Shifting Sands

by chancecraz

Summary

After stupidly listening to Luke, Leia wakes up on Tatooine. Her day only gets worse.

Notes

So many months ago I was stuck on Queens and asked for some writing prompts on Tumblr. Tygermama asked for "So how about Leia getting sucked back in time to when Anakin was 8 or so?" This is what I came up with. Not compliant with TLJ.
Leia hated this planet. She hated the sand. She hated the heat. She especially hated the fact that she heard the name Jabba, and it wasn’t in the past tense.

“Come with me to the mysterious Force Cave Leia,” she said mockingly, as she made her way down the dusty streets of Mos Espa “You’ll find clarity, Leia. You’ll find answers.” No, what she had found was a Force Storm that had dumped her on the planet of his birth, with no explanation, and if she was hearing the chatter around her correctly, at some point in the past.

Of course, she couldn’t just link into a comm and find out the year. She had no money to pay for such a transaction, and if Jabba was alive, that meant the Empire was around, and that meant trouble. If she ever saw Luke again she was going to strangle him with that ratty robe he had taken to wearing. Seven years on Ahch-To and her brother’s wardrobe had gone a bit bare.

She was pulled out of her increasingly elaborate fantasies of killing her twin by a rough shove against her shoulder. Stumbling, Leia fell to the ground and watched as one of the locals kept walking on, as if he hadn’t just shoved her to the ground in his haste. In the normal course of events, Leia would have yelled at him, but she had only her blaster, no idea who she could afford to piss off here, and a deep desire to escape notice.

“Are you alright?” a voice asked beside her.

Leia lifted her head to snarl at the moron who would ask such a stupid question only to come face to face with a human child.

She swallowed her caustic answer and went with “No.”

He looked at her very seriously for a moment. He had bright blue eyes, sandy hair, and was too thin by far, for all that he still had some baby fat left on his cheeks. “Thought so,” He gave her an appraising look, “You lost?”

Leia braced herself on the ground and then using her arms pushed herself up to a standing position. “What gave it away?” she asked dryly.

“Your clothes mostly.” He reached up cautiously and fingered her short sleeves “You don’t wear clothes like this in a desert. Your skin is going to burn you know.”

Leia rolled her eyes. “I am aware. But since I woke up here with no idea how I arrived on this planet, it will have to do.”

A panicked looked entered the boy's face and he blurted out. “Did you just get captured?”

“Captured?” Leia felt like she had missed a step. She was walking around on the streets, wasn’t she? Why would he think she had been captured?

The boy made frantic motions like he was trying to shoo her back the way she had come “If you were, you shouldn’t have run off like that. Your master might blow you up as an example.”

“Master?” Leia was now thoroughly confused. “Blow me up?”

Sorrow filled his eyes “You're new at this aren’t you?” he asked, and without bothering to wait for
her answer went on “That’s weird though. Usually, slavers don’t bother with people as old as you.”

“Slavers?” she whispered.

He nodded.

“No,” she shook her head “I’m not a slave. I just….it’s hard to explain” she finished lamely.

“Oh,” then comprehension filled his face and he took a hasty step back. “Spice user?”

Leia felt her spine stiffen in outrage. “No!!” she bit out. The boy flinched and took another step back. Internally she berated herself for scaring him. Well, Leia what else is he supposed to think? You claim to wake up on a planet and not know how you got there. “No,” she said again in softer voice. “I’m not a spice user.”

He still looked cautious, but he didn’t leave either. “Ok. I didn’t think so. You don’t feel like one.” He studied her for a moment, then coming to some decision about her said shyly “I’m Ani. What’s your name?”

“Leia.”

He gave her a wide grin. “That’s a pretty name.” Then the smile faded “You don’t have anywhere to go, do you?”

“No,” she admitted.

“You could come home with me. We don’t have much to offer, but we have a roof and can offer you some protection from the sun.”

She frowned “You often invite strange women to come with you?”

He shook his head “No, but I’ve got a feeling about you.”

Leia had a feeling about him too. The boy was a Force sensitive, a strong one if even in her limited training she was sensing it. At the very least she could get a sense of his home life, maybe find out what year she was in, and if necessary find a way to spirit the boy away somewhere safe from the Empire’s grasping clutches.

Still, it would be foolish of her to go without questions. She sensed that Ani meant no harm, but that didn’t mean his Master held the same sentiments.

“We?” she asked.

“My Mom,” he said like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Well perhaps to little boys it was.

“Lead the way.”

She follows him to a small complex, made of at least several dozen small cave-like structures, built on top of each other. He walked up to a door on the first floor, and with a flick of his hand entered the passcode. As the door opened he went running in, calling out “Mom, we’re home!!”

A female voice came out of the back of the home, wariness at its core “We?”
Leia stopped at the threshold, aware that no matter how friendly and welcoming Ani had been, that didn’t mean his mother would share the same sentiment.

Ani, who was already halfway into the room, turned around and frowned at her. “Come in,” he said, beckoning to her, “No sense in letting more sand in.”

Acknowledging the practicalities of his request, Leia reluctantly came all the way in. The door swooshed closed behind her, cutting off her only exit.

“Ani,” that female voice said, as a tall woman, with dark hair and eyes emerged from the back room “Who is this?”

Ani gestured to her “Mom, this is Leia. Leia, this is Mom.”

Leia called on every bit of diplomatic training she had at her disposal and gave the woman the friendliest smile she could “Your son was kind enough to offer me shelter while I figure out how I arrived on this planet,” she said.

“Oh,” the woman blinked at her, then switched her gaze to her son, and it became something a bit sharper, “I see.”

Ani gave her a sheepish smile, “She needed help,” he said.

The woman sighed “Yes, I can see that Ani.” She straightened and gave Leia a warm smile, “My apologies for my rude greeting.”

Leia shook her head “No, I am the one who should apologize. I can go.”

“Please don’t. Really, I was just startled. Leia,” she said as Leia turned to go “perhaps you would feel better if you knew my name?”

Leia turned back “You mean it isn’t Mom?”

Delight sparkled in the woman’s eyes “No. It’s Shmi. Shmi Skywalker and you have already met my son Anakin.”

Leia felt all the blood drain from her face, as she looked at this impossible woman, who Ben apparently had inherited his coloring from, but she managed to say “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Leia really hated the Force.
Chapter Notes

So while I always intended to come back to this story, I meant to do it after I had finished Queens. Or at least when I was closer to the end of Queens. Then my husband starting watching The Phantom Menace, and suddenly there were entire scenes in my head. Which, this being me, ended up being a lot longer then I thought they would when I wrote it out. I have a whole another chapter sitting in my head, ready to be written, but since I also have the next chapter of Queens, and Scenes from the Middle Game in there too, I don't when I'm going to fit it in.

So, I hope you enjoy, and if you recognize the dialog, I lifted it from TPM.

Qui-Gon heard Jar-Jar give out a loud squeak. He sighed. He knew bringing the Gungan could potentially cause complications. But it was complications he was much more suited to deal with then his padawan. Obi-Wan already had his hands full with a ship brimming full of anxious civilians.

He turned to see what trouble Jar-Jar had found. The Gungan was laid out on the ground, a Dug shaking something in front of his frightened face. Before Qui-Gon could take a step towards the pair to intervene, a small human child appeared right in front of the quarreling pair. The child started speaking in Huttese to the irate Dug. Qui-Gon hurried over, Padme on his heels. The dug spat something out and stalked away.

The boy looked up at Qui-Gon as he came to them “Hi,” he chirped.

It was the boy from Watto’s shop. “Hi there,” Qui-Gon said in return. He looked down at Jar-Jar, then back at the boy.

“Your buddy here was about to be turned into orange goo,” the boy said, with the enthusiastic license all small children took “He picked a fight with a Dug, an especially dangerous Dug named Sebulba.”

Qui-Gon offered his hand down to the Gungan and pulled him to his feet. Jar-Jar protested “Mesa haten crunchen. Das da las tin mesa want.”

Not his intention no. Jar-Jar didn’t have a malicious bone in his body. He did, however, have the extraordinary ability to find trouble, no matter where he went. When they returned to the ship, Qui-Gon would have Obi-Wan watch him. It would give his padawan practice in dealing with the surprises life could throw him.

“Nevertheless, the boy is right. You were heading into trouble.” Qui-Gon said. He looked down “Thanks my young friend.” He turned to resume their walk back to the ship.

“But! But!” Jar-Jar said, trotting behind him, trying to keep up “But mesa doen notten!”

That had very little to do with whether you were blamed or not, in Qui-Gon’s experience. But now was not the time to explain that lesson.

He heard Padme struggling to keep up with him, and he reluctantly shortened his stride. It was still
early in this planet’s day cycle, and it was already becoming unbearably hot. As he trudged the dusty streets, Qui-Gon risked a quick glance at the sky. Neither sun was approaching its zenith. He shuddered to think of how hot it would get mid-day. He might be able to soldier through, but Padme was a civilian, and Jar-Jar was an amphibian species. They would quickly wilt in the full power of the desert.

As he headed to the end of the one street in this tiny outpost, he spotted the old woman. She was sitting behind a table, with several trinkets on it, a large canopy above her head to provide a little shade. What most interested Qui-Gon was the small clear bottles, full of water.

They should all drink some water before heading back to the ship, but Qui-Gon had no money to pay her. The thought of doing a mind trick crossed his mind, but he was reluctant to leave a woman like this in even more dire straits then he found her.

“The pallies are good,” that boyish voice said behind him. “If you want to know what you should buy. They are a sweet fruit and have a lot of juice in them.”

Qui-Gon hadn’t even been aware the boy was following them. He turned to study him. He was a bit on the thin side, with a light brown hair, colored with blonde streaks from the suns. His clothes were old but well mended. The stifling heat was something he was used to because he didn’t even look out of breath from keeping up with their group. The boy was staring at him, with his pale blue eyes, just as hard as Qui-Gon was staring at him.

“Are they?” Qui-Gon asked.

The boy nodded, then looked a little sad “But you don’t have any money to pay, do you?”

Padme shook her head. “No, but we have water on the ship.” She smiled at him “We’ll be fine Ani.”

Ani looked at her, then past her, to the sky. “Storm’s coming,” he said.

Qui-Gon frowned and turned his own head towards the direction Ani was staring. Nothing but clear blue skies. He turned around to ask the boy to explain what he had seen, but Ani was already forging ahead. “Where is your ship?”

“It’s on the outskirts,” Qui-Gon answered.

There was the slightest feeling of something, fluttering across Qui-Gon sense of the Force. Intrigued, he let the barriers in his mind thin, to better hear.

“You won’t make it,” Ani said, his voice firm. “Sandstorms are very, very dangerous.” Qui-Gon frowned, there was nothing there. Wondering if the heat was getting to him, he reinforced his shields. Then that solemn air disappeared, and Ani gave Padme a shy smile “I can take you to my place.”

“That is very generous of you Ani-” Padme started to refuse the offer, but Qui-Gon cut her off “We would be honored to accept your hospitality,” he said.

Ani grinned, “Yes!” he said, pumping his fist in the air. “Wait here,” he said then ran over to the old woman.

“If this woman was a servant, Qui-Gon was a farmer. “I’ve never been to this planet,” he said mildly,
“but I do know that many cultures take a very dim view of rejecting hospitality.”

“Oh,” the girl’s eyebrows wrinkled. “But he’s just a boy.”

“Yes,” Qui-Gon agreed “But I presume he has a parent or guardian of some sort, who might not be as reasonable as he is being, if we refuse.” Qui-Gon looked out into that clear blue sky, hearing the thrum of danger, danger, danger, “Besides, he’s right. A storm is coming.”

A native would be more aware of a planet’s rhythm. That’s how Ani had known what was coming. Qui-Gon hadn’t sensed anything concrete from the boy. Given his age and this planet’s lack of trained Force users, it was highly unlikely anyone had instructed him to hide what he was. Qui-Gon shook his head, this entire mission had him on edge. Obi-Wan was right, there was something...elusive in the future, and he was having a hard time ignoring it himself.

Ani came back, all happy enthusiasm. “Can you hold these”? He asked Qui-Gon, holding up several small fruits.

“Of course,” Qui-Gon said, reaching out to take them. He moved his poncho to the side, to free up his belt, slipping them into a pouch.

When his gaze returned to Ani, the boy’s smile had slipped, and his eyes were wide. Then, that grin came back. It happened so fast Qui-Gon wondered if he had only imagined it. There was nothing remarkable about him having a pouch on his belt after all.

Ani gestured them to follow. “C’mon,” he said. “It’s this way.”

The clear skies lasted only another five minutes. Then the light noticeably dimmed, and quickly. It was another five before the sand began to whip up. Qui-Gon was leaning into the wind, keeping an eye on the boy as he trundled forward. He wasn’t sure where they were in the town, he had lost all sense of where anything was, he was so focused on the boy, and the shelter he promised.

They came to a mound of hills. Qui-Gon squinted, no, they were not hills, they were clay domes, packed together tightly, rising out of the desert. Ani pushed his way forward, leading them past four doors before he went near one and palmed it open. He walked in. Qui-Gon stopped and made sure that R2-D2, Padme, and Jar-Jar entered before him.

He could hear Ani, even over the wind. “Mom!” Ani cried out “Mom, I’m home.”

All of his charges safely indoors, Qui-Gon walked through the door, grateful for the absence of the shards of sand flaying his skin. His face was a little raw, but nothing was bleeding. Small mercies there. Ani had been right, if they had tried to make it on their own to the ship, they would have all died out there in that desert. Without the need to cover his eyes, he found the panel for the door and flicked it closed.

He heard a sharp gasp, and he looked up. Ani’s mother was a human woman, of medium height and unlike her son, had dark brown eyes. Her hair was also dark, ruthlessly pinned back in a bun, and Qui-Gon could see no grey in it. But her face was worn, with deep worry lines carved into it. Maybe forty or so? It was hard to tell. She was dressed in a homespun tunic and skirt, both of which looked old and very well used.

She looked up at the three strangers, and droid, standing in her home with a wary expression.

“These are my friend's Mom!” Ani said excitedly.

Trying to put her at ease, Qui-Gon stepped forward. “My name is Qui-Gon Jinn,” he said calmly,
trying to project non-threatening, as much as a human male of his build could “Your son was kind enough to offer us shelter,” he gestured to the howling noise outside.

Said son was focusing in on the one person he was interested in. “I built a droid,” he told Padme excitedly, “Want to see?” Before she could answer, he pulled her into one of the back rooms.

Ani’s mother watched the two of them, with R2-D2 trundling behind them. Jar-Jar stayed where he was, shifting his gaze nervously from Ani’s mother to the door. There was no need for the Force to understand where his mind went. The Gungan was terrified they were going to be thrown back into that storm.

Qui-Gon risked another step closer to the woman. Inspiration struck, and he reached into his pouch, bringing forth the pallies as a goodwill gesture. “I do apologize for our unexpected arrival—”

The woman waved her hand “I’m used to it,” she said, a rueful look on her face, as she looked to the back room. “Anakin does have a habit of bringing home those who need help.”

That must account for some of the deep worry lines on her face “I see,” he said neutrally, trying not to pass judgment. It was only because her son was so giving they even had a place to wait out this storm. It would be the height of hypocrisy to lecture the boy about welcoming strangers into his home.

She smiled at him. Apparently, she read his thoughts, because she elaborated “He also has a good instinct for people.” She reached out and took the pallies from his outstretched hand. “My name is Shmi Skywalker.”

“It’s very nice to meet you,” Qui-Gon said, giving the woman a small bow. He gestured to the Gungan “This is Jar-Jar.”

