour
Buirë - parents
Buy'ce - helmet
Dar'manda - not Mandalorian, but more severe than just being an outsider; someone
who has no communal soul
Demagolkasë - monsters, but much more strongly, referring to individuals who commit
true atrocities
Hut'uunyc - cowardly
Kaminiisë - Kaminoans
Ky'r'tsad - Death Watch
Mand'alor - leader
Manda’yaim - Mandalore
Mando’adë - Mandalorian (culturally)
Ne’tra gal - Mandalorian black ale
Osik - shit
Oya manda - expression of Mandalorian solidarity
Resol'narë - the Six Actions, the guiding rules for being culturally Mandalorian
Ret’urcyë mhi - farewell, literally "maybe we'll meet again"
Riduur - spouse
Sundariise - Mandalorian citizens of Sundari, nominally Satine's followers
T’adyc Yaim - Second Home
Vod - sibling, used between people of different clans to indicate an extrafamilial bond
Yaim - traditional Mandalorian dwelling

If you're wondering about the use of the umlaut on the Mando'a plurals, which is not a
feature of the "official" Mando'a resources, it's just a linguistic choice to indicate that the
"-e" is a spoken syllable rather than a modifier to the previous syllable like most finial Es
in English. Not sorry. I've been contemplating applying the International Phonetic
Alphabet to Mando'a recently, because messing with conlangs is a hobby of mine.
Lorana rubbed at her temples, feeling another headache coming on. The last few days seemed to have been nothing but one headache after another, and no amount of tea was helping.

Maybe she was just allergic to the tisvollt trees.

Things were looking bad. Magistrate Argente's aide Denaria Kee would be arriving in the morning. The Corporate Alliance was in an attitude of suspension while they dealt with the power imbalance, and Kee was already in the running to assume Argente's place. Unfortunately, that gave her a lot of incentive to come down hard on the Barlok negotiations. She'd already put in a demand for different mediation, citing a lack of trust in the Jedi's ability to keep her and her retinue safe; Kee had also dared to suggest the Jedi had a hand in arranging Argente's murder. The Supreme Chancellor had made extensive apologies but insisted that Master C'Baoth's party was the only one qualified to oversee the matter. The Jedi would have no relief from Coruscant, despite Kee's vociferous suspicions.

The Shadows whom Master Qui-Gon had called in were fresh from a different assignment on Kuat, and turned out to be Knight Vos -- of course she knew who Quinlan was, he'd been the source for most of the bootleg holodramas circulating through Padawan hands for the last decade -- and his own quiet Padawan, Aayla. Aayla might not be a natural psychometer like her Master, but she was learning to coax the secrets out of important objects. The knife Master Qui-Gon had recovered from one of the assassins was steeped in Darkness -- they could all feel it -- but Quinlan had handed it to Aayla for further analysis.

"He knows." She'd frowned, her eyes closed. "This was crafted possibly a week ago, specifically for the purpose of attacking Master C'Baoth. I can feel it in his focus on the weapon. Its newness
Quinlan had smiled proudly. “Very good. Now look beyond the form to the material.”

Aayla had outright gasped and dropped it.

They couldn’t use the term *Sith* in public. It couldn’t become part of their reasoning, per orders from the Council. Lorana understood why: the Sith had been nothing more than a myth for centuries, and bringing what amounted to a ghost story into political proceedings would utterly sink their credibility.

Master C’baoth had begun demanding an early release from Tiilcatt’s medical center, making loud claims about the Sith trying to interfere with his work. He always had expected people to act solely on his word and authority, but the moment he used *Sith*, the doctors began running tests for dementia and brain injury. Which had only set her Master off further. The hospital staff had been on the comm with Lorana about Master C’baoth’s claims when he’d tried to release himself and they’d forcibly sedated him.

There were several words Lorana could think of to describe this situation, none of them suitable for use in polite company or a report to the Council.

At Quin and Master Qui-Gon’s advisement, Lorana had requested the Order send a transport to bring Master C’baoth back to the Temple for further care -- and to prevent any more civilian medics from being injured. He had been exceptionally resistant to being removed from Barlok, and Lorana could sympathise. But what else could they do? Master Windu himself had been on the shuttle, and she had no idea what the Head of the Order had said to Master C’baoth, but eventually he had agreed to return to Coruscant. He’d given her a stiff, two-hour dictation on how she was meant to handle the negotiations, but it had been marred with clear conflicts of interest.

She had no idea what to do.

At her elbow, her comm pinged. Lorana twitched in surprise, her train of thought broken. “Hi Aayla. What’d you find?”

The younger Padawan looked annoyed. “I found that another ship from Coruscant arrived the same day you did, and that it left in a hurry the day after. It’s registered with Damask Holdings, which is affiliated with the IGBC. Both companies deny any knowledge of the ship and its transponder code, so either somebody is lying or it’s a faked code so they can say they don’t know it and technically not lie.” She was scowling hard, talking calmly through gritted teeth at the end. “The spaceport security droids spotted the owners: two humans, a man and a woman. Unfortunately we don’t have enough visual confirmation on the assassins to confirm if they’re the same people, and the IGBC does have its own interests here on Barlok. It’s a dead end, at least for this investigation.”

Lorana clenched her teeth on a curse. “Okay, we need a new plan. Thanks for looking into it, Aayla.”

There was no way to prove the Brolfi hadn’t sent the assassins without going public with the presence and interference of the Sith. The Jedi Order’s credibility was falling hard on this one, and the Corporate Alliance was unlikely to listen to reason with respect to anything that wouldn’t explicitly give them their way.

They could not be allowed to have their way; Lorana was adamant on that. Despite her Master’s urging, giving the Corporate Alliance exclusive rights to all products from Barlok -- regardless of whether they were mined by Corporate Alliance droids or Brolfi Mining Guild employees -- would completely ruin Barlok’s economy. People would die.
Which left her looking at the Corporate Alliance’s own defense.

Lorana pulled up the original contract between the Corporate Alliance and the Barlok Mining Guild and parsed through it, line by line. She was no legal expert, but the HoloNet was a useful resource: she quickly found a common sentient’s guide to legal contracts and started making notes. All the language seemed to be in order, but something about it still felt subtly wrong.

That wasn’t Guildmaster Gilfrome’s name on the Mining Guild’s signature line. In fact, it wasn’t a Brolfi name at all -- it was Guildmaster Avro Ti’Faranale from the Mining Guild -- the intergalactic parent corporation. The Barlok Mining Guild had been created as a subsidiary to directly oversee planetary affairs shortly thereafter, but the Brolfi hadn’t themselves weighed in on a contract that concerned their interests.

Lorana stacked everything she had together, shoved it in a bag, and hurried out. With luck, the place would still be open.

Qui-Gon wasn’t entirely certain what Lorana was up to, but he’d gamely agreed to go with her into Tiilcatt city. She had the look of a woman on a mission, and had all but ordered him to follow. She had a datapad in front of her face, scanning and translating shopfront signs as they passed, but they were well into the business district now, and it was much less chaotic than the marketplace.

“This one, come on.” She led him through an arched door he had to stoop to enter. The top of his head still brushed the glass chimes suspended above the door as he straightened, but the sound was quite pleasant.

“Jhu’na, jhu’na-- oh!” A stout Brolf in a beautifully embroidered wrapped robe bustled in from a back room and stopped in surprise. “My goodness, Jedi! So sorry, so sorry, what might I help you with?”

Lorana bowed respectfully and Qui-Gon followed her lead, mystified but amused. “Greetings, Lady Iicha. I understand you’re a well-regarded legal counselor?”

The Brolf’s gold-hued cheeks darkened in a blush. “That’s very kind of you to say! I didn’t know I had a reputation.”

Lorana was pulling all the charm out; she smiled gently at the shorter woman. “Well, that’s what everyone I asked at City Hall said. You were highly recommended both for your expertise and your discretion.”

Ah, there it was. Qui-Gon tucked a grin away for later and remained a serene background presence to avoid interrupting Lorana’s work.

Lady Iicha was no fool. Her violet eyes glinted shrewdly as she settled herself into the chair behind the desk. “I see! Well, have a seat and let’s see how I can help you. There, ah… there is a small fee involved--” she added, sounding genuinely apologetic.

“Of course,” Lorana soothed. “We’re authorised to compensate you for your service. As to what I need--” She settled into the other chair and pulled a pair of datapads from the bag slung over her shoulder. “I have here a contract which seems to be legitimate with regards to Republic legal practises, but it doesn’t appear to have been reviewed under Brolfi legal practises. As it does relate to
certain Brofli matters, this seems an egregious oversight.”

The Brof didn’t reach for the datapads but gave Lorana a very long look. “If it is known that you brought this to someone whose welfare perhaps depends on the outcome of this matter,” she said quietly, “it could negate the entire process. A neutral party would be better.”

Lorana folded her hands on the desk with a sigh. “I know. But finding an individual with no conflict of interest in this matter who is also intimate with Brofli legal matters is not possible. Nobody who is not Brofli or a resident of Barlok has any need for such knowledge. Can you say with certainty that your only stake in the matter is whether the outcome ruins Barlok’s economy?”

Lady Iicha gave the question the serious deliberation it was due; Lorana gave her time to process the question. In the end, the Brof legal counselor nodded. “I have no ties to the Barlok Mining Guild or any of its members, and no members of my family have any direct stake in the planetary mining ventures -- they’re mostly farmers. Other than that one point of conflict, I can regard the matter critically.”

“Then that’s a risk we’re prepared to accept, Lady Iicha.”

Interim Magistrate Denaria Kee carried herself like someone who was accustomed to being obeyed. Anakin clenched his jaw and bowed in tandem with Master Qui-Gon when introduced, but the woman’s entire demeanor grated like sand down his back. Lorana had put effort into looking as official as she could -- she’d even had someone style her hair into a series of braids around her head -- and managed to lead the introductions without any of the stumbling she’d been worrying over.

Kee had a massive retinue, including several security droids, and turned down all invitations of refreshment. "My predecessor, fates guard him, made the mistake of letting you lull him; I will not make the same mistake!" she snapped.

Guildmaster Gilfrome and Lorana both received the accusation with expressions of mild surprise. It was times like this that Anakin appreciated having grown up learning not to flinch when authority figures threw their weight around, and he could feel Qui-Gon's quiet approval through their training bond. Lorana had already declared that they would do what they could to ensure Kee felt safe, at least with regards to security. The Interim Magistrate’s insistence on using her shuttle’s facilities rather than the hotel room the Mining Guild had offered was unsurprising.

Due to the damage the seismic mining charge had done to City Hall, and fears that the superstructure may have been compromised, the Mining Guild had reserved a conference room at the Starbright Hotel, where Argente had originally been staying. As the mediator, Lorana opened negotiations, and before anyone else could say a word, Kee was already on her feet.

“"The Corporate Alliance representative wishes it stated on the record that the representative does not trust the Jedi to adjudicate this matter fairly! It is abundantly clear that they have no interest in compromise and were all too content to stand back and watch as my predecessor, fates guard him, was murdered in front of one of their own. Either the Senate must send a new mediation party or we will continue without the assistance of one.”

Anakin’s eyes narrowed at the woman’s severe face. Politicians were so good at pretending, he could almost believe that she meant her accusations seriously. Qui-Gon had explained to him and
Lorana that Kee might make such a demand: if they sent to the Senate for new mediators, things could be dragged out for months while they waited for qualified people to be confirmed via committee. Barlok’s economy would continue to suffer under the virtual blockade the entire time. And if the Jedi agreed to recuse themselves from the negotiations, the Barlok Mining Guild would be at a severe disadvantage.

“She’ll likely attempt to carpet-bomb the room and then compressor-roll the remains,” he’d warned. Anakin appreciated the metaphor.

Lorana somehow managed to keep her blandly pleasant expression. “Your request has been recorded. Unfortunately, the mediation party also made such a request of the Senate, the transcript of which can also be found on the proceeding records, timestamped 980.08.12-0945, and the official consensus as recorded is that the current mediation party must remain in place until proceedings have concluded. The current mediation party cannot be replaced, and proceedings may not commence without the mediation party present.” She had been incredibly smug about getting that decision stated clearly and officially, and it was definitely going to be a good mark on her record towards her Trials.

Kee’s expression soured for only a moment. “The Corporate Alliance representative withdraws the request.”

“Noted,” Lorana said in a bland tone. She seemed to actually be enjoying the verbal sparring, despite her fretting over the past week. “Are there any other orders of business to address before the negotiations commence?”

Qui-Gon’s mental snicker traveled down the bond. Well played, he whispered.

“As the representative from the Corporate Alliance was not present when proceedings opened, we invite the representative from the Barlok Mining Guild to present their position for consideration.”

It was all the same arguments from the first day with no real modifications. Gilfrome asserted that the contract had only been for the use of Corporate Alliance droids and other automated equipment, to be purchased outright, as no percentage of product profit had been stated. Kee insisted that the omittance of a percentage had been because the contract indicated the use of droids in direct exchange for total profit.

The very idea that anyone would give up total rights to their own planet’s resources was outrageously absurd, but they had gone over the contract several times in the last week and the language used could actually have been read either way. It relied upon the reader having the best of intentions.

Anakin was probably biased, but he didn’t believe the Corporate Alliance was capable of good intentions.

Lorana let Kee and Gilfrome bicker for a while -- it might as well have been a recording from the first day, and Gilfrome was beginning to look frustrated -- before stepping in.

“It appears to the mediation team that the dissention reduces to the language used in the contract in question, TA-8386/45b. The mediation team took the liberty during the forced interim to enlist the assistance of a legal expert in interpreting the language in the contract.” She brought up a holo of the contract with a number of vivid notations in the margins. “It was found by the expert in question -- who has experience in Broli legal precedents -- that the language utilised in the contract does not meet the standards of Broli legal practices, and that the contract does not appear to have been reviewed by anyone from the Barlok Mining Guild before it was signed.”
Gilfrome blinked and nodded; Lorana hadn’t told him anything about her visit to Lady Iicha’s practice. “That is correct: the contract was made between the Corporate Alliance and the Mining Guild. The Barlok Mining Guild -- as an extension of the Mining Guild’s influence -- was founded after the contract was signed in order to allow the Brolfi to manage affairs in accordance with local laws.”

Lorana cleared her throat. “For the record, Guildmaster, had there been a Mining Guild of any sort previously?”

He frowned in puzzlement. “The Mining Guild is the oldest guild on Barlok, it predates the Craftmasters Guild by two centuries.”

“If this is the case, why is the signatory on the contract in question that of Guildmaster Avro Ti’Faranale?”

Both the Guildmaster and the Interim Magistrate were losing their composure at the line of questioning. Kee cleared her throat. “I’m not certain I understand--”

“Please, Magistrate,” Lorana interrupted gently. “The mediation party has found matters which require clarification before any agreement can be reached.”

*I really wish I had some snacks to eat, this is great.*

Qui-Gon mentally shushed him, but there was a hint of a chuckle behind it.

Gilfrome was regarding Lorana with a look that suggested he’d figured out what she was leading up to. “The contract was negotiated on behalf of the Barlok Mining Guild by the primary intergalactic Mining Guild.”

Lorana sat back a bit and clasped her hands on the table. “So it is possible that the contract in question was not reviewed by the Brolfi to ensure its compliance with Brolfi legal standards before it was signed?”

It was about as close as Lorana could get to accusing the Corporate Alliance of deliberately misleading the Brolfi. Kee was scowling.

“Young lady, that is a matter you should address to the Guildmaster of the Mining Guild who signed the contract. We are not here for an inquest.”

Lorana’s smile was beautifully angelic; when she spoke, her words were clear and overwhelmed Kee’s further protests. “The representative of the Corporate Alliance is entirely correct. If the language of the contract cannot be agreed upon, it must be reviewed. The mediation team recommends a *com’me nok rein* on the negotiations.”

Lady Iicha had introduced the Brolfi concept of *com’me nok rein*, where a contract that was under suspicion of abuse was to be considered void until such time as all concerned parties -- including those who had not signed it but were affected by it -- agreed on its contents. Most of the concept went over Anakin’s head, but the gist was that everything had to roll back to the state of affairs before the contract had been signed, until everyone could agree on it again.

“As suggested by the representative from the Corporate Alliance, contract TA-8386/45b should be brought under review by both Guildmaster Avro Ti’Faranale and Guildmaster Gilfrome. A full renegotiation may not be necessary, but until such time as the contract is confirmed to be legitimately crafted, the Corporate Alliance’s claims to the product of Barlok are to be considered null. All embargo of Barlok and its products must cease immediately. Guildmaster Gilfrome,” she asked,
ignoring Kee’s sputtering. “What percentage of the droids and automation from the Corporate Alliance are fully paid for by the Barlok Mining Guild?”

The Guildmaster’s eyes were glittering with amusement. “As of last assessment some fifty-eight percent.”

“Then the Barlok Mining Guild may continue to utilise that equipment; all else must be reclaimed by the Corporate Alliance until such time as the contract is re-ratified, to avoid any suggestions of misuse.”

“The Barlok Mining Guild agrees to these terms.”

“The Corporate Alliance does not!” Kee snapped. “This is absurd, you cannot suggest a full cessation of activity based on an unconstitutional practise.”

Lorana went in for the kill with a smile. “According to Barlok’s legal history, com’me nok rein has been used with regards to legal cases between Barlok and the Republic some forty-three times in the past six hundred years. As such, there is precedent that Barlok’s legal practices are entirely constitutional with regards to Republic law. If the Corporate Alliance will not concede the request, then the mediation team asserts that contract TA-8386/45b must be put before the Republic Trade Commission for a full renegotiation of terms.”