“Hello!” he said, waving enthusiastically, much more cheerful now that he knew they weren’t all going to die in a sandstorm.

“And the girl your son ran off with is Padme,” Qui-Gon finished the introductions.

“And the droid?” Shmi asked as she headed to the back of the living space. Qui-Gon could see she was heading to a ramshackle kitchen.

Qui-Gon blinked. He couldn’t ever recall being asked for a droids designation before. Perhaps it was a custom on this world? “R2-D2,” he said.

“Well, Threepio will be excited,” Shmi said “He rarely gets to speak to off-world droids.”

“Threepio?” Qui-Gon asked.

“The droid my son built.” A small, proud smile fluttered on the woman’s lips, as she turned back to the small counter, to begin preparing the food.

Ah. Qui-Gon wondered at what simple creature the boy had built. A mouse droid, perhaps a security drone? Given his resources and age, it was ambitious of him to attempt even that much.

“I see,” Qui-Gon looked around the room. It was small, bordering on tiny, and everything had the look of something that was just about to break. Shmi was preparing the pallies, and humming to herself slightly. He opened his mouth to offer to help with cooking the meal when the door to the little hovel slid open, and a masked figure entered the room. Qui-Gon turned quickly as the sand blew into the room, hand falling to his lightsaber.
The figure was cloaked head to toe in body armor. Even the head was fully covered. There was a breathing apparatus of some kind, and the sound of that mechanical breathing filled the small room. Qui-Gon’s hand fell towards his lightsaber, wondering if somehow the Trade Federation had tracked them down.

“LEIA!!!!” Ani’s voice cried out. The boy came barreling from the back, running up to the figure, and tackling them. There was a loud mechanized “Opmhpf!” coming from the mouthpiece of the helmet.

“You’re home!!!” Ani said excitedly, looking up.

“Yes,” that mechanized voice said, arms flailing a bit as this Leia tried to regain their balance.

“Ani!” Shmi called, coming from behind Qui-Gon, approaching them both “You are getting too big to do that to Leia. One of these days you are going to knock her over.”

It was possible. Even though Ani was a small child, the top of his head reached this Leia’s shoulder.

The figure let out a laugh, hands coming up to detach the helmet. “It’s alright,” a light voice said as it was pulled over her head “If he does get that big, I’ll just take him down with me.”

Whatever Qui-Gon was expecting, it was not a middle-aged human woman to be under all that armor.

“Leia,” Shmi chided, coming right up to the woman, wagging a finger in her face “did you walk through a sandstorm to get here?”

The woman shook her head, sand flying to the floor from her hair. She was small for a human, with brown hair liberally scattered with grey from what Qui-Gon could see of it. It was in a single braid looped around her head. There were laugh lines around her mouth, but there was also deep sorrow carved into her face. Her brown eyes were merry as she looked directly at Shmi.

“It was only half a click,” she said, “I was fine.” She gave a gentle push with her free hand, and Ani let her go. She placed the helmet down on the small table next to the door. She removed the gauntlets and gloves she was wearing, placing them on top of the helmet. She bent down, giving Ani a fierce hug “Hey Old Man,” she said, warmth and affection in her voice.

The boy cuddled up to her, returning the gesture. Then he leaned back, not wholly out of her embrace. “You came back early,” he said, “You told me you’d be gone for at least another week.”

“Caught my bounty early,” she said, dropping her arms, and tapping him lightly on the nose.

Beside him, Qui-Gon felt Padme come up to watch the new person warily. Leia had recovered a bounty? For who? The Hutts? The Corporate Sector? Some minor gang in the Outer Rim he wasn’t aware of?

As he took her full appearance in, he revised his initial assessment. The armor she was wearing was solid, but it had to be at least thirty years old. At one time it had been top of the line, but that time had long passed. Perhaps she was an independent contractor?

One thing he was sure of, she wasn’t a slave. That blaster on her hip looked serviceable, and there wasn’t an owner in the galaxy that would give a slave a weapon like that. So who was she to the Skywalkers? And had he led his charge into even more danger than the sandstorm outside?

As Leia stood back up, Shmi reached out and grabbed her chin with her hand. Shmi moved Leia’s
face from side to side, looking critically at her. “I’m fine,” Leia said. Despite her protests, she made no move to stop the inspection.

“You said that last time, and you had a viroblade wound,” Shmi commented drily, hands dropping from Leia’s face.

“Not a scratch,” she insisted. “Everything went according to plan.”

Shmi reached forward and pulled her into a hug. “Really?” she questioned.

“Really,” Leia confirmed, returning the embrace. They stood like that for a moment, then pulled apart. “But in the spirit of disclosure I do have a rather nasty bruise on my ass,” she said.

Ani giggled out loud at that.

“I also brought some food, Shmi,” Leia said. Her gaze went to the kitchen, and for the first time since she entered the room noticed Qui-Gon, Padme, and Jar-Jar. Her open face closed off and her smiling went from friendly to neutral. “And apparently that’s good timing on my part because we have guests,” she said with a questioning glance at Ani. She knew of the two of them who was more likely to bring home strangers.

“They came to Watto’s shop today,” Ani said, as Shmi took the bag from Leia and returned to the cooking area.

“I see.” Leia looked at all of them critically “And what are they doing here?”

The boy shrugged “They didn’t have enough money for the part they needed for their ship. They were going to try to go back with a sandstorm coming, so I brought them here.” The boy grabbed her hand and swung it back and forth.

“Also Qui-Gon is a Jedi,” he informed her. Leia’s gasp was almost masked by Ani’s next words “I thought you said they didn’t come out this far?”

Leia wasn’t the only one surprised. “And why do you think that?” Qui-Gon asked.

“You have a lightsaber,” the boy responded confidently, looking him straight in the eye “Only a Jedi carries that kind of weapon.”

Interesting logic “Maybe I killed a Jedi, and stole it from him?” Qui-Gon suggested.

Leia snorted “Not likely,” she eyed him up and down critically, and if he didn’t know better Qui-Gon could have sworn there was fear in her eyes. “You look to be in good shape, but you’re not young enough or fit enough to take a Jedi on in full combat.”

“I suppose you could have rigged some explosion to kill a Jedi, but that would have damaged the weapon. You don’t dress like you have money so that rules out buying it on the black market. Even if that was the case. If it were a trophy you wouldn’t be wearing it openly like that. It’s too valuable.”

This had just gotten a lot more interesting. “Experience with Jedi?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“I hope it was a happy one.” Bounty hunters tended to be a bit leery of the Jedi, at least the ones Qui-Gon had dealt with in the past. Their paths didn’t cross often, but when they did it was because they were after the same prey. That would only further complicate matters in this case, since if Leia was
on the job, it was likely seeking out Padme.

“Yes, it was.” She left it that.

Then Ani, bored with the conversation tugged on Leia’s hand, “Leia! Leia! Leia!” he pulled the woman right up to Padme “This is Padme!” he exclaimed excitedly.

Padme froze for a moment, and Qui-Gon wasn’t surprised. Being brought to the direct attention of a bounty hunter surely had to be unnerving for the girl. Especially if she was who Qui-Gon thought she was. What was more disheartening was the outright shock on Leia’s face. Her eyes widened as she took the girl in, her gaze going from the top of Padme’s head, down the entire length of her body. Qui-Gon bit back the curses rolling in his head. Leia had recognized her. Even without the ceremonial makeup to obscure her features, Leia had recognized Padme.

Qui-Gon started to shift, hand moving, so it was closer to his lightsaber. He didn’t want to start a fight in these cramped quarters. There was little room to maneuver, and that would leave him at a disadvantage. Leia made her living with violence, so he couldn't rely on inexperience on her end to help him. Leia's eyes flicked to his face, then to where his lightsaber lay, hidden by his poncho, then back to him. Her face melted into a more neutral expression as she looked at him. Then her eyes flicked back to Padme as if she couldn’t look away.

“Hello,” Leia said, “it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Leia was attempting to show a soft, but polite curiosity. It kept slipping though. Her face was shifting between wonder, then worry, then some other emotions that Qui-Gon couldn’t even begin to identify. Whatever Leia thought of Padme and her presence here, it was a complicated mess.

“And you,” Padme responded, just as remotely and politely.

“I was showing her Threepio!” Ani said excitedly.

Leia’s face relaxed slightly, and she looked down at the boy “Were you?” she said. Her eyes flicked up to Padme, and something crossed her face, “I’m not sure that is the best way to impress anyone Old Man.”

Padme straighten “Threepio's perfect!” she contested hotly.

“Thank you Mistress Padme,” a mechanical voice said from the back. Qui-Gon took his eyes off the two women in front of him to take in a tall, humanoid-shaped droid, standing in the doorway of one of the back rooms. Qui-Gon blinked. If this was the droid Ani had built, it was vastly more advanced than a mouse droid.

The plating was an odd mishmash of different sheens, silver, and gold mostly. But Qui-Gon spotted one black plating on the foot. Even so, this was a mastery of programming and engineering. Qui-Gon had caught glimpses of the parts available at Watto’s. That Ani had built this from that junk was breathtaking.

Leia’s voice was amused “You are being kind,” she said to Padme.

“I'm being honest,” Padme said, chin coming up “Ani is right to be proud of what he built.”

“Oh,” the droid said, seeing Qui-Gon “I haven't introduced myself. I am C3PO, human-cyborg relations.”

Leia sighed “Threepio, this is Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon, Threepio.” No mention of him being a Jedi. Interesting.
“It’s a pleasure to meet you Master Qui-Gon.”

“Likewise,” he said, a little bemused at Leia’s introductions. She didn’t seem to hold Threepio in high regard but introduced him like he was a living creature.

R2-D2 came out then, letting out a warble as he rolled to the protocol droid. He didn’t stop at a safe distance, just rammed the taller droids legs.

“There is no need to get pushy,” the protocol droid whined, “Mistress Leia is perfectly capable of understanding binary.”

The astromech let out a rude sounding noise, and Leia’s mouth twitched in amusement. “Your droid has quite the mouth on him,” she told Qui-Gon.

“He’s not Qui-Gon’s,” Padme said. “He’s mine.” R2-D2 let out a cheerful whistle and came rolling up to the pair. Padme laid her hand on the droid’s dome. “This is R2-D2,” she said.

Leia looked at the droid, and her eyes widened. Then she looked at C3-PO, her mouth forming the words “Oh,” even though no sound emerged from her lips. Her gaze fell to Padme “He’s yours?” she whispered.

Padme frowned, clearly puzzled by the woman’s reaction. “Of course,” then she looked defensive “He saved my life. I find droids who are singular can be more difficult from day to day, but it’s worth the time.”

“Yes, it is,” Leia said absently, staring at the little astromech like he contained all the secrets of the galaxy. She crouched down and looked directly into the visual sensor. “Hello R2,” she said softly “I’m Leia.”

The droid chirped something. Leia’s face broke out into a smile “It’s nice to meet you too,” she said.

Again, the faint hint of something rippled in the Living Force. But what could the meeting of Leia and a droid do to set off a wave like that? Even a small one?

“Isn’t R2 amazing?” Ani said, coming up beside Leia.

“Yes,” she said, running a hand down R2-D2’s leg struts. “He is.”

She was lost somewhere, thoughts drawn in on herself. Then she seemed to remember Qui-Gon and the others in the room. Her face smoothed out, and she came back up to her feet.

Looking down at Ani, who was still crouched by the droid she said “How about you help your Mom with the rest of the food?”

Ani’s eyes narrowed at her, suspicious “Are you trying to get rid of me?” he asked.

“Yes,” Leia answered deadpan, “you are a horrible pest, and I don’t know why I come back here at all.”

“You love me,” the boy said confidently. Then his face sobered. He looked at Padme and Qui-Gon for a second, then turned his pleading eyes to Leia. “Don’t give them a hard time. I’ve got a good feeling about them.”

Leia looked down into that face, the teasing look gone from her eyes “I can see that. But you know
The boy huffed and walked over to his mother. The two droids also departed, they headed into the back room that Qui-Gon assumed was Ani’s.

Leia took several steps closer to them, and leaned forward a bit. Qui-Gon tensed, hand instinctively reaching for his lightsaber, wondering if he had read her intentions wrong. She gave him a look of amusement “I just want to talk quietly Master Jedi,” she whispered, “so little ears can’t overhear.”

Qui-Gon relaxed fractionally, glad he wouldn’t have to start anything physical now. It seemed rude to repay the hospitality the Skywalkers had shown them by destroying their home.

Padme only looked at the woman “You recognize me,” she said to Leia, going for the directness that Qui-Gon was beginning to recognize as one of her signature character traits.

Leia nodded her head.”Hard not to with your bounty flooding the holonet.”

Padme flinched and Qui-Gon just barely contained his own. It was one thing to suspect Leia knew who was standing in front of her, quite another to have it confirmed. They had nowhere to go, Ani was right they couldn’t leave in the middle of a sandstorm.

Leia’s posture relaxed “You have nothing to fear from me,” she said, looking at Padme seriously “I have no intention of turning you in.”

Qui-Gon didn’t read her statement as false in the Force, but she was a muted presence. He reached out, determined to confirm his assessment of her intent and-

Met the thickest mental walls he had ever encountered in his life.

Qui-Gon blinked. Leia didn't even twitch a muscle to indicate she had felt him probing at her mind. He fought to keep himself from openly gaping at her. Had she not felt that? Were they so thick she hadn’t noticed? He had encountered people in the past who were untrained Force Sensitives that had developed natural defenses. He supposed given enough time and will something like this could happen naturally.

He risked another quick scan, and his heart sank. There was nothing natural or unplanned about these walls. They had purpose and planning etched into their very foundation, for all that they were the simplest version of how one could defend one's mind. And Leia still wasn’t looking at him. Was she ignoring him? Or were they so thick she couldn't even feel his brushes against her mind? He hoped it was the former. The power needed to fuel those walls was worrying enough. If they were so thick she couldn’t feel someone of Qui-Gon’s strength touching them, they were in more trouble than he thought.

Then he remembered earlier on the street when he thought Ani reached out and touched the Force. He had, Qui-Gon realized. He had, and he had managed to hide it. Not wholly, not successfully, but he had made it small enough that Qui-Gon dismissed it. It would be unusual for a nine-year-old raised in the Temple to pull that off. A slave who lived on the Outer Rim doing it was a miracle.

Leia was trained, and she felt confident enough to teach someone else. Where had Leia learned it from?

“I’m supposed to take the word of a bounty hunter?” Padme asked, voice sharp, bringing Qui-Gon back to his present problem.

Leia looked at her, too attentive for someone who claimed they weren’t interested in a bounty. “I
don’t work for the Hutts,” she said, “I have no reason to turn you in.”

“Then who do you work for?” Qui-Gon asked.

Leia turned away from Padme, and she looked at him. There was a long moment where she assessed him, wary. She seemed to be very suspicious of him. No, not him, Qui-Gon realized, as her eyes once more fell to where his lightsaber rested on his hip. She wasn’t afraid of Qui-Gon Jinn, she was wary of Jedi Master Jinn. He thought of Ani and wondered how much power that boy was hiding.

“The people,” she said.

He frowned “The Republic?” He supposed there could be some bounties that jumped to the Outer Rim, especially in Hutt controlled space. But not enough to justify living out here. Her ease and familiarity with Shmi and Anakin suggested she lived here when she could.

“No,” she said firmly “The people.” She looked at Padme, “If you feel uncomfortable staying here, I understand. But it is not safe until this storm has passed.” She waved her hands, indicating the howling noise outside “You have time. Even if I comm someone now, they couldn’t come until this had passed. If you can’t trust me, trust the elements.”