The Trade Commission had a decade-long backlog and the contract wouldn’t see the light of day for years, which was why urgent matters such as Barlok’s were usually mediated by the Jedi. The contract coming under full review would lock both the Barlok Mining Guild and the Corporate Alliance out of the planet’s mining economy until it was settled -- but it wouldn’t prevent independent Brolfi workers from continuing their trade, and the Barlok Mining Guild’s terms did not involve a binding clause. The miners could leave the guild and even form a new one if they chose to do so at any time. They wouldn’t have access to the automation, but that was something they’d been doing for generations already.

Kee had to know that. Regardless of which settlement she accepted, the Corporate Alliance would be frozen out of Barlok until an agreement could be reached. A review and re-ratification by the Guildmasters would take a fraction of the time; it was in her interests to accept the com’me nok rein, however much she might object.

The Interim Magistrate seethed quietly for a moment. “The Corporate Alliance agrees to the terms of com’me nok rein, on the condition that a representative of the Corporate Alliance be involved in the Guildmasters’ review of the contract.”

Gilfrome nodded briskly. “The Barlok Mining Guild concedes to the conditional request.”

Lorana looked as composed as she had the entire day, but relief was absolutely pouring off her in the Force. “Is there any further business to be discussed with regards to contract TA-8386/45b? Then the mediation team declares this negotiation to be settled. The Corporate Alliance has ten Standard days to retrieve the droids and other machinery which were on loan per the contract; the Barlok Mining Guild will assist by ensuring only purchased units are retained.”

“I don’t know how you managed to keep calm like that, I would have just fallen apart. Especially when the woman from the Corporate Alliance broke form and addressed you directly like that?”
Aayla shook her head, wide-eyed as Lorana shrugged. She didn’t really want to admit that Master C’baoth often addressed her the same way when she did anything he disapproved of.

He would definitely disapprove of them having a small party in the common room of the suite Lorana was sharing with Master Qui-Gon and Anakin. The discussions had taken another hour while they worked out the particulars of the Corporate Alliance’s withdrawal from Barlok, during which time Quinlan had gone out into the city -- still in one of the borrowed Mining Guild security uniforms he and Aayla had been given -- and returned with bottles of locally crafted drinks and packages of snacks. With Qui-Gon’s blessing, even Anakin was allowed to try a bit of the sparkling fruit wine, although the kid made a face and reached for one of the bottles of fizzy juice after a couple sips.

“As the Interim Magistrate, she should have known better, that might be held against her in the formal review,” Master Qui-Gon mused. “But we don’t have to worry about that. Lorana might be called in to make a report--”

Lorana groaned and covered her face with her hands. More reports. Wonderful.

“--but only if there’s any suspicion of this entire situation being a setup. In which case, Anakin and I might be called to report, as well.”

Aayla’s slender fingers gently peeled Lorana’s hand from her face. Her fellow Padawan was offering a piece of candy that was both like chocolate but too fruity to be chocolate, and Lorana accepted with a smile she didn’t quite feel. Whatever the stuff was, it was delicious.

“Something’s bothering you?”

What an understatement. Lorana let herself flop backwards onto one of the sofa pillows. “I didn’t follow Master C’baoth’s instructions. He’s going to be furious with me.”

Quinlan frowned. “Your handling of it sounded entirely fair to me, probably the best possible result for everyone concerned. What were his instructions?”

She hesitated. Speaking up about it would be dangerously close to criticism of her teacher. But… she was worried. About him. For him.

“When….” Her need to relieve the concerns building up in her mind warred with a lifetime of reminders not to speak ill of others. “When the Supreme Chancellor assigned my Master to handle this, it was because Outbound Flight had been put on hold because of financial concerns.”

The three younger Jedi all started to ask a question at once; Master Qui-Gon held up a hand. “Outbound Flight is a colony-ship project into the Unknown Regions and beyond. I’m not certain why, but it’s been a dear project to Master C’baoth for the past year. The Council isn’t certain it’s a good use of energy and money at this time, so they told Master C’baoth that if he could gain enough support for it from outside, they would approve the complement of Jedi he was requesting.”

Lorana nodded gratefully. “The Chancellor said that…” Oh, boy. “The Corporate Alliance had offered to pick up the project’s backing if the trade dispute here could be settled.”

Anakin scowled. “Meaning they won’t help if this doesn’t go in their favour.”

“That’s not what he said,” Lorana protested. “But… yeah, the Corporate Alliance probably won’t provide funding since they have to spend time reviewing the contract now.”

Master Qui-Gon’s face was carefully neutral. “Did your Master tell you how he wanted the matter
“Since the Brolfi are also talented crafters, and because the mining is known to be dangerous and better left to droids, he thought the best outcome would be to let the Corporate Alliance manage the mining, and the Brolfi can acquire the products at discount, and be allowed to build a larger trade in crafted exports.” She pressed her hands to her face again and mumbled, “It makes some sense -- exchanging trade instead of credits for the droids is in the short term a better deal for the Brolfi and in the long term a better deal for the Corporate Alliance. But it’s not fair to lock the Brolfi out of the core of their own planet. I… couldn’t.”

“The Corporate Alliance getting back a thousand times what the droids are worth and getting the Brolfi to pay for what they need is totally fair,” Quinlan growled. “Ugh, how would anyone see that as an ideal solution?”

“Quinlan.”

“No, Master Qui-Gon, it’s not right! It would have been a biased suggestion, and I can’t imagine the Brolfi would have just gone along with it.”

Lorana peeked through her fingers. Quinlan was glaring at Master Qui-Gon, while Qui-Gon just looked tired.

“Often, if one party refuses to bend on a point of contention for long enough, the other party will grow weary of the argument, accept it, and then offer a concession based on allowing the first party to have its way. I suspect that was the Corporate Alliance’s plan from the start, given the contract’s questionable nature.”

“This is why you’re the diplomat and I’m the investigator.”

They continued to snipe at each other as Anakin looked increasingly entertained. Aayla touched Lorana’s shoulder and offered her more of the not-chocolate. “Are you alright?”

“I don’t know,” Lorana admitted. “I don’t know what’s going to happen now.”

“Always in motion, the future is,” Aayla teased in a crabbed voice that sounded alarmingly like a higher-pitched Master Yoda. The two of them dissolved into giggles and Lorana squeezed Aayla’s hand.

“You’re right. And there’s no point worrying about it right now. He’ll be upset, but the Council might have a different opinion.”
she could turn to for advice, but Mace doubted she would need it. The Council had suggested some months previous that Jinzler was ready to undergo her Trials.

Jorus C’baoth, of course, felt otherwise. He gripped Mace’s sleeve, his eyes wild and desperate. The dishevelment of several days in medical care, including three rounds of bacta treatment, only added to the effect. “You don’t understand -- she doesn’t understand -- what’s at stake! If she chooses not to follow my instructions-- I should be there to guide her! I should--”

“Master C’baoth.” Mace rested his hand over the elder Master’s where it clutched on his arm. He kept his voice low and soothing as he projected calm through the Force. “You’ve said as much before, but you never explain what you mean. If you would only tell someone--”

The older man glared, bushy brows making the expression truly intimidating. “I do not need to be coddled by someone less than half my age!”

Mace pulled away and folded his arms. “You keep suggesting something dire is about to happen, but you refuse to say what it is. Unless you can be open with the Council about your concerns, we can’t help you.”

C’baoth puffed up as much as someone who was propped up in bed and attached to a number of monitors could, and Mace sighed internally. "It is the responsibility of every Jedi to spread the Light to every corner of the galaxy. If my Padawan fails in her task, the results could be disastrous."

It was impossible to tell if he was referring to Lorana Jinzler's mission -- which, according to the report the Council had just received, had gone better than anticipated -- or something else entirely. Healer Vokara Che had got in his face and all but ordered him to not over-excite her patient, who was still awaiting a cloned kidney, so that would have to wait. Mace hadn't experienced anything unusual about the situation on Barlok: no shatterpoints or visions, just the creeping sensation that C’baoth wasn't telling them everything.

"We can only trust the Force to guide her," he said, rather than asking the questions he really wanted to ask.

"The Force has been shadowed of late. You cannot be so ignorant as to have missed that." C’baoth's self-important tone grated against Mace's nerves. "I have been granted an auspicious vision. I cannot trust my Padawan to receive the right directions from a Force which barely speaks to the Council anymore."

Not this again. The Force was murky, yes, but that didn't mean that one person's visions were more accurate than anyone else's. Mace smiled tightly and nodded. "We'll discuss it more when Padawan Jinzler and the others return and make their report." And they would discuss it, with the full Council in attendance. Hopefully the elderly Jedi Master would be able to manage under his own power; Mace couldn't imagine the man deigning to submit to a hoverchair for assistance.

He nodded to Vokara on his way out. She beckoned him over before he could escape. "He's due for surgery tomorrow, but we want to keep him another week to ensure there won't be complications, considering his age. I don't care if you have to have one of the Temple Guard watching his door, just... make sure he actually stays where he should?" Vokara scowled. "Last time he was in due to injury, he walked himself halfway through the Temple in the wrong direction because he couldn't remember where his quarters were and refused to ask directions."

"When was that?"

"Some years ago. He acquired a concussion during his mission to Ando. Padawan Jinzler held things
together despite her inexperience."