She turned her head “Shmi?” she asked in normal voice.

“Yes, Leia?”

“I’m going to be staying for a few days.” Qui-Gon wondered if that had been her original plan, or she had altered it because of his presence.

“Yes!” Ani whooped.

“Allright,” Shmi said, “But get out of that armor. Lunch is almost ready, and the sand in them has to be driving you crazy.”

“Yes grandmother,” Leia said dutifully. Grandmother? An odd nickname for a woman that Qui-Gon would put at least ten years her junior. But Leia softened the words by placing a kiss on Shmi’s cheek as she walked by heading into the other room in the back.

As Leia walked off, and Padme sent him a calculating look “You knew?”

“That you were the Queen? Yes.” He had guessed. It had been a very good guess, but Qui-Gon wasn’t going to admit that unless he had too.

“Do you trust her?” Padme asked.

He looked thoughtfully into the room she had just disappeared into “I trust she isn’t interested in turning you in for a bounty,” he finally allowed.

“But do you trust her?” Padme pressed.

“I don’t know,” he answered. Then he looked the Queen in the eyes. “Either way she is right about the storm. We might as well eat, we are going to need it.”

Padme nodded and went over to help Shmi. Qui-Gon was following are, also indenting to offer assistance, when his communicator beeped. He withdrew to the far side of the room.

“Obi-Wan,” he said softly.

“Master, we just received a plea from help from Sio Bibble. He is requesting we return to Naboo
immediately.” His padawan was trying to project a neutral voice and was failing miserably to Qui-Gon's ears “He is pleading for the Queen to return.”

“Why?” Qui-Gon asked. Bibble has been desperate to get Padme off Naboo the last time they spoke. What had changed since then?

“He says that the people are being herded into camps and being slaughtered. He claims that there is nothing he can do to stop it.”

Qui-Gon sighed and rubbed his forehead “It sounds like bait. To establish a connection trace.”

“What if it is true?” Obi-Wan countered “And the people are dying?” His apprentice had a hard time dealing with individual people. He found non-Jedi baffling and puzzling to the extreme. However, just because he mostly didn’t like people didn’t mean he wanted them to suffer.

“Either way, we are running out of time.” Qui-Gon noticed Leia coming out of Shimi’s bedroom, shorn of her armor. She was openly watching him, and he wondered how much she had overheard. “Keep me informed if there is any further contact.” Leia just continued to stare at him, not even bothering to hide what she was doing.

“Of course Master.” Qui-Gon cut the connection.

“Hungry?” he asked her, choosing to ignore her eavesdropping.

“Starving,” she said, giving him a polite smile. She was wearing a tunic and leggings, similar in style to Ani’s, but instead of tan, it was a dark brown.

He went up to her, “My apologies. In the chaos of your entrance I didn’t fully introduce myself. I’m Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn,” he bowed slightly.

She looked at him, face neutral “Leia Solo,” she said without a bow, curtsey, or even an extending of the hand to soften the introduction.

He looked at her, “Solo?” he questioned. Wondering if it was her real name or one she had made up? Perhaps she was out here because she was hiding? He wasn’t sure where she was from, but he was confident it wasn’t this planet. No matter how attached she seemed to be to the Skywalkers.

She shrugged “It was my husband’s.”

That was the truth “And where is he?” he asked.

Her face shuttered “Dead,” she said flatly.

Also true. “My condolences,” he offered.

“Leia!” Shmi called out “If you want to eat, you have to help.”

“Coming,” Leia cried out and headed over to the woman in the kitchen. She grabbed a stack of plates from one of the shelves and headed back to the round table, situated in the middle of the central living space.

Qui-Gon awkwardly followed her and offered to Shmi “Should I help too?”

The woman laughed “No, you are a guest.” she said.

“And what is Leia?” Padme asked.
“Family!” Ani piped up, coming up beside the girl. “But she has to set the table.”

“Why?” Padme asked, curious.

“You set one dinner on fire,” Leia grumbled, slamming the plates down on the round table a bit harder than necessary. “Old Man,” she said “I’ll set the table, but you need to get this” and she waved at the parts strewn on one end “out of the way.”

“Whoops!” Ani scampered to do as he was told.

Padme hovered for a moment before Leia looked up from her tasks and said firmly “Sit down Padme.” The girl did as she was told. Leia wasn’t someone who looked like she was often disobeyed, even by a Queen. She wasn’t rude, just very sure that she would be obeyed. It added another clue to her identity and furthered the mystery. Just what had the living Force placed in front of him?

Qui-Gon sat too and watched the three of them as they danced around each other and brought the food to the table. This had the look of long practice. He studied the two women, trying to figure out what exactly their relationship was.

Ani had said Leia was family, and Shmi had backed that with actions, if not words. Qui-Gon wondered how they were related. Ani didn’t call Leia Aunt, but that didn’t mean anything. Different cultures had different mores about that. He didn’t know anything about the people who lived on this planet. If he squinted, Leia looked a little like Shmi, superficially at least. That didn’t mean much, Leia also looked a little like Padme and he knew those two weren’t related.

Perhaps Leia and Shmi had been separated years ago? It would explain how Leia was free, and Shmi and her son were not. But if that was the case, why hadn’t she done everything she could to buy their freedom? Bounty hunting was dangerous, but lucrative work. Even if she was an independent contractor, she should have had the money to purchase them. Maybe it was a recent reunion? But that didn’t make any sense either. There was a feeling of old familiarity between the three of them.

He watched as they wordlessly put the rest of the plates down, in moves that looked choreographed. This was something they had done before, many times. Leia had been here for a while. But maybe not buying their freedom was the point. If Ani were a slave, then Leia would always know how to find him.

As soon as Leia set down the last plate, the three of them took their seats. Ani taking the seat next to Padme, who was to the left of Jar-Jar. Leia sat to Ani’s left, and Shmi sat in the final chair between Leia and Qui-Gon.

“Do we say a prayer?” Padme asked, looking nervously around.

Shmi shook her head “Not necessary,” She scooped something out of the serving bowl and then handed it to Qui-Gon.

“Thank you,” he said, serving himself.

The next few moments were quiet as everyone loaded their plates. Jar-Jar gave an experimental sniff of everything and only ended up serving himself half of what was offered.

Leia finished first. She ate fast, like someone who was used to eating in a hurry. Well, the life of a bounty hunter could lead to some exciting times. Qui Gon took his time, trying to get a feel for her.

Padme spoke first “Do you work for Watto?” she asked Shmi.
The woman shook her head “No, I’m his slave.”

Padme paled then she looked at Leia “And you?” If she had shouted, she could not have more plainly told Qui-Gon she had never been off-world with a question like that.

Leia looked as if she had come to the same conclusion. She studied the girl for a moment. “No, I’m not a slave,” Leia answered simply. “But I would be careful about asking that question out loud.” She gave a twitch of her lips “Some would consider that rude.”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Padme said, “I just don’t understand.” She gestured around her “Why don’t you just run? I don’t see any chains on any of you.”

“Shmi shook her head “All slaves have a transmitter placed inside their bodies somewhere.”

“I’ve been working on a scanner to try and locate mine,” Ani said.

“Any attempt to try to escape-” Shmi said

“And they blow you up!” Ani finished, his small face angry. He brought his fist down on the table “Boom!”

There was a moment of awkward silence then Jar-Jar said tentatively “How rude.” Perhaps not the most fervent denial, but the young one did look upset.

Leia said nothing, but Qui-Gon could see a muscle in her jaw clench.

Padme looked shocked. She looked at Qui-Gon for confirmation, and he gave a subtle nod of his head. “I can’t believe there is still slavery in the galaxy,” she sputtered “The Republic’s anti-slavery laws-”

“Are not enforced here,” Leia said, cutting her off.

Padme only looked confused “But the citizens of the Outer Rim are entitled to the same protections-”

“Only if someone is willing to enforce it,” Leia’s smile was bitter and sharp “Isn’t that right Master Jedi?”

Padme’s eyes moved to him “That is correct,” Qui-Gon admitted. “I know that Judiciary is working on bringing down the Hutts-”

Leia snorted and shook her head “It’s only been the work of the last century, I’m sure justice will come any day now.”

Qui-Gon shifted in his seat uncomfortably “I’m not the most up to date on their plans in that area.”

Leia only looked at him flatly “And the Jedi?” she asked.

Qui-Gon frowned “What of us?”

“What are your plans?” she said, nothing but condescension in her voice.

“We go where the Senate sends us,” he said, back stiffening.

“And if the Republic doesn’t serve the people?” she asked, “What would the Jedi do then?”

“The Senate does serve the people,” Padme protested.
Leia’s smile was bitter “Yes, the people whose financial interest depend on the Outer Rim remaining second-class citizens.” She turned to the young woman “How long before that definition includes the planets on the outer reaches of the Mid-Rim?” she asked sharply.

“It won’t come to that,” Qui-Gon protested.

Padme’s face grew troubled. He could see the thoughts circling in her mind. Naboo was a prosperous world, in its own way. They could feed their own populace, and they had a small surplus of artisanal goods that they sold to the Core. But it was small planet, and very near the Outer Rim. The Trade Federation had probably picked it because of that, and any surplus to its wealth was reliant on trade. But they hadn’t been abandoned, he and Obi-Wan had been dispatched to see to the problem.

Sensing he was losing the argument to Leia he countered “Would you have the Jedi declare our own laws? You seem to be aware of what we are capable of doing. Of what we could unleash on the galaxy. We need to be answerable to someone. So we serve the Senate.”

“I thought you served the Force,” she countered.

“Yes,” he said patiently, “but the Force doesn’t always give the clearest directions.”

“Doesn’t it?” she asked, an arch look on her face. “How strange.”

Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed “And what would you know of the Force?” he asked.

She only gave him an enigmatic smile. “To serve to the higher purpose of governing, surely oh learned ones, that is the greatest duty one can give one’s life to,” she quoted.

Qui-Gon leaned back in his chair, surprised. But it was Padme who identified the author of that quote. “Mala Keen,” she said.

Leia’s grin was big and full “You know your classics,” she said approvingly.

“As do you,” Qui-Gon stated. “I wouldn’t expect someone with your-”

“Profession?” she asked challengingly.

“Background,” he corrected smoothly “to know, by memory, the works of a pre-Sith War Alderaan philosopher.”

Leia looked smug “I’m full of surprises.”

Indeed she was.

Shmi cleared her throat, “Leia,” she said warningly “that’s enough.” Leia looked at her and Shmi’s face was full of polite rebuke “Lunchtime is not the place to get into this.”

“What time would be?” Leia challenged. She waved her hand at him “Why is a Jedi out here at all?”

“To free the slaves?” Ani asked hopefully.

The two Skywalkers looked at him expectantly. Qui-Gon cleared his throat nervously, “No, I didn't come here to free slaves.”

Ani looked disappointed, Leia only looked at him critically. “I’m not surprised.”
Jar-Jar, who had lost interest in the philosophical discussion, darted his tongue out, catching a small fruit out of the bowl.

There was a long pause, as they all stared at him. “Excuse me,” Jar-Jar said.

Leia looked at him critically “Jar-Jar?” she asked.

“Yessa?”

Leia folded her hands over the table, “I’m not very familiar with your culture-”

“Messa issa Gungan,” Jar-Jar said proudly.

Leia tilted her head, indicating she understood. “But here, on this world, and at this table, what you just did would be considered exceptionally rude.”

His face drooped “Truesa?”

Leia nodded. “Really.”

“Tha wassa the lassa thing messa want.” Jar-Jar proclaimed, hands flying about in agitation.

Leia put up a hand to stop him. “Is this your first time off your world?” she asked.


Leia nodded “I never thought you meant anything malicious,” she said “Or were trying to be rude. I just thought you might want to know.”

Jar-Jar’s eyestalks perked up “Really?”

Leia’s smile was kind “Really. I’m not mad.” No, that emotion was reserved solely for Qui-Gon. Leia was friendly with every other person at this table, even the taxing Gungan. She picked up a glass of water to take a sip “It’s a teaching moment,” she said “Nothing more.”

“Thanks,” Jar-Jar gratefully. Then looking at the four humans around the table, he began eating much more slowly then he had before.

Ani looked at them “Has anyone ever seen a podrace?”

Qui-Gon looked at him, puzzled by the abrupt subject change. “They have podracing on Malastare. Very fast, very dangerous.”

“I’m the only human who can do it,” the boy said proudly.

“Old Man!” Leia hissed, dropping her glass of water back on the table, and glaring at him. Qui-Gon watched the two. If he wanted confirmation that Ani was a strong Force sensitive he had just gotten it. No human, never mind a child, could manage to podrace without the aid of the Force.

“Well I am,” he said defensively.

Leia dropped her head into her hands. “We’ve discussed this-” she started to say.

Ani shook his head, “No, you’ve talked about it,” he countered hotly. “And I did listen, but this is my choice, not yours. Isn't that what you are always telling me? It’s my choice, no one else’s.”
Leia looked at him, frustration on her face. Ani stared back at her, his face drawn in its own mulish lines. They looked so alike just then. Qui-Gon wondered if they did share blood.

“You must have Jedi reflexes if you race pods,” Qui-Gon remarked, breaking up the strange standoff between them. Leia’s head came back to him, and her eyes narrowed in Qui-Gon’s direction. He stared back at her calmly.

“I had a dream I was a Jedi,” Ani said. Leia’s jaw tightened, but she didn’t try to stop Ani from talking this time.

“Did you?” Qui-Gon leaned forward.

Ani nodded “I came back here, with Leia, and freed all the slaves.”

“I told you Old Man,” Leia said tiredly “You don’t need to be a Jedi to do that.”

Ani glared at her “I know that!” he said “But you said it yourself, you aren’t sure your way is the right way either. And if I’m not meant to be a Jedi, why are they here?”

There were awkward glances all around. Qui-Gon sighed “We were on our way to Coruscant, it’s the central system-”

“We know what Coruscant is,” Shmi said, looking at Leia.

“On a very important mission.”

Leia slumped back, face tired. “And what is this all-important mission?” she asked, her eyes looking at Padme. “I’m assuming you don’t want to draw attention to her, which is why you won’t comm the Jedi for help. But why are you in such a hurry?”

“You don’t know why?” Qui-Gon asked. I thought the bounties would have said so.”

Leia shook her head “No, it only listed her face, name, and the amount she is worth. Nothing about why they wanted her, or who. It’s being paid by a well-known shell company.”

Padme snorted “Oh, of course not. The Trade Federation likes to keep its hands clean.”

Leia froze “The Trade Federation?” she asked, voice tight.

Padme frowned “Yes,” she said “They have invaded my planet. The need me to sign a treaty to make their occupation legal.”

Leia’s mouth tightened into a grim line, and her face grew deathly pale. Shmi and Ani just looked confused. Whatever Leia knew, she hadn’t shared it with the two of them.

Shmi looked at Padme “Your planet was invaded?”

Padme nodded.

“How did you end up out here in the Outer Rim?” Ani asked puzzled.

“Our ship was damaged during our escape, and we are stranded here until we can repair it,” Padme said.

“I can help,” Ani said, “I can fix anything.”
Qui-Gon chuckled thinking of the droid who was even now in Ani’s room. “I believe you can. But first we need those parts from Watto.”

Leia frowned “You have no money?” she asked suspiciously, focusing back in on this conversation from wherever her mind had gone. “The Jedi temple just sent you out here with no funds?”

“Republic dataries,” Qui-Gon elaborated “Which Watto told me wouldn’t be acceptable.”