Now he remembered: the Demilitarization Observation Group. Jinzler had been C’baoth’s Padawan only a few years. Mace nodded. "Nobody told me he’d tried to release himself from the Halls."

Vokara huffed in amusement and rolled her eyes. "If only that was the worst behavior we’ve had to deal with. One of my predecessors left some very exasperated notes about a particular Grandmaster when he was much younger."

Grinning, Mace aimed a finger at her as he turned to go. "I want to see those, sometime."

"Patient-Healer confidentiality, dear," she returned smugly.

When he returned to the quarters he shared with his Padawan, the lights in the main room were out and everything was lit by the soft blue glow of a holoprojector. Ghostly stars and planets circled each other in increased time lapse.

Three young voices and a Wookiee growl complained at the brief intrusion of the brighter corridor lighting, and he chuckled as he pulled his boots off. "Sorry."

Ferus, Asajj, Tiiritakkia, and Sarrissa were sprawled on the floor between pieces of furniture along with a scattering of datapads and a tray of snacks filched from the commissary. Mace squinted at the display. "Astrogation? Or astrophysics?"

"Astrophysics," Ferus said as he paused the display. "It’s more comfortable here than in the Star Map Room. And we can have drinks."

Asajj snorted. "You can have drinks in the Star Map Room."

Unseen in the dimness, one of Mace’s eyebrows rose. Before he could comment, Tiiri chuckled. [[Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.]]

"If it keeps you from driving the cleaning droids crazy over a sticky floor, by all means continue using our sitting room to study." Mace stole a cookie from the tray and went into his room where he could review the fallout from the Barlok mess without disturbing the teens further.

News of Passel Argente’s assassination had reached Coruscant and the Senate almost before it had reached Mace’s inbox. The Corporate Alliance and its numerous allies had been quick to accuse the Jedi Order of being involved -- or at least, standing back doing nothing to protect their late Magistrate. There was some sympathy for Jorus C’baoth’s injuries, but there was confusion regarding how he’d received them -- most of the rumours suggested Master C’baoth had incurred them in trying to save the Magistrate’s life, and Mace was content to let those run.

Qui-Gon’s report suggested the second assassin had been there specifically for Master C’baoth, which was yet another completely different concern that Mace did not need on top of everything else. Who would hire a bounty hunter to kill a Jedi Master?

Particularly a Jedi Master who was well-known with deep political connections that gave the Council collective headaches?

The ‘why’ was a relatively simple question: either someone didn’t like that C’baoth had political connections, or they didn’t like his influence upon those connections. Vos and Secura’s report suggested Dark side influence, most likely Sith. Which suggested the Sith Master had hired the assassins--
He pulled up the file Vos had sent him. The knife the assassin had dropped, steeped in Darkness, had been crafted by the assassin, specifically for that purpose. Which meant at least one of the assassins had been some level of Sith acolyte. Mace doubted an acolyte would take a shot at a Jedi just for the fun of it. If there was a Sith connection, the Master had to have ordered it.

Jinn had been incredibly cautious with his information. It had taken Mace a long time -- years -- to wheedle from him the detail that Obi-Wan Kenobi had learned the chosen name of the Sith Master, that the exiled former Padawan had come to Coruscant specifically to tell Jinn that, and that Kenobi worried that former Master Yan Dooku might be at risk of the Sith Master’s influence. Jinn had sworn Mace to absolute secrecy; so far, the only other person he’d told was An-chul, the Master of Shadows. It would have been nice of Kenobi to have let Mace in on those particular secrets, but given how their last meeting had ended, he couldn’t really blame the boy.

Man. Kenobi might have been twenty when he’d left the Jedi, but that had been five years ago. Wherever he’d disappeared to, Kenobi was definitely an adult. Mace could only hope Kenobi hadn’t found as much trouble as he had as a Padawan. Someone with that track record must surely want a break.

Sidious. Whoever Sidious was, they were on Coruscant, by Kenobi’s guess, and interfering with Republic politics, possibly even the Supreme Chancellor himself, given Vos and Secura’s earlier report to the Master of Shadows on Greejatus’ assassination.

Had that only happened fourteen days ago?

It felt like there was some secret war being carried out in the shadows between opposing forces.

Speaking of interference with the Republic….

Mace opened another document: Jocasta Nu’s report on the thing she and some visiting friends had stumbled across when touring the ancient remains of the Temple a month and a half previous. They hadn’t ventured beyond the hidden door, due to an overwhelming miasma of Darkness, but she’d detailed the method by which her friend had noticed it, and how to get there. Mace refused to let anyone else investigate further until he’d checked it himself. Madame Nu had done substantial research after the fact, and turned up massive gaps in the archives which should not have been there. They had no idea what the Temple was sitting on top of -- guarding, perhaps? -- and all reference links led to corrupted data errors. There was no way that was a coincidence.

There were too many missing pieces. He felt badly about keeping everything to himself -- he hadn’t even told Master Yoda -- but Kenobi had never been the sort to exaggerate his concerns. The Council was too close to the Senate, and the Senate was too close to the Sith Master. Somehow. An-chul needed that information to conduct her work; until she had a report to present and a direction to point in, the secrecy was necessary. She even kept information from Mace -- at his own request, because he was also too close to the Senate.

It was frustrating to know the source of their problems was hiding somewhere right in front of them.
Lord Sidious always did find the most amusing torments. If Sheyvan kept thinking of it that way, he might even start to believe it.

His gut was cramping with hunger; worse was the unbearable dryness in his throat, his tongue swollen in his mouth. He had no idea how long it had been since he’d been left on the arid wasteland rock on the edge of the Outer Rim, with neither food nor water, instructed only to survive if he could. Days had passed, but he had no way of knowing the planet’s rotational period. The planet was dead: no water, no life, not even tufts of dessicated grass. Only echoes remained like ghosts in the Force. Everything had been boiled away by the local star going nova aeons past; now reduced to a faded dwarf, it cast barely more light than a moon.

It was a punishment, of course, not training. Sheyvan had failed to kill the old Jedi Master on Barlok as he had been commanded. No, as they had been commanded: Caliiga had been given the same order. She remained at their Lord’s side, still in favour after offing Argente in a positively banal fashion. There had been no artistry to it, no skill.

His rage seethed in his chest. Rage at himself, for his failure. Rage at Caliiga for doing nothing more. Rage at their Master for the unjust punishment.

His rage was the only reason he was able to remain upright in the hazy shadow of a rock overhang. Lord Pyrrha had taught him how to sustain himself through the Dark Side -- oh, it wouldn’t last forever, a body would still eventually give out. But the most skilled practitioners had at one time been able to survive months of privation by meditating on the Dark Side.

There were two other people he had nearly forgotten, and Sheyvan turned his thoughts to that idiot boy, the one whom Caliiga had needed to lead away, the one they weren’t allowed to touch, per their Master’s orders. He’d had the nerve to march right up and join them; only Sheyvan’s immense control over his own presence in the Force had prevented the kid from noticing anything wrong. At least Caliiga had had some fun.

C’baoth…. The rage flared again. Who would have predicted the old Wookiee of a human would reach for the Dark in his final moments? How dare he! Sheyvan’s parched throat still ached from being nearly crushed; it was a miracle being thrown into the wall hadn’t broken his spine. He’d been fortunate the old man had reacted on instinct rather than intent.

Something scuffed the bare rock beyond his natural shelter; when he peeled his eyes open, it felt like his corneas were being abraded.

Beyond the rock ledge, his Master stood, a shape of infinite blackness on the baked salt flats.

“You have earned your reprieve, my Hand.”

There wasn’t enough spit left in Sheyvan’s mouth to form words. He stared with dark, burning eyes at his Master as the Sith Lord continued, “C’baoth’s Fall has cost him everything he worked for.” He chuckled with the sort of Sith Lord humour that ends in public hangings. “Moreover, his outspoken belief that the Sith were involved -- a myth! How sad -- has utterly ruined his credit with the Senate. I have you to thank for that.”

The smile disappeared. In the shadow of his cowl, the older man’s eyes glittered like flint. “Get up,” he snarled.

Forcing his tortured joints into movement seared his nerves; Sheyvan dug hard into that reserve of rage, of hatred at the man for whom he held absolute loyalty, for his Master’s lack of sympathy. It
was a struggle to rise smoothly without staggering, but he would display no weakness before his Master. One foot in front of the other, he followed Darth Sidious back to his ship, where Caliiga and Maul waited on guard at the ramp.

Chapter End Notes

TW for minor ableist language in the last section.

Yep, Outbound Flight is toast. I know some of you were looking forward to that, but a lot of priorities have shifted. I have a LOT of issues with the novel, primarily the completely nonsensical plot, and if you've seen me ranting about Legends vs Expanded Universe on Tumblr in the last couple weeks, this was the cause of it.
Previously:
After a thought-provoking conversation with Obi-Wan Kenobi on Outland Transit Station, Jango Fett decides to reconnect with the remaining True Mandalorians and reclaim his role as Mand'alor.

Chapter Notes
Beta credits to norcumi, DragonHoardsBooks, sanerontheinside, and cuzosu

Reformation Year 980.10.13
Outland Transit Station II

Hy Zozo I hop yu ar gud. We so a big big fiss yesrda and bur ses is cold a mee...

Zohli grinned and tried to parse Boba’s spelling, which it seemed the computer had given up trying to fix, or possibly the kid had deactivated the spelling corrector because he thought he knew better. It had been funny the first few times getting text messages from a five-year old, but now they were messaging back and forth regularly. It was kind of nice to have someone to actually share stories with, someone who didn’t know all the stories already.

She’d been a little worried, at first -- Boba’s dad was kind of intimidating, even if he was generally nice to her -- but At’tha had said it was sweet.

“From what I understand, Boba doesn’t have a lot of friends. If it makes you uncomfortable, we can always say so to his buir.”

He probably wouldn’t mind having an excuse to talk to Mister Fett, anyway, and she’d said so, teasing. At’tha had actually blushed, opened his mouth to reply, then sighed. “No, I wouldn’t mind having an excuse to talk to him, but I can’t just comm Jango out of the blue to catch up.”

“Why not? You seem to have a lot to talk about.”

Bastra had sat down beside her on the bench seat in the lounge and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Zoh had leaned in happily: he always tried to let her know when she asked awkward questions that he wasn’t upset at her about it. “Jango has expressed a bit of dislike for me. I did involve myself in his business a few times, in ways he found uncomfortable, and I didn’t ask permission. So that’s all on me, not him.”

“But you like him.”
He’d tightened his arm a bit and given that soft laugh that meant it wasn’t really happy and he was regretting something he’d done. “I like him. I want to get to know him better. But I promised to leave him be unless it was unavoidable. He doesn’t mind Boba wanting to be friends with you, so it’s alright.”

Now Zoh drummed her fingers on the edge of her datapad and wondered if there was some way to get Mister Fett less angry at her father. Bastra would spend the occasional night with someone -- sometimes Hondo when they were on Florrum, sometimes just someone he met at one of their stops for supplies and work. She didn’t really understand it, but it usually happened when he seemed to be feeling overwhelmed or lonely. In the holos, the characters always tried to find a person or people who made them less lonely, and then they’d… well, the holos never got past pretty bonding ceremonies. That was always where it ended, with the implication that the characters being together made everything alright from then on.

She wasn’t naive enough to believe that, nothing could ever be completely perfect forever with no problems at all. Case in point: they were currently docked at Outland II for repairs after tangling with Cavik Toth and his buddies in Radnor. Even though she had a family that loved her now, they still got into trouble.

Sometimes they argued. Everyone had a habit that got on someone else’s nerves, and the close quarters in the Sunflare could make things… tetchy. At’tha would leave half-finished mugs of tea or caf around and it drove Feid nuts; Pulkka hated anyone messing with the tool kits because she had a system where everything could be easily located. Deesix’s snark could be grating, especially when Zoh was having trouble with something in her advanced coursework or when she was trying to fix things. Sometimes she just had so much energy that it was too much for everyone, and then At’tha would pull her to the cargo hold for a training session until she felt like a limp noodle. It was hard to tell what irritated At’tha, but she could tell when he needed a break because he’d meditate more often.

In fact, the only person who didn’t bother someone else at least once a week was Ulic, and that was because he could just disappear back into his crystal; and even he was on edge, probably because he hated being tied to his rock. He still hadn’t said he was ready to go to Rhen Var, and Bastra was adamant that it had to be Ulic’s choice.

So she knew that having a life partner wouldn’t magically solve everything. When she’d asked why he accepted the occasional offers of intimacy, At’tha had sat down with her and explained how to be responsible with casual relationships -- implants for fertility control, making sure a partner wasn’t feeling pressured or trapped, warning signs to watch out for. It felt a little early to discuss such things, but he’d reminded her that she had the right to make her own choices, even at thirteen, and that having information too early was better than having it too late or not at all.

True, people didn’t always get along, and there didn’t have to be any good reason for it -- there could be loads of good reasons why Mister Fett wasn’t fond of Bastra. But the way they’d been interacting at the arcade all those months back had been more like… like Feid and Bastra sometimes interacted, when they were teasing each other and pretending to be offended by it. Those times usually ended with them sparring in the cargo hold and laughing as they threw each other around the room. Boba’s dad could have easily left the arcade, if he was that upset at spending time with Bastra.

So. Maybe he was making excuses. He liked Bastra, but didn’t want to be around him? It was hard to imagine someone like Mister Fett being scared of spending time around someone, but….

Zohli frowned, remembering how wary she’d been when Bastra and Phel had rescued her -- how suspicious she’d been over every hug and gesture of kindness, wondering when it would be turned
around into pain.

How much she had hoped it was real, how afraid she had been that it might be a lie.

And there was Boba’s dad, enjoying spending time with someone -- anyone! -- but not wanting to admit it, even to himself.

Biting her lower lip, Zoh opened a reply window and started to type.

Every time he returned to Outland, Roz had slapped more neon on the exterior. Jango grinned at the latest addition, a holographic cartoon that had Boba pointing in excitement. His son had spent most of the trip from Kamino singing half-remembered teaching songs he’d learned from some of the kids on Mandalore; he’d tried sharing them with the cadets who were at his level, but Jango wasn’t sure how well the concepts had stuck.

It was giving him ideas, though. The Kaminiiwen weren’t thrilled with the clones being ‘too Mandalorian’ but there was nothing wrong with dropping the teaching songs into the creche materials.

Boba’s little datapad -- a sturdy, brightly-coloured thing that had just enough processing power to send and receive messages and access parent-locked HoloNet material -- lit up with a happy chime, and the kiddo cheered. “It’s Zozo! She wrote back!”

Zohli had been sharing lots of stories, which Jango was pretty certain had been heavily sanitised, about the kinds of people and places she had seen with Bastra. Boba loved all of them and even tried to read a few out loud, although he was still slow at it. The constant contact was good for his reading comprehension, and his vocabulary was getting better.

He surrendered guidance to the docking computers just as Boba tugged his sleeve. “Buir, Zo says they’re on the station right now because their ship got shot. Can we go see them?”

“You can, with Auntie Roz,” he conceded. “Remember I have work to do?”

“Oh.” Boba’s face fell, then brightened. “Zoh says her buir wants to be your friend! Maybe her buir can help you!”

Even though that wasn’t particularly a subject he wanted to consider -- but you did work well together, a treacherous part of his brain whispered -- Jango had to laugh. “Not this time, ad’ika. It’s a really quick job, I’ll be back before you realise I was gone.”

“You said that last time but it was two weeks,” his son grumped.

“You didn’t have fun staying with ba’vodu Neve?” After the first time taking Boba to see Keldabe, he’d started alternating between leaving Boba with Roz, who spoilt him rotten, and Neve, who was happy to throw Boba in among the packs of semi-feral kids she kept half an eye on. The Mando’adikë had been introducing Boba to all the childhood games and lore adults tended to forget about.

“Well, yeah, but I missed you. When can I go with you?”
A quick side glance showed that Boba had his best pout on. It was so kriffing adorable. “Remember when I let you hold my blaster, Bob’ika? Remember how heavy it is? You have to be able to hold it properly and shoot on target before you can come with me, because my job is dangerous.”

“But Ordo can do that and he’s younger than me!” Boba protested.

“Ordo is also a cadet and he grew up twice as fast as you, son.” The hangar guidance set the Slave I down gently with barely a bump, and Jango rolled out of his chair to kneel in front of his son at eye level, resting his elbows on the chair arm. This was important. “Look, you can’t expect yourself to always be at the same level as everyone else. We all learn at different speeds. Some people the same age as you will always be behind, and some will always be ahead. That’s just normal. You focus on growing and learning at your own speed, don’t worry about your vodë.” Cort had been right about that: Boba was starting to notice the developmental difference, and the last thing Jango wanted was for his kid to feel less than adequate because of how his siblings had been raised.

Roz was waiting for them at Jango’s apartment. She grinned and patted Boba on the shoulder when he hugged her. “Got that intel for you, honey, it’s on the ‘pad.”

While Boba chattered happily about his new friends on Mandalore, Jango studied what Roz had dug up. He’d picked up a live-capture contract on Maak Ta’hoa, a scammer and con artist who had picked the wrong target and fleeced the elderly grandparent of some cartel hotshot. The details weren’t important. The human woman had quickly figured out that she’d ticked someone off and gone to ground under a series of aliases, gorg-hopping her way across the galaxy seemingly at random.

The job hadn’t been worth the effort of trying to physically track her down; Roz merely had to crack the pattern of Ta’hoa’s aliases. Her last known location had been a small settlement on Balamak, a mid-rim agrarian world. The local population was mostly human, originally from a group whose founders had aspired to a simpler, ‘more natural’ way of life. They were friendly and Republic-aligned, but a little backwards. The Balamakan government refused to harbor offworld fugitives, so Jango could count on them to not get in his way--

He got to the second page and swore softly.