Leia shook her head “You tried to mind trick him didn’t you?”

Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed. While it wasn’t a secret, that information was kept private. Only a few trusted outsiders knew for sure that the Jedi could do it. Who had told Leia?

“Yes,” he said slowly “I did.”

She leaned back in her chair and rubbed her eyes. “You have nothing to trade?”

“No, we do not,” Qui-Gon answered.

“These junk dealers must have a weakness of some kind,” Padme said.

“Gambling,” Shmi said “Everything here revolves about betting on those awful races.”

“Greed can be a powerful ally,” Qui-Gon said thoughtfully.

“I built a racer,” Ani said shyly “It’s the fastest ever.” If it was anything like the droid, then Qui-Gon believed it. “There is a big race tomorrow, on Boonta’s Eve. You could enter my pod.”

“Anakin!” Shmi’s voice was tight with her fear “Watto won’t let you.”

“Watto doesn’t know I built it,” Ani said. He pointed to Leia “We could make him think it was Leia’s and get him to let me pilot it for you.”

“I don’t want you to race. It’s awful. I die every time Watto makes you do it,” Shmi said. Leia said nothing, but a muscle was clenching in her cheek.

“And you?” Qui-Gon asked. Those brown eyes flicked to him.

“I don’t like it,” she said levelly. “But Ani loves it.” And there wasn’t much in a slaves life that couldn’t be taken away if you loved it.

“The prize money would more than pay for the parts they need,” Ani said.

“Is there anyone friendly to the Republic who can help us?” Padme asked.

Leia snorted “On Tatooine? No.”

Ani huffed through his teeth “Mom don’t you say the biggest problem in the world is that no one is willing to help anyone else?” Then he turned those eyes to Leia “And isn’t that what you are doing? Helping the people?”

Leia had told this boy bounty hunting was helping the people? Leia’s mouth compressed into a tight line “I’m not a nine-year-old boy being asked to participate in a race that kills people.”

“I want to help!” The boy insisted.
Qui-Gon looked around “No, Ani.” he said, “Your mother and Leia are right.”

Padme nodded “I don’t want to place Ani in danger either. We’ll find some other way.”

Shmi looked at Leia. The two women seemed to be having some sort of mental conversation. Then they both looked at Ani “There is no other way,” Shmi said tiredly. “I don’t like this, but he can help you.”

Leia gave a soft sad laugh and ran a hand over Ani’s hair “It seems he was meant to help you.”

Ani caught her hand “I’ll be fine.” he told her

“You say that now,” she said. She leaned down and pressed their foreheads together. She took a deep breath, then stood up. “I need some air,” and she walked into Shmi’s room.

They waited until the storm died down to see if they could get Watto to agree with their plan. Ani went first, apparently to let him know. The Toydarian apparently didn’t respond well to surprises. Leia, Qui-Gon, Jar-Jar, and Padme followed about five minutes after he left.

Qui-Gon could tell Padme was not happy about the plan, and he couldn’t blame her. But she said nothing as they walked back to the shop, Leia leading the way.

“He can do it,” Leia said conversationally.

“What?” Padme asked.

Leia turned around “My issue is not whether he can win, he can. It’s the consequences of letting him race at all.”

Padme’s jaw tightened “I meant no disrespect.”

Leia laughed a bitter tinge to it “No you are being entirely rational. The fate of your world relies on this. Ani might not fully understand what that means, but I do.”

Padme looked at the woman, thoughtful “But you are still letting him do it,” she said.

“I am not his mother,” Leia said, “It is not my place to forbid Ani anything.”

Qui-Gon kept his snort to himself. No, Leia wasn’t his mother, but she was just as protective as one. And she was right to fear the consequences. The Jedi weren’t the only ones who had an interest in Force Sensitive, and most of those other organizations weren’t nearly as benign.

“And you are asking me to trust you too,” Padme said, “A woman and boy I barely know?”

“Sometimes that is where life leads you,” Leia said sadly “And I don’t see many other options for you.”

Padme sat down on the bench by the door “I still don’t approve.”

Qui-Gon watched with interest as Leia looked at the girl with compassion. She told Padme gently “You can rage all you want, but that doesn’t change what is,” she said. Qui-Gon wondered how Leia had learned that lesson. She didn’t strike him as someone who gave in gracefully. He ducked through the door, following Leia into the little shop.
Watto was no more pleasant after the brief separation. He came flying over to them the minute they entered. “You!” he shouted, coming directly up to the woman, pointing a finger at her face. “You aren’t supposed to be in here!” No love lost between the two of them.

Leia stopped and cocked her head “Didn’t Ani tell you?” she asked. “I need a pilot.”

“Yes, yes, He told me that you have a pod,” he said to Leia, ignoring Qui-Gon. “Where did you get it?” he asked, looking at Ani and then her suspiciously.

“Payment,” she replied, looking bored.

“Payment?” the Toydarian looked incredulously “I know what work you take. None of them would just have a pod to give you.”

Leia crossed her hands in front of her chest. “I got lucky,” she said.

“I hope you didn’t kill anyone I know for it,” the Toydarian said slyly.

“Still doesn’t solve the problem of the entry fee,” Watto said.

“That is where I come in my friend,” Qui-Gon said, stepping up.


“My ship will be the entry fee,” Qui-Gon said, bringing the holo up in his hands. He pressed the button and the holo of the showing the cruiser they had arrived in flared to life.

“Oh,” Watto crooned, coming slightly closer to look at it “A Nubian? Not bad, not bad.” He scratched his chin thoughtfully.

“It’s in good order, except for the parts I need.” Qui-Gon shut the holo off.

Watto looked between Leia and Qui-Gon, “And this one dragged you into this?” he asked pointing at Leia. “You should be careful, she is tricky.”

Qui-gon looked at Leia, raising an eyebrow. He would categorize her as difficult, not tricky. She shrugged in response.

“You aren’t going to let a little thing like me threatening to kill you get in the way of business are you Watto?” That would have been nice to know before he walked into this shop. If Qui-Gon had been aware of that, he would have argued that he should handle this alone. Which was probably why Leia didn’t tell him. She didn’t trust him around Anakin. Qui-Gon’s concern was determining if that was because she didn’t want the Jedi to take him away, or because she had more nefarious purposes in mind for the boy.

The Toydarian laughed “That’s what I like about you Solo, you always keep your eyes on your goal.” He started to hover around his shop “Well, Solo provides the pod, you supply the entry fee, and I supply the boy. We split the winnings by thirds.”
This was where things got tricky. The last thing Qui-Gon wanted was the Hutts to take a closer look at his ship. And they would. They would insist on inspecting it before he would be allowed to submit it as collateral. Even that cursory of an inspection was too dangerous. Hopefully, Watto’s greed would be to Qui-Gon’s advantage.

“If that is the case,” Qui-Gon said “Then I suggest you front the cash for the entry. If we win, you get to keep all of the winnings, except for the cost of the parts I need. If we lose, you get to keep my ship.” He shrugged “Either way, you win.”

Watto frowned and looked at Leia “You let him bargain away your winnings like that?” he demanded.

She gave him a tight smile “Not all of us are interested in money Watto.”

He huffed, and looked her up and down “Clearly. So if it isn’t money, what do you get out of it?” he demanded of Leia.

“Why do you care?” she asked back tonelessly.

Watto looked at Anakin, then back to her “You are too soft for this one,” he finally said, “I think you would give him the galaxy if he asked.”

“My business,” Leia said flatly.

Watto fluttered back from her hard stare “True,” Watto looked at Qui-Gon “Deal,” he said, extending out his hand. Qui-Gon returned the shake, and all three of them left the shop, to head back to the Skywalker home.

Leia strode ahead, and Padme and Jar-Jar scrambled upright as she walked past them.

“Leia,” Qui-Gon called out. She stopped and turned around.

“Why didn’t you tell me you threatened to kill him?” he demanded.

Leia’s head cocked “It was only one time,” she said dismissively.

Behind him, Padme gasped. Despite her flippant words, Leia’s face was hard and set. Whatever had passed between her and Watto, Leia had meant her threat.

Anakin came up and took her hand. “Leia,” he whispered softly, trying to calm her.

She closed her eyes, and then opened them, whatever was driving her so hard locked away. “If I told you that, we would have spent precious time arguing if I should be included.”

“And why was that so important to you?” Qui-Gon demanded.

“I need to look out for Ani,” Leia said, her voice firm “because of her position on this planet Shmi can’t. I can.”

She was sincere. Whatever plans Leia had for Anakin, she did care about him. But that didn't mean she would make the correct choices for him. “Do you think I’m a threat to him?” he asked.

“No,” she said.

Qui Gon's eyes narrowed. She was lying. “You think I would deliberately hurt him?” he pressed.
She looked shocked “Of course not.”

That was the truth. Then what did she mean? “Then why didn't you tell me about Watto?”

She started to look aggrivated again “I told you, because you would have tried to stop me from being involved.”

“You go too far,” he said “Your arrogance could have cost us the whole plan. It is not just Padme, Jar-Jar, and me who are relying on this to work. Millions of lives hang in the balance.”

Leia’s face filled with anger “I would never forget that” she hissed. “I think I know more about this place then you do. If Watto refused to do business with everyone who threatened to kill him, he would very quickly be out of business.”

“He’s that untrustworthy?” Padme asked.

Leia just looked at her “Are you really that naive?” she demanded, voice rising “This is Tatooine. It’s the way things are done.”

Padme’s face flushed, “I’m trying to learn,” she said, “This was nothing I was ever trained for.”

Leia’s face hardened “Learn fast your Majesty,” she said in a cold hard voice, “Or your people will die.”

Anakin let out a small whimper and tightened his hand on Leia’s. “Stop,” he begged tears on his face.

Leia’s face immediately grew horrified. She knelt, so she was face to face with the boy. “I'm sorry,” she whispered, “I'm so sorry.” She cupped his face in her hands, soothing his temples with her fingers. “I forgot. I forgot. Just take a deep breath, alright Old Man?”

Ani nodded and closed his eyes, face scrunched in concentration. Qui-Gon was about to demand what was going on when he felt the Force dance between them. It was a subtle thing, no a thing they were deliberately trying to keep hidden, but Qui-Gon still caught a hint of it. Ani’s face abruptly relaxed, and he took in a shuddering breath.

“Ok?” Leia asked, concern written on every line of her body.

He nodded, and drew his face out her hands, to scrub at the tears on his cheeks, wiping them away.

At his withdrawal, Leia’s face crumbled a bit. She bit her lip and offered hesitantly “Let’s go home. You still have some modifications to finish in that pod of yours if you are going to race it tomorrow.”

He looked at her, eyes searching hers. Then reached out to touch her cheek “You going to help?”

Relief broke out across her features at his offer of unspoken forgiveness “You bet I am,” she said firmly.

Padme looked at Qui-Gon, nothing but confusion on her face. “What just happened?” she demanded softly.

“I'm not sure,” he answered her back. But there were suspicions building in the back of his mind.

When they arrived back at the little hut, Leia and Anakin went into the back, uncovering a pod racer.
They hurriedly set to work on it, Leia retrieving the tools, Padme and Jar-Jar milling around. A small flock of children came up to watch the excitement. Qui-Gon stayed up on one of the interconnected balconies. It was time to let his padawan in on what he had done.

After he explained, Obi-Wan was silent for a long time “What if this plan fails Master? We could be stuck here a very long time.”

Qui-Gon’s eyes were on Leia as she handed Ani some tool, and then went to the back of the pod. The Force twanged softly along his senses at Obi-Wan’s worried pronouncement about their future. Subtle, but it was there. Shaking his head, he heeded his own advice. Focus on the now, not the future.

“Well, it’s too dangerous to call for help,” he stated, “and a ship without a power supply isn’t going to get us anywhere.”

He took a deep breath in “And, there is something about these two.” He cut off the communicator, as he heard the lightest shuffle of feet. Shmi exited her dome, eyes wary. Just what had Leia told Shmi about the Jedi, and him in particular?

“You should be very proud of your son.” Qui-Gon said, “He gives without any thought of reward.” Leia would say nothing about why she was here. Shmi might, and flattery was the lubricant of the galaxy. It was also very accurate in this case.

Shmi nodded “He knows nothing of greed.”

“And your sister seems-” he broke off at Shmi’s startled laugh.

“Leia is not my sister,” she said.

“My apologies,” Qui-Gon offered, frowning. “I just assumed,” he lost his footing at her clear amusement at his discomfort. He scrambled to explain his reasoning. “You don’t resemble each other strongly. But she and Ani look alike.” Only a little, he conceded to himself. But he had been sure they were related by what had just happened on the street. Strong Force users who were related could inflict their emotions on their blood family if they weren’t careful. None of that was something Shmi would understand. “With the comfort and familiarity you all I have with each other I thought—”

She shook her head “Leia showed up about a year ago.” She gave a fond smile as she watched the older woman help Ani into the pod “Anakin brought her home with him. Just like you.”

She had only been here a year? Where was she before this? Who was she? Did Ani and Shmi know? Had Leia confided in them, or had she lied to them to gain their trust? The reasons as to why Leia would latch so firmly into a couple of slaves in the Outer Rim were small, and the only good one he could think of sent shivers down his spine. Qui-Gon’s eyes narrowed.

“He deserves better than a slaves life,” Shmi said sadly, as she watched her son.

“Did Leia promise him something more?” he asked.

Shmi’s eyes looked at him then away “Leia loves him,” she said, instead of answering his question.

“Does she teach him?”

“Some,” the woman admitted “When she is here. Myself as well.” Qui-Gon’s eyebrow went up in surprise. She elaborated “How to read and write Basic, the history of the Republic, some mathematics, division and multiplication” her mouth twisted “I admit Ani is much more interested
then I am in such things.”

“Why aren’t you?” Qui-Gon asked. Shmi didn’t strike him as a stupid woman.

“The Basic is useful,” she admitted “The rest?” She shrugged “What use does a slave have for that?” None, which made it all the more puzzling Leia was trying to teach Shmi if her goal was the boy.

“Ani and Leia are...special,” he ventured. Shmi’s back tensed, and he saw her take a deep breath.

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Anakin sees the future sometimes, doesn’t he?”

She nodded.

“And Leia?”

She looked at him, a thoughtful expression in her dark eyes. “You will have to ask her about that.”

The woman was confessing to her son, but not Leia? Why? He would have thought it would be the opposite way.

“Leia is teaching him more then what you said, isn’t she?”

Shmi looked forward, hands crossing serenely in front of her. “I don’t know what you mean,” she said.

Watto might be arrogant enough to buy that self-effacing line, but he wasn’t. “Leia isn’t in any trouble,” he said. At least not yet. “She hasn’t broken any laws.”

“Of course she hasn’t,” Shmi said, “Bounty hunting isn’t illegal, even in the Republic.” She gave him a wan smile, "And we all know how the Republic enforces its laws out here."

Qui-Gon nodded his head, acknowledging her point, and the sentiment behind it. “It's also not illegal to know how to use the Force either.” Unusual, outside the other Force sects, but not illegal. The woman continued to stare into the distant sky, past his shoulder. “There was an ...incident earlier when we were coming back from Watto's” Qui-Gon said “Leia got upset. It seemed to...hurt Ani somehow.” He knew how, he was betting Shmi didn’t.

The woman maintained her silence, no surprise on her face. That was not the first time something like that had happened.

“Shmi,” he said, moving so he was standing directly in front of her, forcing her to look at him “I don’t mean your son, or Leia, any harm. I’m just worried. Anakin is strong in the Force. And Leia clearly knows that.”

Shmi’s face tightened, and he pressed on “Not everyone is as pure of heart as your son. I just want to make sure everything is alright, and you two are not being used for nefarious purposes.”

Shmi looked at him, looking grim. “She said you might say something like that.”

Qui-Gon felt a small bit of relief. Finally, he was getting somewhere with Shmi. A small crack in the bond between the two woman, but it was there. “If your son had been born in the Republic he would have been identified earlier as Force-sensitive.” It was a minor miracle he had gone this long without being identified by the Hutt’s. They liked Force sensitive slaves.
“I know,” she said, heaviness in her voice, “Leia told me.”

And how did Leia know that? Had she been identified by the Jedi? Did she leave the Jedi when she was young? Her knowledge and the casual quotation of Mala Keen revealed a Core education, but if that was the case what was she doing out here?

“You’re wrong about her,” Shmi said. “Leia would never hurt Anakin. She loves him.”

“She may love him,” he conceded “But she might not want what is best for him. If that were the case, she would have sent word to the temple about his existence. We could have extracted him from this situation. He would be around people who understand and could train him.” As it was, he knew there was going to be one hell of a fight to get the boy trained. Anakin was too old, maybe if it were a year ago it would have been easier, but nine?

Shmi shook her head “She does understand him, Master Jedi. They sing the same song.”

“And does she train him?” he risked asking.

Shmi gave him a tight smile. He had pushed her too far. “Ask her,” she said “The heat has become too much for me,” she said. “I’m going back in.”

She turned to leave, and Qui-Gon tried one more desperate gamble “You love Leia too,” he said, “but you don’t believe everything she has told you.”

Shmi stopped, and then looked at him “No, I didn't,” she said, “But then I met you, and I’m starting to believe everything she told me.” She walked back into her home without another word, leaving Qui-Gon to ponder what she meant by that.

Nighttime on Tatooine was like most deserts, cold. Ani was looking at the stars, asking Qui-Gon for the names of them.

“Didn't Leia teach you this?” he asked, wiping a cut on the boy’s hand.

Anakin shook his head “She doesn't know them. Or at least she doesn't know them from this planet.”

Leia wasn’t from Tatooine. He had suspected, but it was good to get some confirmation. There was so little he had solid answers about Leia.

“Has anyone been to them all?” Ani asked.

“Not likely,” Qui-Gon answered.

“I’m going to be the first one to see them all.”

Yoda often said children’s enthusiasm was one of the reasons he loved the creche. Qui-Gon could only marvel at the boy’s energy.

“Ani!” Shmi called out “Bedtime!”

Qui-Gon used the brief distraction to take a sample of Ani’s blood.

“Ow!” the boy said.

“There we are,” Qui-Gon said, pacing the bandage over the wound, and rolling down his sleeve
“Good as new.”

“What was that for?” Anakin asked.

“Checking your blood for infections,” Qui-Gon said smiling.

“Ani, I’m not going to tell you again,” Shmi’s voice had lost its patience.

“You should go,” Qui-Gon said, “You have a big day tomorrow.”

Anakin jumped up “Goodnight,” he said.

“Goodnight Ani,” Qui-Gon waited until the boy was out of sight, then he attached the sample to his communicator. He raised it to his hand, intending to call Obi-Wan.

“Do you often take blood samples without permission Master Jinn?” Leia’s voice remarked coolly from behind his shoulder.

Qui-Gon lowered his communicator. He turned and looked at the woman. How long had she been there? He hadn't even sensed her.

“I'm just checking for infections,” he said smoothly.

“You may be,” she allowed, coming to stand with him on the balcony “but that is not the only thing you wanted to check.”

He looked at her, wondering the best way to handle this. Perhaps the direct approach would work, subtly working around the edges had only left him with even more questions. “I wanted to see what his midi-chlorian count is,” he finally said.

“Oh,” was all she said. So, she did know what that was.

He leaned back, studying her. “Why are you so protective of them?” he asked.

She looked surprised. “They’re my family,” she said.

“Shmi said you met them only a year ago,” Qui-Gon pointed out.

Her face took on an arch look “So love is measured in time?” she asked.

“No, of course not,” he allowed. “I’m not sure what, or who you are Leia Solo, but I do know you are not soft or sentimental. So who are they to you?”

She regarded him with heated eyes “Family is more than blood,” She leaned forward “And as someone who has lost every other person I have loved, I will protect this one, with everything I have.”

Qui-Gon felt the slightest warning in the Force. She meant that, and the Force was warning him that the weapons she had to bring to bear to keep to that vow were impressive.

She leaned away from him “Run your test if you are so curious,” she said.

Leaving aside the fact that by all the laws of the Republic she had no right to give or refuse permission for Anakin, he asked her “Do you know what the count will be?”

She cocked her head, and gave him a false smile “No,” she said.
Qui-Gon started a bit. That was the truth. She didn’t know. If she was grooming Anakin, wouldn’t that have been the first thing she would have checked?

Leia turned to walk away. On impulse, Qui-Gon called out “Do you know yours?”

She stopped in her tracks. Qui-Gon felt, something, flicker across her mind. He waited, wondering what she would admit too.

She didn’t turn around, but he heard the long sigh that came from her. “Yes,” she said softly, “I know what mine is,” then continued on her way back indoors.

When Obi-Wan came back with Anakin’s count, Qui-Gon wasn’t surprised it was the highest ever recorded by Jedi Order. He wondered if Leia’s would set records too.

Morning came. Qui-Gon wasn’t surprised, after he risen from his makeshift bed on the main living space floor, to find Ani already up, vibrating at the table. There was a plate, half full of food, and a steaming cup.

As he approached the table, he felt his eyebrows go up as a familiar scent hit his nose. “Aren’t you a little young for caf?” he asked the boy.

“That’s what Mom says too,” Ani said, “But it’s not for me.”

“Then who—” Qui-Gon stopped speaking as Leia came out of the back room. She grabbed the cup and plopped into a seat.

“Made you breakfast,” Ani chirped. Leia only grunted at him, sipping her caf. He looked over to Qui-Gon, “Made some for you too,” he said.

“Thank you Ani,” he said, touched by the boy’s thoughtfulness. He wandered over to the kitchen area and saw five plates laid out on the counter. One was full of the fruits that Jar-Jar had eaten last night, the other four were identical to each other. He grabbed two of the identical ones and headed back over to the table. He sat, and then slid the plate over to Leia, who was still staring vacantly into space, sipping her caff.

“Not a morning person?” he asked lightly.

She started, then looked at him “Need caf,” she mumbled, eyes bleary.

“Mom says Leia is grumpy as a krayt dragon until she’s had her caf,” Ani said cheerfully. “It doesn't matter when she wakes up.”

“I see,” Qui-Gon said, wondering how often Leia stayed here. If she had a home or base of operations somewhere else. Watto didn’t like her, but that didn't mean she didn't live here when she could. Another question to add to the thousand he had about this woman.

Qui-Gon finished his plate, just as Shmi and Padme came out of the backroom. Jar-Jar had stayed in Ani’s room, and Padme had slept with Leia and Shmi. Breakfast was a quiet affair, until a young boy, who introduced himself as Kitser came bursting through the door.

After that, it was the rush to get everyone out the door.

Because Qui-Gon and Jar-Jar had chosen to walk, instead of ride the Eopies Leia had rented the
evening before to bring the pod to the racing arena, they got there first.

Watto met them at the doorway of the hanger bay, impatience evident in every beat of his wings. “I wanna see your spaceship the moment the race is over,” he said, as they started walking into the hanger. Qui-Gon looked at the two rows of pods, lining both sides of the hanger. They were all much bigger then Ani’s. Qui-Gon was not knowledgeable enough in the mechanics of pod racing to know if that a good thing or a bad one.

“Patience my blue friend,” he told Watto “You’ll have your winnings before the suns set. And we’ll be far away from here.”

Watto scoffed “Not if your ship belongs to me, I think, huh?” The greed was practically dripping off the Toydarian, excitement too. He was riding the adrenaline high of the race. He laughed “I warn you, no funny business.”

Qui-Gon stopped, “You don't think Anakin can win?” he asked.

Watto looked a little taken aback “Don’t get me wrong,” he said “I have great faith in the boy. He’s a credit to your race. But uh, Sebulba there is going to win, I think.” He pointed to a Dug who was surrounded by two Twi'lek women, who were pampering him.

Qui-Gon heard Jar-Jar gasp. “Oh no!” It was the creature he had an altercation with yesterday.

“Why do you think that?” Qui-Gon asked,

Watto laughed, startled “He always wins!!” He flew back over to them “I am betting heavily on Sebulba.”

Qui-Gon made a quick decision “I'll take that bet.”

Watto turned “You what?” he demanded.

“I'll wager the racing pod against, say, the boy.”

“It’s not even your pod!” Watto cried out “It belongs to Solo!”

“And I won it from her,” Qui-Gon said. “When she arrives with Ani, you can ask her yourself.”

Watto didn’t look like he believed him. Qui-Gon pushed just a little harder. “Do I look like enough of a fool to try to take anything from that woman?”

“No,” Watto said, “You are foolish, but you are not suicidal. She has one hell of a temper, I’ll tell you that.” He rubbed his shoulders absently, and Qui-Gon wondered just what Leia had done that had frightened Watto so severely.

The Toydarian looked at him, wavering “Well, I-” Qui-Gon could see the calculations dancing in his mind. “I’m fond of both of my slaves,” Watto said. More likely he wanted to keep the one who was more valuable to him in his shop. “We’ll let fate decide, huh?” He reached into a pouch on his belt “I just happen to have a chance cube here. Blue, it’s the boy. Red, his mother.”

The cube was weighted, there was no doubt about that. But it didn't matter. All it did was remove the little guilt Qui-Gon normally would feel at manipulating the outcome.

Sure enough when the cube came up blue Watto looked at him incredulously, then shouted “You may have won this small toss outlander, but you won’t win the race. So it makes little difference!!”
Watto flew off in a huff.

Qui-Gon went to the front to meet the two Eopies that held the rest of his party. Watto flew to Ani and spat something at him. Then he saw Leia and went off in a huff.

Leia looked at Qui-Gon “What was he talking about?” she demanded.

“Nothing of importance,” he said. Anakin would win this race, and he would get him to where he belonged. And there was nothing Leia could do to alter that.

He went over to help Shmi off the animal she was riding.

Kitser was babbling excitedly to Anakin. Something about how he was sure Ani would win this time.

“You’ve never won!” Padme proclaimed loudly, she shot Leia a betrayed look.

Leia’s smile was tight “He will,” she said. She sounded very sure of that. She also had the barest hint of mourning coloring her voice. Shmi looked at her worriedly, but Leia didn’t elaborate further.

“Of course he will,” Qui-Gon said, reassuringly putting his hands on Ani’s shoulders.

Kitser shrugged “He has finished one race,” he told Padme.

She looked shocked “One. Just one? And that’s something to boast about?”

“Well duh,” Kitser said scornfully “He's finished a race and didn't die. That's more than most people do.”

The hum of multiple engines revving let them know that the race was about to start. It had been decided that Kitser, R2-D2, and C3-PO would remain here, in the racing pit in case Ani ran into any mechanical trouble. The rest of them would be watching the race from the owner's boxes.

Ani was running around, making last minutes adjustments and fixes. Leia was leaning against the pod watching Ani and Qui-Gon, when she suddenly shouted out, in a falsely cheerful voice  “Hello Sebulba, how are you on this fine morning?”

Qui-Gon narrowed his eyes peered around the pod to see on its other side. The Dug was standing there, frozen, with one limb reaching up like he was about to pull something off.

Sebulba noticed Qui-Gon staring at him and unfroze. “Solo,” the creature spat at Leia’s back. She still hadn’t turned to look at him. Then he went off in a nasty sounding tirade in Huttese.

Shmi let out a sharp gasp, and Ani dropped everything in his hands. He rushed over to the Dug, his face red, and he started yelling back at him, voice loud. Qui-Gon tried to contain his shock. At no time in the last day had he even seen a hint of this anger in the boy. He wouldn't have thought it was possible. But the Force was twisting all around him, thrumming in time with Ani’s sharp words.

Leia said nothing, she just rolled over the top of the pod and landed with a thump on the other side. She didn’t get between the two racers, only laid a hand on Ani’s shoulder. The boy didn’t fight her, and his words stopped.

There was a tense moment, while all three of them stared at each other. Leia broke the silence. “That wasn't polite,” she chastised the Dug “but not very creative. I’ve been called worse.”
So Ani’s rage had been about defending Leia, not his pod.

The Dug said something else, and Leia smiled sharply. She leaned down so that she was face to face with Sebulba. Her face hardened, and she hissed something through her teeth at him in Huttese.

C3-PO let out a startled “Oh my!” at the same time Shmi cried out “Leia! Language!” Ani and Kitser only looked delighted.

The Dug turned three shades darker then he had been a moment before, and he shakily backed up from the slight woman. When he was a safe distance, he said something in a wobbly voice and scurried off to his pod.

“That was wizard!” Ani said gleefully, as Leia straightened up. “I have to remember that.”

Kitser nodded his head in approval.

“I never want to hear you use that language until you are older,” Leia told the boys primly. “Both of you,” she warned pointing her finger at Kitser. He only looked at her with open admiration.

“How old is old?” Ani asked.

“Fifty,” she decided on “Fifty sounds good.” Then her face grew serious. “We can’t have a repeat of what happened last time you raced.” Sebulba had sabotaged Ani before? And Leia hadn’t killed him for it?

She knelt in front of the boy “You sure you want to do this?” she asked.

“I want to help,” the boy responded stubbornly.

She tugged at his clothes, unnecessarily straightening them “I know you do,” she said softly “But there are other ways.”

“Not for this,” he said. “Can’t you feel it?”

Leia let out a snort, then rested her head against his “Good luck,” she whispered. Then she straightened and headed away.

Shmi was next, but Qui-Gon wasn’t paying attention to the woman, only looking at Leia as she walked towards the owner’s platforms.

Shmi rose, and Qui-Gon went over to Ani “You all set?” he asked.

“Yep!” the boy said confidently.

Qui-Gon picked him up, “Whoa!” the boy cried out in delight as Qui-Gon lowered him into the pod.

As he got himself settled, Qui-Gon leaned over “Ani, remember to concentrate on the moment. Feel, don’t think. Use your instincts.”

Ani looked at him, “Leia said something like that to me the last time I raced,” he said.

Qui-Gon leaned back a bit “She did?” he asked.

“Uh-huh,” he looked at Qui-Gon, worry on his face “I know you don’t like her,” and Qui-Gon was slipping if he couldn’t hide something like that from a nine-year-old “But Leia does have her reasons for what she does.”
“I will grant you she’s probably told you more then she has told me,” Qui-Gon admitted. “I suppose the question is do you trust her?” he asked.

Anakin didn’t even think about it. “Yes,” he said. “She’s my Leia.” There was equal parts pride and possession in his voice.

To a nine-year-old, it was that simple. He didn’t see all the ways an adult would want to use him. All Anakin saw was a friendly face. “All right Ani. I’ll try to keep an open mind.” He ruffled the boy’s hair “May the Force be with you,” he said.

As Qui-Gon walked to join the rest of his party, he was aware of the announcers talking over the intercom system. He was too lost in thought to pay much attention to what they were saying.

He arrived at the platform, still at the bottom of its tower, the others waiting for him before they ascended.

“Is he nervous?” Shmi asked.

“He’s fine,” Qui-Gon said, eyes falling onto Leia. She was leaning against the edge of the platform, eyes fixed on the pods. He went over to stand next to her.