Roz’s sharp hearing caught it. "You noticed the problem, eh?"

"She's Balamakan?"

"Fifty-fifty odds they won't protect her because the trouble she pulled is from offworld. But no guarantees."

Jango chewed his knuckle thoughtfully. He could comm what they had for a security force and ask about the policy, and risk them shutting him down, or he could go in without asking and beg forgiveness if they took offense. If they took offense, things might get sticky: Balamak had a primitive penal code.

Going in quiet and trying to get the job done with a minimum of violence sounded like the best option. Balamakans were very socially oriented, and Roz had included a dossier on the community Ta’hoa was hiding in; if he could get a couple of them on his side, it would probably work.

Roz cackled. “I know that look.”

He’d always hated doing the diplomacy-talky-peopley thing. He was good at it, but that didn’t mean he enjoyed it. That was Bastra’s deal. Jango grimaced. “Not looking forward to this, that’s all. Three
day transit time isn’t too bad, should have this wrapped up in under a week.”

He knelt and hugged his son, curling his fingers into Boba's unruly dark hair, then pressed their foreheads together. "Neve taught you this, right?"

"Sharing breath?" Boba broke any potential solemnity by giggling. "Stinky!"

Jango grinned. "Maybe sometimes. But it means something. Do you remember?"

Boba frowned. "Breath is… life?"

"Right. So sharing breath means?" Old lessons, handed down by birth parents Jango barely remembered. You know what it means, son, don't you?"

"It means we share life!"

"Close." He grinned and pressed a kiss to Boba's forehead. "I give you a bit of my life, and you give me a bit of yours in exchange."

"Because we're family!" Boba bounced on his toes, excited by his knowledge.

"Exactly. Now, I have to fly for three days to get where I'm going, so…?"

Boba's little face screwed up in concentration. "Six days?"

"Plus a few days to do my work." He stood and ruffled those thick curls. "I won't be more than ten days, if everything goes well."

Boba sighed and wrapped himself around Jango’s armoured leg. “You promise?”

It was a mistake, but he still said, “Absolutely promise. While I’m gone, you could see if Zohli’s people are still here.”

His son brightened instantly. “Yeah! Zozo’s here!” He scampered off to the apartment’s comms terminal while Jango and Roz shared an amused glance.

“If he wants to spend time with Bastra’s kid, it’s fine.”

Roz shook her wings out with a grin. “Figured.”

Balamak was nice, in a way that reminded Jango of Mandalore's northern settlements. The pattern of fields formed a riotous patchwork across the landscape around Dorum, which only counted as urban in terms of its population size. The majority of the buildings were house-sized and -shaped, and what they had for a spaceport was a network of actual masonry enclosures around a single control tower barely twice the height of the tallest house.

A battered astromech droid was waiting when he opened the hatch. It twittered to itself a moment, then a scratchy, warbling audio recording blared, "THANK YOU FOR BRINGING YOUR TRADE TO BALAMAK. TO ACQUIRE A TRADE PERMIT OR ASSESSMENT TO REMAIN, PLEASE VISIT THE DORUM ADMINISTRATION BUILDING, ACROSS THE PLAZA FROM THE SPACEPORT ENTRANCE. THE KEY TO YOUR BERTH HAS BEEN PRE-SET; PLEASE
RETURN IT TO THE NEAREST DROID BEFORE YOU DEPART." A slot opened at the front of
the droid's dome and an electronic card popped out partway. "THIS UNIT WILL PROVIDE GUIDANCE
AROUND THE SPACEPORT FACILITY. WHERE DO YOU WISH TO GO: THE ADMIN
BUILDING, SPACEPORT SECURITY, BALAMAK PUBLIC DEFENSE ADMINISTRATION,
THE TRADE DISTRICT, SPEEDER RENTAL--"

"Speeder rental," he said quickly.

"PLEASE FOLLOW ME."

It was just as well they had droids giving tours; there were no signs anywhere other than berth
numbers, and the walls were all painted a uniform white, with unbleached fabric awnings stretched
across the path to provide shade. The astromech stuck close, and if he went in a different direction, it
would squawk another pre-recorded, "PLEASE FOLLOW ME," repeatedly until he did.

At least the droid in charge of speeder rentals was a protocol unit, no less battered and with a sour
personality. "Welcome, visitor," it muttered flatly. "If you will please tell me your destination, I will
prepare a suitable vehicle for your journey."

"I'm going to Jurgunsrae."

The droid hesitated. "Jurgunsrae is three thousand, six hundred fifty-eight point three-four kilometers
south-southeast of here. You would be better served by hiring a local skimmer pilot to take you
there."

Of course she would find someplace inconvenient to go. "Are there regulations against flying my
starship there?"

Despite its immobile features, the droid somehow managed to give him a glare as if he were being
deliberately obtuse. "Yes. The governors of Balamak wish to maintain as low a technology profile as
possible. Starships contribute twenty times more to exhaust pollution per kilometer traveled than
Balamak's redesigned skimmers."

Jango nodded reluctantly. "Can I ask an unrelated question? If they want a low tech profile, why is
the spaceport staffed by droids?"

The droid turned away to fuss with a terminal. "The skills needed to use and maintain starship
equipment are taught at only one higher education facility on Balamak, typically to citizens who have
made the choice to move offworld, due to the overall lack of sufficient funds for otherwise paying for
passage."

He was really starting to hate his planet. Jango thanked the droid and turned back to his astromech
guide. "Can you direct me to the hireable skimmer pilots?"

When he asked about passage to Jurgunsrae, the dark-skinned young woman behind the counter
gave him an incredulous once-over. "No offense to you personally, but why would someone like
you want to go that far out?"

"I have business there."
She pulled a face and opened an actual physical logbook. "Mighty rude of your business to put you out that much."

"It's because they're rude that I'm going."

That drew a laugh, at least. "Only one on shift today is Kalaan. Are you going to want him to wait to give you a ride back, too?"

Jango shrugged. "It might take a couple days. I'm guessing I can hire someone there for a ride back?"

"Can, but they'll charge you more, and their skimmers aren't designed for the long haul." She handed over a piece of real paper with rates printed on it. "The pilot can wait for you for up to a week -- that's six days here, by the way -- at the additional cost of room and board at the local public house."

The cost was significantly less than Jango had been expecting, but he didn’t say so. He produced a number of local credit coins, obtained thanks to Roz's exchange services, and paid the cost of the initial flight out. "Rest to be paid on return, yeah?"

The woman nodded. "Used to charge up front, but paying people back for overage was a hassle."

Kalaan was an older man with his silvering tight curls twisted into small knots around his head. He never seemed to stop grinning, even while talking, and showed off his skimmer with pride. It was a long-bodied craft with four wings and three mechanically-powered propellers. The main compartment was big enough to fit a pair of speeders, and folding seats along the walls could accommodate up to ten passengers. "Usually we offer ear protection, 'cause the motors can get pretty loud. But, uh, I'm guessing your helmet there is good for that?" He gestured to the buy'ce Jango had tucked under his arm to put the locals at ease.

"It's good for it, yeah."

The trip took a total of five hours -- Kalaan explained that a straight shot would be closer to three and a half, but they had to make a detour through a mountain pass because none of the local skimmers were designed for higher altitudes. "We've been trying, but there were too many fatalities in the test flights. These days, if they catch someone making an attempt, the pilots get arrested and assigned to different work."

"Arrested by whom?"

"Balamak Public Defense." Kalaan shrugged. "I think it’s an extreme reaction -- if kids want to risk their lives innovating, it’s their business. We sure could use that innovation, if you ask me. But they take preserving future generations seriously."

More like keeping the kids from fleeing into the rest of the galaxy, but Jango kept his opinion to himself.

Jurgunsrae didn’t have roads so much as it had well-worn paths between the spread of buildings. Kalaan set the skimmer down in a grass-patched field that didn’t appear to have enough space for a takeoff, declaring it adequate. The “public house” was a building which looked like it had started life as a small farmhouse a few generations previous and been added on to every other decade until it sprawled through the centre of the village like an amoeba.

"Seems a bit oversized for a town this scale?"

Kalaan shook his head. "Seasonal workers need somewhere to stay. The bigger a public house needs to be, the better the local economy is."
Jango started a tab and left Kalaan settled at the bar, sharing gossip with the staff. The late afternoon was pleasant -- lightly overcast but not with any sense of impending rain, the temperature comfortable for the end of local winter -- and he removed his buy'ce again as he walked, listening to the sounds of home industry. The sharp chok of splitting firewood, rhythmic clacking from an actual wind-powered mill, the clink of metal from a workshop -- it brought back old memories, childhood memories from Concord Dawn.

He tugged a tasseled rope hanging by one door, setting off a cheerful bell inside the house. A woman old enough to be his grandmother opened the door, craning her neck to look up at him. "Can I help you?"

Jango put an apologetic smile on. "Good afternoon, ma'am. Are you Taiyo Ta'hoa?"

Despite her wary study of his armour, the woman cracked a grin full of strong white teeth. "Oh, bless, no. Taiyo's my daughter. I'm Kyah. What brings an offworlder to our doorstep?"

"I'm afraid I have to speak with your granddaughter, Maak." He grimaced sympathetically. "She caused some trouble offworld, and I've been sent to bring her back."

Kyah scowled and thumped the end of her walking stick on the floor. "I knew something was up with that girl. When she left home, she vowed she was never coming back. Said some downright unpleasant things to her father, too. Ten years later she’s back claiming the big galaxy was too big for her! Far as I’m concerned, she should have accepted that choice and dealt with it." She peered at Jango. "You don’t look like the sort of man who shows up at old ladies’ doors merely to talk, though."

He shook his head. “Sometimes the people I’m looking for don’t want to face justice, ma'am. I have to be prepared for anything. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather let your community decide how to handle this situation. My employer won’t be pleased if I come back without Maak, but it’s better than upending everything here."

“Well, I appreciate that.” Her head bobbed as if it were too heavy for her skinny neck. “Maak isn’t here right now -- she went with her parents and some of the hands to the next town over. What are your plans, hunter man?"

“I’ll be staying at the public house here until my pilot’s time runs out in six days. If you and the rest of your people here can decide on a course of action within the week, it’d be much appreciated.” He hesitated. “Preferably sooner, I promised my son I wouldn’t be away too long.”

Mention of having a family was all it took to open the door; Jango ended up sitting with Kyah and her neighbour Leksa, who had wandered over to investigate the offworlder, chatting over a pot of tea until the sun began to set. He was just beginning to make his apologies when the door opened.

“Mother? Who is this?"

Controlling his reaction, Jango glanced over and nodded to the three people standing there, very obviously Kyah's daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter, Maak. Kyah laid her hand over his where it rested on the table and said, "This gentleman is here looking for Maak. She has some explaining to do, don't you, dear?"

Maak Ta'hoa, very nearly Jango's age and poised between fight and flight, snapped, "You just let someone like that into our house?!"

Kyah's hand patted his once before withdrawing. "Hunter Fett has agreed to let us handle this matter
our own way, Maak. Haven't you?" She squinted at him, and he nodded easily.

"I'm not here to disrupt your way of life any more than necessary; I understand how important community is here." Collecting his buy'ce, Jango rose and bowed politely to Kyah and Leksa, who looked positively thrilled to be witness to the drama. "I should leave you to talk in privacy. You know where I'll be."

The public house was now full of migrant farmhands who had come to help prepare the region for planting, and once they moved past their wariness of the newcomer, they were cheerfully irreverent. Jango let himself get drawn into a low-stakes game of cards -- it was pazaak, although they didn't call it that, and it had some alternative rules -- and swapping stories. His willingness to socialise made him popular, and it reminded him of Keldabe.

It reminded him of a place he hadn't known since he was eight.

Maak's father, Shevv, came around a bit later to let him know the community would be gathering the next evening to discuss Maak's behaviour. Jango gave him the full list of what she had proveably done -- the salacious hearsay wasn't likely to get taken as seriously as the swindling of vulnerable elderly retirees -- along with receipts. The older man looked disgruntled about the entire situation, and Jango couldn't blame him.

It almost felt too easy.

When Jango entered the main room the next morning, there were already a number of people having breakfast or talking over carafes of something local that wasn't quite caf. Some of the workers he recognized from the evening before, but the public house seemed to take a great deal of traffic from the locals as well. He was served some kind of stew on a piece of flatbread, and was nearly done when two men sat down to either side of him at the bar. A quick glance showed some sort of metal badge clipped into the breast pockets of their jackets: some level of law enforcement.

"Morning, Hunter."

So that was how it was going to be. Jango nodded and sipped his not-caf. "Morning. What can I do for you?"

The one who'd spoken, a short, bearded man who looked like he could deadlift a speeder, had the grace to look apologetic. "'Fraid I'm going to have to ask you to come with us to answer some questions."

Jango nodded again -- he'd figured as much. "Mind if I finish this, first?"

"As long as you don't mind us keeping you company."

He could handle this the easy way, but it was unlikely the locals would then willingly let him take his target offworld. It was ridiculous, but at the same time there wasn't much choice. "Not at all. How's the day treating you?"

The other man, taller but rail-thin, spoke up. "Let's keep the conversation to a minimum, shall we?"

Shrugging, Jango finished his breakfast and let them lead him outside to where three others were
waiting. They did a good job making the group not look like a security escort on the short walk to
the Jurgunsrae administration building. Jango paused once everyone was inside and the door closed
before saying quietly, “I notice you let me keep my weapons.”

The skinny one gave him a narrow look. “Figured you might start a scene if we didn’t.”

“Will you tell me what this is about?”

The bearded man leaned his hip on the front of the desk. “Second-sheriff Tcali Gadon,” he said by
way of introduction. “Balamak PDA has been on the lookout for you for a while, Hunter. We got a
tip from an unidentified source that you were poking around here. After what you did in Mekksburr,
we didn’t want to waste time.”

Jango resisted the urge to cover his eyes with his hand. “I’ve never been to Balamak before.”

“That remains to be seen,” Gadon said levelly. “Until we’ve finished our investigation, we’re going
to have to ask you to disarm. Those armguards, too, we know what you loaded them up with.”

This was getting better by the moment. “Am I being detained, Second-sheriff?”

“For purposes of keeping our people safe, yes. Are you going to resist?”

Jango studied the man, mentally cataloguing where the others were in the room. If he tried to fight
his way out, he would definitely succeed.

Then he’d be stranded in the back-end of nowhere, unless he felt up to stealing a skimmer he was
only marginally certain he could pilot himself, and a village full of carnage if he wanted to try to
force the issue with Maak. It would be an intergalactic incident, and while Jango had a reputation as
a good fighter and a deadly hunter, he was not a murderer.

The situation was not in his favour. Carefully, he set his buy’ce on the desk beside Gadon and hit the
clips to detach his vambraces. “No.”

Gadon was not the officer in charge at Jurgunsrae; that role belonged to the skinny man, Third-
sheriff Deilun Paark. Gadon had flown in via skimmer that morning from Dorum, prepared to handle
the entire situation personally, which Paark was only too happy to leave in his hands.

Jango had been allowed to keep his jumpsuit and underlayer. He gave the officers enough local
credits to pay his tab at the public house and see Kalaan on his way home with a significant bonus,
after which he was delivered to a modest lockup room. It was quaint and could be considered
comfortable by the standards of most prisons in Jango’s experience; there was even a thin mattress on
the bunk.

They didn’t leave him for very long; a pair of Paark’s deputies escorted him to an unmistakable
interview room where Gadon was waiting.

Before Jango had even got comfortable in the hard wooden chair, Gadon said, “The only reason
you’re not being handed the full weight of the law right now is because it’s been reported that you’ve
had no interest in violence since your arrival. Given the massacre in Mekksburr two years ago, I was
sceptical, but people here have corroborated what the skimmer agent and pilot told us.”
Jango studied the other man quietly, unwilling to say anything that could be misconstrued until he had a better picture of the situation.

“So I’ve got a few questions to ask you, and it’d help us all a lot if you’d answer them truthfully.” He opened a paper folder and looked over a printed report. “Says here you gave your name as ‘Jango Fett,’ which is why our system didn’t notice your arrival immediately. You claim this to be your real name?”

“I do.”

“Do you have any identification to back that up?”

Jango sighed. “What would you consider valid identification? I have my hunter’s license, piloting certification, basic ID--”

“With you?”

“Get one of your boys to bring my belt in, I’ll point to the right pocket.”

One of the deputies left. Gadon flipped the page. “While we’re waiting on that, you’re here to bring a local offworld for justice?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You think we’d just hand someone over to you?”

Shrugging, Jango twitched to find a position where the back of the chair wasn’t digging into his spine. “I thought I would leave that to her community here to decide.”

“You didn’t think to come immediately to the PDA about this instead?”

_Tread carefully._ “In my experience, local security isn’t considered a part of the community. The community tells the security what to do, not the other way around.”

Gadon gave him an odd look. “Your experience?”

There was a window in the wall to his right, secured with metal bars and too small for a grown adult to climb through, but the fields beyond the village were just visible. Jango tilted his head towards it. “Grew up on an agriworld like this. Our security was called the Journeyman Protectors. My father was one… for a while.” _Until Death Watch killed him._

A reluctant smile was tugging Gadon’s cheek. “Well, your experience is right. What agriworld?”

“Concord Dawn, Mandalorian sector.”

That earned him a heavy stare. “We hear rumours about Mandalorians being dangerous.”

“Depends what kind of Mandalorian you’re talking about. It’s a culture.”

Paark’s deputy returned with Jango’s entire cuirass. “Sorry, couldn’t figure out how to detach the belt.”

Jango stopped himself short of a laugh. “There are catches on the sides and back, but that’s the pocket you want,” he said, pointing to one of the smaller pouches.