“When I heard tales of the Jedi in my childhood, I never imagined they would place a nine-year-old in possibly deadly situations,” she said.

Qui-Gon jerked his head towards her “I obey the Force,” he said smoothly.

Leia shook her head “When it suits you.”

“My coming here was no accident,” Qui-Gon said “The Force led me here.”

She turned to look at him, grief in her eyes “Yes,” she agreed “it did. It was always going to.” She said nothing as the platform went up, and kept her silence through the rest of the race.

Anakin pulled ahead early, and never lost his lead. There was never any doubt in Qui-Gon’s mind that he would win, but such a command performance only cemented things for him. He certainly hadn’t expected to find a prophecy come to life, on this planet of all places. But the Force had led him here, and he would obey. Qui-Gon would do everything in his power to bring the Chosen One to his rightful home.

When Qui-Gon found Watto, in Jabba’s personal box, the Toydarian was furious.

“You!” he shouted, flying closer to hover in front of Qui-Gon’s face “You swindled me! You knew the boy was going to win. Somehow you knew it.” His hand dropped, and his face drooped as his anger drained away “I lost everything.”

Qui-Gon shrugged “Whenever you gamble my friend, eventually, you’ll lose.” He walked away from that battered face, not having the patience to deal with Watto’s lies to himself. He stopped at the edge of the box, looking over at the arena “Bring the parts to the main hanger. I’ll come by your shop, later on, so you can release the boy.”

Watto’s voice took in a whining quality “You can't have him. It wasn’t a fair bet.”

Qui-Gon turned around. He wasn’t shocked that Watto was trying to renge on their deal. He had
lost everything, and Anakin was his most valuable asset.

He kept his voice calm, but firm “Would you like to discuss it with the Hutts?” he asked, “I’m sure they can settle this.”

Defeat washed over Watto, and he sank a few inches in the air “Take him,” he breathed.

Qui-Gon gave a small bow of his head and headed back to the hanger.

With the Eopies to ride, the trip back to the ship was much faster than going out on foot had been, even with the cargo they were hauling behind them.

Jar-Jar slid off his mount, while Panaka not so subtly went over to Padme to escort her back to the ship.

Obi-Wan came out to greet him. Qui-Gon stayed on his mount and said “Well, we have all the essential parts we need.” And this was going to be the sticking point for Obi-Wan “I’m going back,” he said “Some unfinished business. I won’t be long.”

“Why do I sense we’ve picked up another pathetic life form?” Obi-Wan asked, exasperated.

Qui-Gon leaned forward “It’s the boy who is responsible for getting us these parts,” he said sharply. “Get this hyperspace generator installed.”

Chastised Obi-Wan nodded his head “Yes Master. It shouldn’t take long.”

Qui-Gon walked Ani back to his home. If the Force was with him, Leia wouldn’t be there to complicate things.

She was there, of course. By the look of things, she had arrived shortly before he did. When he and Anakin entered the small domicile, she was putting her gloves by the door. Anakin gave her a quick smile, and she went further into the room, to get out of his way. She casually leaned against the kitchen wall. The spot, Qui-Gon noticed, where she had the broadest view of everyone in the room and the door. Given the way her eyes flicked about, he doubted she choose it by random.

“Mom!” Anakin said, running up to the woman who was sitting at her table. “Qui-Gon is here to say goodbye.”

“Not quite,” Qui-Gon said, coming further into the room. “I’ve come to tell your mother that you have been freed Ani.”

“What?” Anakin turned around, shock on his face. Leia she didn’t look surprised in the slightest.

“You are no longer a slave,” Qui-Gon said satisfied.

“Did you hear that?” Ani asked his mother and Leia, looking for confirmation that his ears weren’t playing tricks on him.

Shmi’s face was awash in delight. “Yes,” she said “I did. Now you can make your dreams come true Ani.” She looked back at Leia “Will you take him with you?” she asked. This was why Qui-Gon had hoped the older woman wouldn’t be here when he broke this news. But he didn't have time to wait for her to leave. The Queen was needed on Coruscant, as soon as possible, to plead her case to
the Senate.

Leia opened her mouth, but Qui-Gon cut her off before she could accept.

“I was hoping to take him with me,” Both women stared at him. Qui-Gon almost grimaced. That sounded much more ominous then he intended. He clarified “To the Jedi Temple. I would like to take Ani back to Coruscant to be trained as a Jedi.”

Shmi’s face lost its open joy and became much more guarded. “With you?” she asked, “You want to take Ani with you?”

“Yes,” Qui-Gon said, “There he can receive the training he needs.”

Leia’s eyes were unreadable “The training you think he needs,” she said softly.

“What the Force thinks he needs,” Qui-Gon corrected “Otherwise why would it lead me here?”

She offered no response to that.

“What about Mom?” Anakin asked, a frown on his face. “Is she free too?”

Qui-Gon shook his head “No, the bet was only for you.”

Shmi grabbed Ani’s hand and pulled him towards her “Anakin, no matter who you go with, Leia or Qui-Gon, my place is here, my future is here-”

“The hell it is,” Leia spat. All three of them turned to look at her.

“Leia-” Shmi started to say, but Leia cut her off.

“No grandmother,” she said “in this instance I think you should listen to me. Your place is certainly not here.”

“And you just proclaiming it makes it so?” Shmi asked ruefully.

“No,” Leia said, mouth firming up “my buying you from Watto makes it so.”

There was dead silence in the room. “What?” Qui-Gon asked, certain he must have heard incorrectly.

“I sold the pod, on your behalf,” Leia said, giving him a hard look. Watto must have filled her in on Qui-Gon’s claims of ownership. She hadn’t contradicted the Toydarian, otherwise the bet for Anakin would have been invalidated, but she wasn’t happy with him either. “I reasoned you wouldn’t object to me buying the two of them with it.”

Shmi shook her head “There was no way that pod was worth enough for one slave, never mind two.”

Leia nodded her agreement “I also placed all the money I have managed to save over the last year on Ani winning the race.” She gave Shmi a warm smile “That, and the money from the pod was enough to buy you both.”

She looked from Shmi to Qui-Gon, her stare morphing into an angry glare “Imagine my surprise when Watto told me that he had already sold Ani, and to who.”

Shmi looked at her “You were going to buy us?” she whispered.
Leia frowned, and looked back at her “Of course I was going to buy you.”

“But you never said -”

Leia dropped her defensive posture and knelt in front of the younger woman “I didn’t want to get your hopes up,” she whispered, taking Shmi’s hands into her own “I didn’t want to dangle the possibility in front of you and have nothing happen.” She gave Shmi a rueful smile “Life is very precarious, you know that better than most. There was a good chance I could die any day. The work I do is dangerous,” she looked at Anakin. He was staring at her, shocked. “If the worse happened to me, I didn’t want to leave the both of you grieving and with all your hopes dashed.”

“Leia,” Shmi gasped, tears rolling down her cheeks “you didn’t need to do this.”

“Yes, I damn well did!” Leia snapped. Then she took a deep breath in “I’m sorry,” she said in a much calmer voice “But if you think for one moment I was ever going to leave you in the hands of Watto a second longer than necessary-”

“Watto isn’t that bad,” Shmi protested.

“Compared to some of your other owners? No, he’s not.” Leia admitted, letting Shmi’s hands go, as she rose to her feet. She started pacing, her anger snapping off of her, “Compared to every other decent sentient in this galaxy? Yes, he is. He owned you Shmi. You and Ani. He thought he had the right to-” she cut herself off, and took a deep breath.

“The mindset that allows him to think he can do that-” Leia’s mouth twisted in disgust. “There aren’t words Shmi. In any language I know.”

Then Leia stopped her frantic movements, looking at Anakin and Shmi, her heart in her eyes. “Do you honestly think I could continue my work if you two were here and vulnerable? It’s a miracle nobody has put anything together yet.”

What work? Bounty hunting? But that wasn’t a secret. Everyone who interacted with Leia that Qui-Gon had seen, had known that. What was this woman up to?

Leia looked at the two of them, voice fond “Besides, I thought I could use the help.”

Shmi scoffed “I’m an old woman. What possible help could I be?”

Leia leaned over and cupped her cheek “I don’t like when you talk about someone I love like that,” she said fondly “You’ve survived in circumstances that would have shattered me. Not only have you survived, but you’ve kept your kind heart. You’re smart, quick on your feet in a crisis, and people trust you. I’m an outsider here, you know that. I need you grandmother, in so many ways.”

Shmi looked at her, eyes shining. “We’re really free?” she whispered. “Both of us?”

Leia nodded “Both of you.”

Anakin didn’t say anything, only ran to Leia, arms wrapping around her. This time he did manage to knock her over, and true to her promise, she brought him down with her.

Qui-Gon stood there for a minute, mind whirling. Just when he thought he had gotten Ani away from Leia, she had done something completely unexpected and reversed everything in a moment. He watched the pair of them on the ground, heart sinking. With all of them free, he had no way to track where they would go next. Anakin would be lost to the Jedi and his purpose. He could bring it to the attention of the Jedi, but without Anakin standing in front of them, they would never agree to
marshall the forces needed to find this trio again. He cleared his throat to get everyone’s attention, breaking the joyous mood of the room.

“Well then,” he said, “if that is the case, then let me leave with my goodbyes-”

Leia snorted and shook her head cutting him off. She sat up all the way, Ani still clinging to her “It will not be that easy Master Jedi,” she said.

Hope dawned “Oh?”

“The Force has decided otherwise,” she proclaimed, rising to her feet “I need to go to Coruscant myself.” She looked at Shmi and Ani “And I can’t leave them here. They would be taken back into slavery in less than a day if I’m not here to protect them.” She looked at Qui-Gon “I already spoke to Padme, before she headed back to the ship. She generously agreed to ferry us all there.”

“So you are all coming to Coruscant?” Qui-Gon asked.

Lea’s smile was mocking “My Papa always told me that you should be careful what you ask for Master Jinn.” She looked at him, sorrow in her eyes, but resolve too “We will all probably regret this, you most of all, but yes, we are all coming to Coruscant.”

It wasn’t the ideal solution, but it was something. Once the Jedi met Anakin and saw his midi-chlorian count, they would agree to train him. After that, Shmi and Leia’s options would be very limited.

“Pack up,” Leia said. “We have a long walk, so only take what is necessary.” Ani bolted, heading for his room.

“Oh but,” Shmi looked around her home, cataloging everything.

Leia gave her hands a gentle squeeze. “Money isn’t going to be an issue for much longer,” she said. “Only take that which has real value to you.”

Shmi looked at her, “Really?”

Leia nodded. “It’s why I have to go to Coruscant. I can’t access the accounts from here.”

Shmi looked troubled “You have already done so much Leia. I can’t accept your money too.”

Leia’s mouth tightened at the implied rejection, “You are the only family I have left. And we-”

“Watch out for family,” Shmi finished. “Alright, Leia. When you are right, you are right. I’ll go get started.”

When Leia told the mother and son to pack, Qui-Gon hadn’t imagined they would be hauling a droid through the desert. C3-PO whined the entire way. He complained about his joints, he complained about the sand harming his finish, he complained about the heat.

Qui-Gon was beginning to understand Leia’s overall frustration with him, if not the underlying affection.

Leia didn’t complain, neither did Shmi. Anakin only piped up when they were going too fast for him to keep up. They were about twenty yards from the ship, and relief from C3-PO in site, when Leia came to an abrupt stop in front of Qui-Gon.
“Ani, Shmi, Threepio, get to the ship,” she cried out, dropping her pack in the sand.

“Mistress Leia, what-” C3-PO started to say. Qui-Gon noted that Shmi had already taken off at a dead run.

Leia twirled to face back to Mos Espa. “RUN!!” she roared.

Qui-Gon turned to see what had caught her attention. He spotted the figure on the speeder bike, heading towards them at a very fast clip. A second later, a wave of cold fury came barreling into him in the Force.

Stepping forward he pulled his lightsaber and ignited it. “Tell them to take off,” he shouted, as he charged to meet the newcomer.

There was a whirl of black robes as the rider spun himself off his speeder, jumping into the sand to meet Qui-Gon head on. Qui-Gon brought his green lightsaber down, fully intending to end this threat now. His blade was matched by a red one, crackling with energy. Qui-Gon could only look in shock at the face of the owner of that lightsaber. It was red and black, inches from his own, a manic grin on it.

Unsettled, Qui-Gon took a hasty step back, and barely brought up his lightsaber to parry the creatures thrust. The facial tattoos and horns identified his attacker as a Zabrakian, but what was a Zabrakian male doing out here? With a lightsaber of all things?

They went around each other for what felt like an eternity. Qui-Gon’s opponent was fast and clever. He kept hammering away at Qui-Gon’s defenses. That red blade was also distracting, it’s singing in the Force wrong somehow.

Qui-Gon felt like his lungs were going to burst, and he strained his ears for the sound of the ship. Obi-Wan wouldn’t abandon him, he would bring it around, Qui-Gon would jump on the ramp and he would be far away from this nightmare made flesh very shortly.

Qui-Gon took a quick step back to dodge the red blade, unable to block it with his own. The effort brought him several feet from the creature, and open to a charged attack. Qui-Gon looked at his opponent, and by the malicious grin on his face, he was as aware as Qui-Gon was, of the fatal error Qui-Gon just committed.

And then the Force came up like a tornado around the creature.

No, not like a tornado, an actual tornado. Qui-Gon blinked as the sand around the Zabrakian’s feet came up to swirl around him. Within seconds it was a thick cloud that Qui-Gon could barely see through. The creature gave out a roar, just barely audible over the sound of the whirlwind surrounding him, and there was the barest hint of movement. The red light of his blade disappeared, and the hilt dropped several inches outside the barrier of whirling sand. He must be trying to shield his eyes, Qui-Gon realized, and dropped his lightsaber in the process.

Qui-Gon turned his head to see where that blinding earthquake of power came from. Leia and Ani, not ten feet from him, were standing side by side, their right hands both stretched out. They were so entwined in the Force Qui-Gon couldn’t tell where one began and the other ended. Even that brief glimpse blinded him, it was like looking into a sun. He threw up every wall he had in his mind, trying to bring the sensations he was being bombarded with down to a bearable level.

When he could focus his eyes, he saw Leia frown at the lightsaber still on the ground. She reached out her left hand, and the hilt came to her. Not smoothly, but what the motion lacked in grace, it more
than made up for in speed.

“Old Man, now!” she roared in the Force, and Qui-Gon clapped his hands over his ears in an instinctive gesture, even though that would do him no good. By the Force, was she trying to deafen them all?

That wellspring of power vanished as if it had never been. Qui-Gon opened his eyes to see the tornado drop away as quickly as it came. The Zabrakian roared, clutching his eyes, curses spewing out of his mouth. Leia’s blaster flew out of her belt, coming to her right hand which was still outstretched, the left still holding the stolen hilt. Qui-Gon heard three shots fired in quick succession, and the creature dropped.

“Stay here,” she told Ani and walked up to the body, then calmly shot him in the head, confirming her kill.

She looked at Qui-Gon “Sith or Jedi,” she said, “you all lose the lightsaber, and suddenly you forget the simplest things about protecting yourself from blasters.”

Qui-Gon could only gape. At this women’s strength. At her ability to synchronize so effortlessly with a nine-year-old child. The child’s power. He shook his head, still half dazzled by the cacophony they had just unleashed. Had she just called the creature a Sith?

“MASTER!!” Obi-Wan’s voice bellowed across the dunes. His padawan came racing across the sand, lightsaber drawn and lit. He stopped abruptly when he spotted Leia and Ani, unsure. He called out to Qui-Gon. “Master?”