The deputy looked baffled at the holograms on the ident cards. “That’s some pretty fancy work.”
Deadpan, Jango suggested, “Squeeze the edges. Yeah, like that.” The full hologram projected out of the front of the card and the deputy dropped it with a yip of surprise.

Gadon scowled at him across the table. “And how are we supposed to know these are real?”

“Why did you ask for them if you didn’t know how to identify a real holo from a faked one?”

The man’s jaw clenched as he picked the card up and squeezed it again, turning the holo off. “We have HoloNet access; it’s just not widely used. In what way are you not one of the dangerous Mandalorians?”

Jango grinned and folded his hands on the table. “Oh, I’m definitely one of the dangerous Mandalorians. I wouldn’t be any good at my job if I wasn’t. But I follow a code. There are Mandalorians who don’t follow that code. Some of them are pacifists.” It was a struggle to keep the disdain from his voice. “Others, well.” He scowled. “They’re the ones who killed my parents and sister. The ones who kill people just for standing in their way.”

“The sort who cause massacres on low-tech worlds?”

Jango nodded. “You can tell by the emblems on our armour.” He pointed to the design on his right pauldron, newly-painted on the last trip to Keldabe. “That’s the Protectors, in memory of my dad and the man who adopted and raised me after. The other one--” he pointed to the other pauldron-- “is the symbol of the True Mandalorians, those who follow the code.”

Gadon was staring at him. With careful deliberation, the Second-sheriff pulled a blank piece of paper from the back of the file, took the writing implement from where it rested on top of his ear, and sketched something. “What’s this one?”

It looked something like a three-pronged fork, long jagged points rising upwards, with three shorter spikes underneath. Jango sucked air between his teeth. “That’s the Kyr’tsad, and they’re no True Mandalorians. In Basic, they’re called the Death Watch, and they aspire to full conquest of the galaxy. Some of them take jobs as bounty hunters, like we do, but their methods….”

“Death Watch?” Gadon looked alarmed as he wrote the name down beside the drawing. “I’m starting to think we have you wrong, Hunter Fett. All we have is a description of the armour, which I’m sad to say looks very like your own--”

“It’s called beskar’gam, it’s a style common to Mandalorian culture.”

“The other hunter never showed his face, although the name given at the spaceport was Sev Garohe.”

The name didn’t mean anything to Jango, but that wasn’t a surprise.

The attitude from both deputies and Gadon had done a complete shift. “I think we can let you get on with your business here, but you’ll have to place a call to your next of kin before we can release you.”

Jango blinked. “I’m sorry?”

Gadon gave him an apologetic smile. “Because you were detained legally, we can only release you to a member of your family. Even a distant cousin will suffice, as long as they’re a legal adult and can identify you.”

“Is that a custom, or a law?”
One of the deputies shrugged. “Law. Been on the books for at least ten generations.”

What had happened to make something like that a necessity? Jango grimaced and sighed. “Alright. If you have a signal booster, I can use my own comm and spare you the cost.”

He was relieved when Roz answered almost immediately.

“*Time is money, who’s this?*”

“Heya Roz.”

“*Jango, honey, you wouldn’t be calling from an unlisted code unless something went to shit. What’s up?*”

He sighed. “I found Ta’hoa easy enough, but there’s a complication. Someone -- I’m guessing it was Ta’hhoa trying to get me off her case, but could have been anyone -- reported me as a Death Watch member who killed a bunch of people a while back.”

“*Seen one set of beskar’gam, you’ve seen ‘em all, huh?*”

“Basically.”

Roz’s gleeful cackle echoed tinnily on the comm. “*You got arrested, didn’t you?*”

He scrubbed his hand over his face. It wasn’t the worst day of his life, not by a long shot, but it wasn’t fun either. “Officially detained, yeah. Local law says I can only be released to next of kin.”

“*Oh, that puts a damper on things.*”

“Yeah, just a little. They’re all a bit spread out right now--” *nonexistent--* “but I know you can get ahold of someone. Preferably not too shifty.” Zam was the only person he knew of who could look close enough to be mistaken for a relative; she’d used his face once, with permission, on the threat of *never again*. But he was willing to make an exception this time.

“I’ll see who I can get ahold of.” *Message received.*

They signed off and Jango accepted the remainder of his gear from Gadon. He wasn’t allowed to leave the Admin Building’s security block or the private courtyard in the centre, but they made exceptions as a way of apologising for the indignity.

The next few days passed slowly. As he usually did during long flights and other periods where he wasn’t allowed freedom of movement, Jango went back to his daily routine of working out, reading, and -- in moments of extreme boredom -- indulging in the electronic puzzle game he’d originally loaded onto his datapad to make sure it was at Boba’s level.

He really missed having his son around.

Paark, Gadon, and the deputies Tullyn and Ha, were reasonable company. Gadon -- stuck in Jurgunsrae himself until someone collected Jango -- was eager to learn more about other worlds and how they compared to Balamak. Jango did his best, although Gadon clearly didn’t think very highly of more urban and built-up locations. “*Too far from nature,*” he called them.
On the second day, so early it was still dark out, Maak was dragged into the town’s holding facility herself, screaming insults and pleas; she’d attempted to flee the town, and since the community hadn’t finalised a decision regarding her fate, they’d decided to make sure she stayed put.

The escape attempt seemed to have swayed them: toward the end of day three, Ta’hoa’s parents and an elderly woman who was the equivalent of a Village Elder approached Jango. He was formally given leave to take Maak to face offworld justice for her crimes, regardless of what form that justice would take. Her parents seemed upset, but more at Maak for her actions than for whatever fate awaited her. Jango couldn’t offer any reassurances: it was only his job to bring her back, and he didn’t know what price she might have to pay.

Gadon merely grunted something about *personal responsibility* and drew another card from the not-pazaak deck.

It was still tedious, and Jango was starting to feel twitchy.

He awoke on the fourth day to Gadon knocking on the doorframe. “Just got word in from Dorum, your release is on their way.”

“Did they say who it was?”

“No, unfortunately.” Gadon grinned at him. “It’ll be a surprise family reunion.”

“Knowing my family, they’ll give me a mound of shit over this for the next decade.”

The Second-sheriff walked away cackling.

Five hours later, they let him into the front office. Jango was already preparing to sass Zam back when a voice which was distinctly *not* Zam’s said, “Darling!”

*Roz, you absolute fucker.*

Jango forced a grin as he stepped toward Bastra. “Fancy seeing you here.”

The younger man hugged him -- not tightly, due to the armour they were both wearing -- and muttered into his ear, “I’m so sorry, it was Roz’s idea.”

“I figured.”

Bastra stepped back, leaving one hand on Jango’s shoulder, and addressed Gadon. “I appreciate you keeping my husband from further trouble here.”

“He behaved himself.” Gadon arched a thick brow at Jango. “He never mentioned being married, though.”

“We don’t generally discuss it,” Jango said quickly. “It could put him at risk for revenge aimed at me.”

“And I get into enough trouble on my own for both of us,” Bastra added. “But if you need proof….”

He produced a holoprojector which showed a marriage certificate Roz had somehow forged. That was definitely Jango’s signature on the line, which Gadon had seen for himself when Jango signed the holding papers.

“Proof enough for me!”

Gadon had them sign off on the release paperwork, and Paark brought Maak to the front with a pair
of cuffs linking her hands. The woman’s features were set in a fierce scowl and she glared at the Third-sheriff as he handed over the keys.

“I think you know what to do with this one,” he said.

“As long as my ship’s where I left it at the spaceport?”

Gadon nodded. “Still there, Hunter Fett.”

Maak gave Jango a venomous look as he herded her out the door and toward the field where Bastra’s hired skimmer was waiting. “I hope it crashes when you take off.”

“You’d better not hope that, because you’re going to be onboard.” What they didn’t need to know was that he was going to be sedating her the moment the hatch closed. He glanced at Bastra. “You got your ship fixed yet, or did you take a shuttle out?”

Bastra raised his eyebrows and Jango remembered that the only reason he knew that was because Zohli had told Boba. “We’re still waiting on a part. I know it’ll be a bit tight--”

“Special guests like Maak get their own seat.” The Slave I was barely designed for an adult and an inquisitive child, but they could manage. Maak was going in a body-bag in the cargo.

He had three days to plan how to get back at Roz for this one.

Chapter End Notes

Happy 2nd birthday to FtRP! It was actually at the end of May, but I lost track of time cus things have been a bit crazy around here. We’re in the middle of getting ready to move to a new apartment, the precise date of which is actually the next day I would normally release a chapter (the 19th). Obviously trying to write an 8k chapter AND pack up an apartment in three weeks is not going to happen, so I’m pushing the next chapter back to August 2nd. Thanks for your patience! <3

Addendum: This was meant to be a standalone chapter, but enough people are anticipating a follow-up -- and there’s enough opening to catch up with a couple other characters as well -- that I’ll probably drop an interlude chapter at some point in the next few weeks. We’ll see how Obi-Wan and Jango are getting along sharing the same airspace for three days xD

Works inspired by this one

Tales of Obi-wan Kenobi: The Mandalorian Knight by ThatOne749

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