He wanted to know if Leia and Anakin were the threat. “I’m alright,” Qui-Gon said. “The others?” he asked.

“I told them to remain on the ship,” Obi-Wan replied, looking at Leia and Anakin warily. Then he powered down his lightsaber, and assumed a more relaxed position. But he didn’t take his eyes off the pair, or put his lightsaber back on his belt.

Qui-Gon blinked and looked down at his own empty hands. His own hilt was laying on the ground, several inches from his feet. He must have dropped it when he tried to cover his ears. He felt the beginnings of a blush creep up his face as he called it back to his hand. He hadn’t made such a mistake since he was a wet behind the ears padawan.

Anakin, sending Obi-Wan uneasy glances, moved closer to Leia. When he was next to her, he examined the hilt she was still holding. “Wizard,” he breathed.

Leia looked down at him frowning “I thought I told you to run to the ship,” she said.

Anakin shrugged “I thought you might need the help,” he looked at the body, not even five feet away from him. He frowned “He didn’t feel right.”

“No,” Leia agreed “Sith generally don’t.”

There was that word again.

Anakin returned his attention to the hilt. “I think that’s double-bladed?” he asked.

Leia blinked and brought the hilt up closer to her face so she could examine it. “You’re right,” she murmured. Then she sent a judging look at the body, “What an idiot,” she said condescendingly “If you have a weapon, use it.”
Anakin looked up at her, wry amusement on his face “Leia’s life lessons?” he asked.

“One of the most important,’’ she said. “But the most important is…” she prompted

“Work to not be in a place where you need them in the first place,” Anakin repeated dutifully. “Although that is not as fun."

“Fun changes when you get older,” Leia observed.

“I’m sorry,” Obi-Wan interrupted “But who are you?” He pointed to the corpse on the ground. “And who is that?”

Leia arched an eyebrow “I’m Leia Solo, this is Anakin Skywalker, and I have no idea who this is.” She gestured to their attacker laying out on the ground.

Obi-Wan looked at the lightsaber in her hand, then peered into her face. “Was that you just now?” he asked.

Leia only looked puzzled. “Was what just me?” she asked.

“In the Force,” Obi-Wan explained, then his hands twitched at his sides nervously, “If it was you might I suggest in the future you tone it down?” he complained. “You should be more considerate of others.”

Indignation crossed Leia’s features. “And you are very rude,” she shot back, sharply. “I do the courtesy of saving your Master’s life, and all you can do is complain that I wasn’t using my indoor voice?”

Leia had no idea, Qui-Gon realized numbly, she had no idea how extraordinarily powerful she was, and how other Force users would feel that nova presence. She had no idea how painful her broadcast had been for him and Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon suspected that every Force-sensitive in this quadrant heard her yell Ani’s nickname. Speaking across the Force like that, manipulating her environment like that, syncing with a child’s mind like that. All of it was far outside his experience with other Force users. Even Yoda couldn’t manage all of this with the breathless ease Leia showed. That Anakin showed.

How had her teacher, whoever they were, left her this ignorant of what she was?

She was talking to Obi-Wan like this was nothing extraordinary. Like it was normal. And the boy….Anakin's midi-chlorian count was over twenty thousand, but Qui-Gon hadn’t thought to put that number into the sheer power the boy could pull from the Force.

Obi-Wan looked at Leia in shock, but his training had him responding almost by rote. “You are quite correct,” he said, giving her a bow. As he came up, he said, “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi.”

Incredibly the first thing Leia did on hearing that name was look at Anakin. Then she looked at Obi-Wan again, then back to Anakin. Her head fell forward, and her shoulders started shaking. Qui-Gon was worried for a moment until he heard the sounds escaping from her. It was laughter, pure unrestrained laughter.

Obi-Wan frowned “What is so funny?” he asked, still looking half dazed.

“You,” she said, bringing herself back under semi-control “Just you.” The mirth still in her eyes, she extended her hand in greeting. “Hello, Obi-Wan Kenobi. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”
First off, my apologies that this took so long. I swear I thought it was ready a week and a half ago, with one plot problem to solve. Well, I solve that plot problem, then created another, and before I knew it the whole thing unraveled. So, I sat down and reworked the whole thing. That is why it is so late. Which brings me to my warning. This chapter is 48,000 words long, and no that's not a typo. You all are adults, or adult-ish, and can make your own decisions, I just thought it fair to warn you.

If you recognize the dialog, it's from TPM. As always I hope you enjoy.

Padme was waiting with Eirtae, Rabe, and Sabe in the throne room. Sabe was still Amidala, she and Padme hadn’t switched back yet. Padme had changed into the orange robe of the handmaidens. The smooth fabric was a relief after the last day spent in that itchy outfit she had donned to walk into Mos Espa. She felt her nerves jittering up and down, and once again she paced in front of Sabe, who was sitting on the pared-down version of the throne that had been installed on this ship. Padme’s predecessor, King Veruna, had felt the need to make sure that even on his personal ship, everyone knew he was king.

Padme felt a little guilty for the thought. Yes, he had been extravagant in his tastes, but he had commissioned a ship, that even though it didn’t have any weapons, was capable of taking a vast amount of damage. His precaution, and R2, was the only reason they had made it past the Trade Federation’s blockade of Naboo.

The Naboo Royal Starship not only looked elegant, but it had the storage to hold enough food to feed at least a dozen people over several days, and had the beds for those guests to sleep on as well. It was how they were able to accommodate the dozen pilots and mechanics who the Jedi had freed in the Royal Hanger bay, and who were even now, still on this ship. Padme wondered about the twenty or so others she had seen sitting on the hangar bay floor. Had they escaped unharmed from the palace? Or had they been recaptured? They would be valuable targets. Naboo didn’t have anything approaching an army, but they did have the royal starfighters, and those pilots and ships, would be a threat to the control ship of the droid army.

Padme yanked her thoughts away from all of that. Dwelling on it would only make her angry, and she needed a clear head right now. Things were changing so fast, she could barely make sense of everything that had happened, and that meant she was prone to making mistakes. Mistakes that would be costly to everyone on board this ship, and on Naboo.

“Padme,” Sabe said, watching her with worried eyes behind the white makeup of Amidala, as Padme took another hurried circle around the room “You have done enough. You need to rest.”

Padawan Kenobi chimed in gently from one of the sofas that flanked the throne. “Her Highness is correct. The hard part is over. The repairs are complete, and we will be leaving soon.”

Padme shook her head “Not until all of them come back,” she said to Sabe. So many times in the last day she had felt like everything was going to be fine, only to have a new complication pop up. She had been heading to an internment camp, then, like a fairy tale, Jedi had arrived to rescue her. They
had gotten her, and several others, off the planet, but the ship had taken too much damage to make it to Coruscant. They had found a planet where the Trade Federation had no presence, but gangsters controlled it. They miraculously find the part they need in the first settlement they tried, but had no money to pay for it. They find people willing to help them, but it involves placing a nine-year-old boy in a deadly situation. If there was any lesson to learn, it was that circumstances could change in a split-second.

Padme was distantly aware that remaining awake wouldn’t keep anything bad from happening. And if something else went wrong, she didn’t have many practical skills that would do her any good right now. The only ones available to her was her accuracy with a blaster. But being able to shoot a target was different then trying to do the same thing in the middle of a fight. She had no idea if she could even pull the trigger on a living person. But her rational mind wasn’t able to override her instincts right now. And every instinct she had was screaming at her to remain awake until they were on their way.

She supposed she could eat, but the nausea that hit her even thinking about food made her dismiss that simple action. She had showered though. That had been the first thing she had done when she came back to the ship. Padme had spent many a lovely vacation in her family’s summer home, Varykino, in the Lake County. There had been sand there, but until she set foot on this planet, where it was everywhere, she had never realized the stuff could get into so many delicate places.

Padawan Kenobi said in a reassuring voice “You really shouldn’t worry yourself. My Master is perfectly capable of protecting himself.”

Padme snorted “So is Leia, but that doesn’t mean Shmi and Ani aren’t vulnerable.”

The Jedi cocked his head. “Who?” he asked.

Padme stopped her pacing and turned to him startled. “Leia, Shmi, and Ani,” she repeated the names. There was no comprehension on his face “They were the family that helped us get the parts we needed.”

Padawan Kenobi frowned “I know the names, I’m just surprised they are coming. My master only mentioned bringing the boy.”

Master Jinn taking Ani, and leaving Shmi behind, and possibly Leia? Padme didn’t think that would have gone over well. She wondered how shocked the Jedi master must have been when Leia informed him that she had already freed both mother and son, and procured them all passage on Padme’s ship to Coruscant.

“So is Leia, but that doesn’t mean Shmi and Ani aren’t vulnerable.” Padme snorted, “And how do you know she can protect herself?” Padme turned to face her handmaidens. She had “given” a report to Sabe in the Queen’s quarters, but neither Rabe or Eirtae had been there for that.

“Leia is…” Padme’s voice trailed off. How to explain Leia? “She’s a bounty hunter?” she offered meekly.

Padawan Kenobi stood up abruptly “My master didn’t mention that,” he said, hands twitching in agitation. “Why did you let a bounty hunter involved?”

Padme shook her head “Leia is not someone who you order about,” she said.

Padawan Kenobi’s eyes narrowed “My Master can be quite charming and persuading when he wants to be,” he said cautiously. “I don’t see how he allowed such a dangerous element to get
involved.”

Padme looked at him “I’m sure he would have preferred that too,” she said. “But Leia is Ani’s family and his protector. He was the one we needed to compete in the pod race, and if he was involved, so was she.” She felt some of the tension drain from her “And she seems to hold the Trade Federation as much contempt as the rest of us.”

Padawan Kenobi didn’t look convinced “It was still a huge risk you took.”

Padme shook her head “Your Master didn’t believe she meant us any harm. If you don’t trust what I think of her, perhaps you will trust what he thinks?”

Padawan Kenobi opened his mouth to say something, then he swayed on his feet, his eyes going very distant.

Concerned, Sabe asked “Padawan Kenobi? Are you alright?”

“Trouble,” he breathed, then he pointed his finger at Sabe, “Stay here Your Majesty,” he ordered. Sabe stiffened, intending to rebuke him, but between one moment and the next, he was gone.

Padme blinked and was surprised to find that she had taken an involuntary step back. How had he done that? Then her brain caught up with his words, and she set off at a dead run to the holding bay of the ship, Eirtae, and Rabe on her heels.

She came barreling into the ship’s little bay, only to come to an abrupt skidding halt when she saw Padawan Kenobi who seemed to be catching Shmi Skywalker as she stumbled at the top of the plank.

“Shmi?” Padme asked, running over to the woman. “What’s wrong?”

Shmi shook her head “Don’t know,” she said, gasping loudly, trying to catch her breath “Leia told me to run.”

Padawan Kenobi tightened his grip and pulled the older woman to her feet, and gently turned her around so that he could guide her to one of the boxes near the entrance hatch.

“Are you injured?” he asked, peering into her eyes.

Shmi shook her head “No,” she said “I’m fine- “

Her voice was drowned out by the clanging of metal feet as the hit they grate. “Mistress Shmi!” C3-PO’s shrill voice cried out as he shuffled his way up the ramp “Mistress Shmi! Master Qui-Gon says we need to take off!” The droid hustled into the hanger bay.

Padawan Kenobi, in another of those fast movements Padme couldn’t track, popped to his feet. “Where is he?” he demanded of the droid.

Shmi looked at the droid “Where is Ani?”

C3-PO, not surprisingly, chose to answer Shmi first “He wouldn’t come!” the droid wailed, “I told him there was nothing he could do to help Mistress Leia, but he insisted on staying! And that man will kill us all for sure once he is done fighting Master Qui-Gon!”

Obi-Wan turned to Rabe, “Go tell the pilot to take off!” he ordered the girl.

“We can’t!” Padme shouted before Rabe could give into the command in that voice.
Padawan Kenobi turned his head “My Master can jump onto the platform if we fly low enough, that was certainly his plan when he ordered the droid to tell us to take off.”

“My son can’t!” Shmi protested, coming to her feet, face still red from her punishing run through the desert “And we can’t leave him and Leia behind!”

Padawan Kenobi turned to answer her. But before he could complete the move, he let out a low groan and fell to his knees, hands clasped over his head. It was such a strange motion, and completely the opposite of what was expected, it took Padme several moments to understand what was going on.

“Padawan Kenobi?” she asked, falling to her knees as well, looking for blood, or some sign of injury. On his other side, Shmi did the same.

He ignored both of them. “By the Force,” he whispered, his voice vibrating with pain “Who is that?” and then in a louder, pleading voice “Please, do you have to be so loud?” he asked nobody.

Padme raised her eyes to meet Shmi’s. The woman’s face was also tight in pain, and there was comprehension in those solid brown eyes. Whatever was going on, Shmi was caught in it, or at least understood what was happening.

Then three shots rang out, and Padme turned her head to automatically look out the hatch, looking for where the danger was, but all she could see from this angle was the endless strech of the desert, framed by the light blue sky. Beneath her hand, Padawan Kenobi gave a long shuddering breath, and all the tension in his muscles dissolved under Padme’s hand.

Padme turned her attention back to him and was about to ask if he was alright when the sound of another blaster shot cut through the silence in the cabin.

Padawan Kenobi’s’ head came out of the crouch it had fallen into. He looked into the desert, and breathed, “Master.”

Then his head turned, and he ordered “Stay in the ship. All of you.”

Padme stiffened, “You are not in charge of-“ she started to say, but then he was gone again. She looked out the hatch, but he had already run out of her line of sight.

Rabe was the one who broke the silence first “What is going on?” she demanded, blaster out, ready to defend Padme if needed.

Shmi looked up into her face “We were attacked,” she said. Slowly she raised herself back to her feet. “But it’s over now.”

“How do you know?” Padme asked.

Shmi gave her a tight smile, “I know the sound of Leia’s blaster.”

Padme frowned. One blaster sounded very much like another to her. Rabe looked doubtful as well, but Eirtae nodded. “It’s a bit more high pitched then a standard model,” she said.

Shmi nodded, “Whoever, or whatever was chasing us is gone now.”

Rabe blinked at the woman’s matter of fact tone, then looked down at Padme, who was still crouched on the floor “I guess you weren’t exaggerating when you said this Leia could take care of herself.”
Panaka was arguing with her Jedi guards. Padmé’s head was throbbing, and every whispered angry word between the three of them was only making it worse. The situation was not being helped by the small crowd of people that had gathered in the back of the bay, subtly trying to eavesdrop on the argument.

Sabe, who had been allowed to come into the bay when Master Jinn had come aboard to let everyone know that the danger had passed, was standing slightly to the side of the three men. She was watching them argue about what to do with the corpse of the man who had attacked them.

The trouble had started after Ani and Leia had boarded the ship. Padawan Kenobi had been following them and had gotten halfway up the ramp when Panaka had noticed the body floating, floating, behind him. He had rushed down the plank and demanded to know what Padawan Kenobi thought he was doing.

That shouted argument had brought Master Jinn back into the hold, and the admonishment that they needed to keep their voices down. That at least had brought the conversation to a much quieter level but it was too late to keep away curious onlookers, who wanted to know what all the fuss was about.

Padme and Eirtae had spent several minutes calming down several of the mechanics, who had gotten hysterical at the sight of the body. Someone, probably Padawan Kenobi, had covered the body while Padme had been dealing with the more nervous passengers on this ship.

Padme had never seen a dead body outside of a funeral or a holo, and there was a very large part of her that wanted to scream about it too. But she couldn’t. Even as a handmaiden she couldn’t, the Queen’s court must be seen as having nothing but complete control. Not that anybody outside of her handmaids, and Panaka, knew that she and Sabe had switched. Oh, they knew Naboo rulers had long used doubles to foil political machinations, especially during the Gungan–Naboo War. And it was an open secret that, even now, in peacetime, rulers of Naboo used decoys to slip away for a few personal hours.

But what they weren’t aware of, even the crew of this ship, was how thoroughly Padme had revived the old practice. Shortly after her election, she had seen the potential of pulling this off successfully as another level of protection. Not that she had thought things would become this desperate, but she had thought over preparing for the future, and not needing it was far preferable to being underprepared. Even with the few months, she had been on the throne, Padme knew she had switched with her decoy more times than her predecessor had in the entirety of his career. The result of all that hard work was that very few people could tell when she and Sabe switched. They had even managed to fool Panaka once.

But that meant that Sabe had a more scrutiny on her then Padme did at this moment. Sabe had arrived only a few moments ago, dressed in the Queen’s gray traveling gown. She had walked into the hold slowly, and elegantly. She had briefly paused when she realized what lay on the ramp, but she had shouldered ahead. Padme wasn’t even sure anyone but her and Eirtae had noticed the slight hesitation. There were too many witnesses here to even give a hint of fear, and Sabe rose to the occasion.

So, because her friend, and trusted ally, had given it her all, Padme could do no less. So she ignored the nausea in her stomach, and the scream building at the back of her throat every time her eyes involuntarily strayed to that very still form.

She couldn’t seem to focus. Sabe had been acknowledged by the three man when she came to stand in front of them, but they quickly went back to their bickering as soon as they realized she didn’t
have a decision to give them. She watched impassively, but every few moments she shot Padme a look, seeking her guidance. Padme wished she knew the answer herself.

What little she had been able to glean, was that Master Jinn wanted to bring the body back to Coruscant. If it were just that, Padme would have been inclined to let him. She might not understand their reasons for what they did, but so far, they hadn’t steered her wrong. Even if Master Jinn had an unbelievably arrogant way of going about it.

Padme had thought the man treated her like that because she was only a ‘handmaiden’ and a young one at that. It was something many adults did when faced with her outside of her royal garb. But then she saw how he had tried to treat Leia that way too, for all the good that had done him. Padme admitted to herself she was a little in awe of how the older woman seemed to be unfazed by anything the Jedi, and his sure commanding presence had done or said. Leia just listened, then brushed aside anything she didn’t care for and went along her own path.

And Qui-Gon had still treated Padme like a child even after he confessed that he had known she was the Queen the whole time. Maybe the man was just that arrogant and demanding to everybody? Padme didn’t think it was a trait all the Jedi had. At least she hoped not. They were supposed to be humble, weren’t they? Padawan Kenobi had been nothing but polite to her, but then he had tried to order her around too. Padme didn’t know, these were the first Jedi she had ever met.

Master Jinn’s voice rose again, cutting into her thoughts “I am only asking you to let us do what we were tasked to do.”

“And I want to know why,” Panaka shot back.

That was why she was having trouble ordering Sabe to end this. It was a reasonable question and one that the Jedi were so far refusing to answer directly. Padme didn’t know why, but she did know that she had enough people trying to take advantage of her youth and inexperience over the last few days. And no matter if the Jedi had rescued her, and were ordered to protect her, Master Jinn’s vehemence on having his way made her suspicious. Their goals were not her goals. Padme’s only goal right now was to stop the Trade Federation’s invasion of her world, and she wasn’t sure she could say that was true of the Jedi right at this moment.

Sabe’s eyes flicked to her, looking for guidance, and Padme bit her lip, trying to force herself to make a decision, any decision. Time was against them, and very much against their people.

What was wrong with her? Padme was never this indecisive. But right now, all she felt was uncertainty and like an odd fog was surrounding her mind. Despite the fact that the hatch to the ship had been open for several minutes, letting in the heat of the desert, she couldn’t stop shaking from the cold. She was tired, much more tired than her trek through the desert could explain.

“Why won’t they answer the question?” Eirtae asked, voice a low whisper at Padme’s side.

Padme shook her head, “I don’t know,” she said.

Eirtae’s voice was mocking “Just who do they think he was?”

“They think he might be a Sith,” Leia’s voice said lightly from behind both of them, matter of fact in tone.

Padme jumped and turned to look at the bounty hunter. She hadn’t even heard the woman come up behind her. Eirtae’s startled jump was less noticeable, but still there. Padme felt reassured that she wasn’t the only one taken by surprise. Her handmaidens had more intensive training then Padme did,
and more time to hone their abilities, but Padme wasn’t comfortable being the weak one in any group. She didn’t like thinking she was only being indulged because she was the Queen.

Eirtae had been startled too, and thinking about it, that made sense. Leia was in a profession where if you didn’t have the skills to sneak up on people, you were soon very dead. Padme wasn’t sure how old Leia was. Even if she were being generous, Padme would say the woman was at least in her forties. That was a long time to be in a deadly career if you weren’t any good at it.

Then the word Leia used caught in her ear. “I’m sorry,” she asked, voice going high “a what?” The pilots, who unlike the mechanics, hadn’t reacted poorly to the corpse, and were still in the bay, all turned as one to look at her curiously. Padme gulped and lowered her head.

Leia’s voice was soft so that they wouldn’t be overheard, but still firm “A Sith,” she repeated. “They think he might be a Sith.”

“Why would they think that?” Eirtae whispered, scared. And she had every right to be. The Sith were the monsters from the beginning of the Galactic Republic. They had once come close to plunging the galaxy into chaos and ruin until the Jedi had wiped them out a thousand years ago.

Leia cocked her head, “Because that’s what I called him.”

Padme blinked, her heart slowing down it's frantic beating. She looked at Leia for a moment, closely observing her, seeing if the woman was joking with her, or trying to test Padme’s knowledge. Leia looked back at her, perfectly serious. She was still Leia, as far as Padme could tell. Practical, deadly, prickly Leia. Everything about her screamed all of this, even her clothes. She was dressed in a tunic, and pants, both a dark brown, that was made of some rough material that looked itchy. But it would be cheap and would provide some protection from any sand whipped up by the winds of this planet. There was a thick, wide belt wrapped around the woman’s waist to bring the tunic in, and a blaster was hanging from the right side.

As she examined her face, Padme made the smallest adjustment to her assessment. Leia’s hair was braided in a thick braid, that wrapped several times around the back of her head. Padme’s hair wasn’t long enough to do that, and hers fell to her mid-back. Leia’s had to reach at least her waist, which was a very impractical choice for a woman who lived in the desert. Padme wondered how she took care of it, with so little access to water to clean it. But it was only one of the thousand oddities about the woman.

Including her serious face, as she gauged Padme’s reaction to her saying the most impossible thing. Padme let out a nervous giggle. Of all the ridiculous tales to believe, Leia had chosen that?

“The Sith are only a legend,” she reassured the older woman. Padme supposed that the people in the Outer Rim, not having access to the education that the Mid and Core worlds did, could believe that foolishness. There were still Force users, and worshipers, who weren’t nearly as benign as the Jedi, but those groups weren’t the Sith. “They are long gone, every school child in the Republic knows that.”

Those brown eyes stared at her for a moment, and for a second Padme could swear she saw disappointment on Leia’s face. “Do they?” Leia asked her in an openly mocking tone, and Padme was surprised how much that little jab hurt.

Leia’s eyes slid past Padme’s, and she looked out the hatchway. Her smile was fierce and the opposite of friendly as she remarked “How fortunate then that I was never a child in the Republic.” Her eyes came back to Padme, and they were full of challenge. “Because unlike you, and the posturing peacock over there,” and here she jerked her thumb over in Master Jinn’s direction “I know
a Sith when I see one.”

Eirtae’s made a derisive noise in the back of her throat at that statement, but Padme felt a small ball of unease flutter in her stomach. Eirtae didn’t know Leia. If she thought about it, Padme really didn’t either. But what she had seen over the last day suggested that even when Leia was saying the most fantastical things, she tended to be right. Hadn’t Leia known Ani would win that impossibly deadly race?

Leia’s words also suggested she had seen another Sith, besides this one. Padme wanted to laugh this all off as nothing more than the ramblings of a paranoid lunatic who had lived too long on a hostile world. But Leia didn’t strike her as unhinged. More often than not Leia had seemed to be the voice of reason, for all that she said things that made Padme, and Master Jinn, deeply uncomfortable. And there was no boasting or pleading in her tone. Leia said what she believed to be true and was going to let Padme decided whether to believe.

Sith or not, the person laying out dead on the ramp was very real. In all the chaos of the last few minutes, Padme had managed to very carefully not think about why someone like that was out here in the middle of nowhere. “He was here for me,” Padme said softly, eyes not leaving the covered figure.

“Yes,” Leia’s voice was uncompromising.

Eirtae made a worried noise. Padme blinked and brought her attention back to her handmaiden. She was staring at Padme with open censure on her face. Oh, of course. There was no way that anyone would be that intent on killing a handmaiden. Eirtae was upset that Leia knew Padme’s real identity. Surprising, given how dismissive the woman had been of her over the last few minutes, Leia came to Padme’s defense. “Padme didn’t break protocol,” she told Eirtae “I recognized her from the bounties posted on the holonet.”

Eirtae turned her anger on a new target “Is that supposed to reassure me?”

Leia shrugged “No, it just is.” She pointed to the body on the ramp “Just like he is a Sith and was here for Padme.”

“You are not very comforting,” Padme wheezed, fear clenching her heart.

Leia looked at her critically “Do you want me to be?” she asked.

Nothing but studied neutrality in that voice. But there was something about the way the woman stood, in the angle of the tilt of her head, and the seriousness of her gaze. All of her body language reminded Padme of someone, she just couldn’t place who at this moment. But this was a test of some kind, she was sure of that.

Padme wondered if she really was the naive girl Leia had accused her of being not even a day ago. She would have laughed at that notion if someone had told her that a week ago. Even as close as two days ago, she would have argued that naive was the last thing she was as she and her court were marched off to an internment camp. But all of the events that had happened since she stepped foot on this planet, the existence of slavery still in the galaxy, the wanton corruption of the Hutts, her mysterious attacker, made her wonder if Leia had a point. The last two days had shown her that the galaxy was infinitely harsher and crueler place then she thought it to be, and Padme’s belief that she could handle what ruling would bring into her life was woefully ignorant.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and mentally ordered herself to get a grip. Padme had
already been threatened several times in the last few days, she wasn’t sure why this one was bothering her so much. Maybe because she had names to go with the people who had been doing the threatening before. Nute Gunray’s face, as he ordered the droids to “process them” was very clear in Padmé’s mind. But just because she didn’t understand all the players that had become involved, didn’t mean she couldn’t learn more about them now.

“No,” Padmé said, straightening her shoulders, and meeting Leia’s gaze head-on. She couldn’t seem to bring her voice under control, but she wasn’t going to cower in the corner like a scared child “It just is.”

There was a flash of respect in the woman’s face, along with something else Padmé couldn’t identify, and there was the slightest lessening of tension in the woman’s shoulders. Leia wanted to like Padmé, but she kept testing her. Why?

No matter. What mattered was that it was time to think, not react, and puzzle over what Leia had said. If it was true, Padmé had no idea what this monster’s motive to even be here was.

She frowned “Why would a Sith be after me?” she said, looking back at Leia. If the woman wanted to test her, Padmé would indulge her. Padmé was very good at passing tests, and she might learn more from Leia than the woman intended to tell her.

Leia’s eyebrow cocked “Why do you think?” she asked, neutrally.

So Leia was that type of teacher. Palpatine was more fond of giving long lectures to Padmé and then quizzing her on the most obscure topics he brought up. But Padmé’s first teacher, Grandmother Alabre Naberie, she had often questioned Padmé this way.

Padmé took a deep breath in, and then let it out slowly, trying to get her whirling mind to focus. She tried to think about it from every angle, but nothing about what had happened over the last few months made any sense in the context of what she knew about the Sith.

“I have no idea,” she confessed. “I understand the Trade Federation’s motivation. They want more money, more control, and a tighter grip on the trading done within the hyper lane routes of the Mid Rim worlds.” She swallowed, and then said as neutrally as she could “I can even understand why they choose Naboo. We are a small world, not high in political importance, but we have a lively surplus of goods we sell to other worlds, and all our wealth is built on that. We look like an easy target.”

Looked like, but not was. Padmé herself was an example of that. She was here, wasn’t she? And not in some camp, being tortured, until she gave the Trade Federation what they wanted. Her people would not bend so easily.

Leia’s smile was full of approval, and she nodded her head, encouraging Padmé to go on. Padmé shoved thoughts of what was being done to her world, possibly her family, away. All it would do was distract her from the now. She went on, her voice growing stronger as she stated her conclusions “If what you are saying is true, that my attacker is a Sith, then it doesn’t make any sense about why they would even get involved in this. All the history I was taught said they were interested in galactic conquest through war.”

Leia nodded her head “For once, the history you were taught is correct,” she said. “So what does that mean for you and your world?”

Padmé splayed her hands out “We have no army on Naboo, no experienced fighters to be drafted. My people could be pressed into building weapons, but we are mostly farmers and craftsman. As a
workforce, we would require months of training to switch to that type of manufacturing. We don’t
have enough natural resources on our world to even build the machines needed to conquer another
planet, never mind the galaxy.”

Leia’s looked approving, and while Padme was elated that the woman thought she wasn’t useless,
she was puzzled over why Leia was so happy. She admitted to her ignorance, and still hadn’t come
up with the answer. Irritated, Padme asked, “Are you seriously saying that the monsters that were
destroyed at the beginning of the Republic, was resurrected simply to win a trade dispute?”

Leia’s face was still smooth, but her eyes sharpened in interest “No, that would be ridiculous.”
Padme frowned, that was what she had been saying all along. “What I’m saying is that they were
never destroyed, and are seizing an opportunity as it is presented to them.”

Padme shook her head “And how would you release such violence from Naboo?”

Leia looked at her critically, “Why are you defining war as simply violence?” she asked.

“Because that is what it is,” Eirtae hissed. Leia’s eyes flicked to the blonde, then back to Padme.

“Do you agree?” Leia asked. Nothing in her voice or body language to give away what she thought
herself.

Padme opened her mouth, a “Yes,” forming on her lips, then slowly closed it shut. She thought of
the last few months on Naboo with the blockade in place. The economic instability, the rationing of
food, and especially of the medicines they were incapable of producing themselves. There was a lot
of discontent on Naboo, and while it hadn’t dissolved into violence yet, Padme knew the potential
was there. She thought of how worse it would be if a pandemic broke out now. Or if any of Naboo’s
crops failed. Those mutterings could easily spread into a full-blown panic, and mob rule. Those
feelings had already toppled the political reign of King Veruna, and he had been in power since
before Padme was born. She had used those feelings to get elected.

“No,” she said, her gaze meeting Leia’s, “I think economics and trade are one way to bring an
enemy to its knees without firing a shot. You can eliminate an entire world, without the use of a
single bomb. It just takes longer.” And require patience, lots and lots of patience. But it was also not
as attention-getting as dropping a bomb, or an invasion. If the Trade Federation had started with a
bombing of Naboo, the outrage in the Senate would have been immense. But they hadn’t had they?
They had started small and built up to what they were doing. Even now, before they invaded her
world, the Senate had ruled that the blockade was legal. And would they still think that it was legal,
if her people started dying off from lack of needed supplies?

She said the next part slowly, as the thought coalesced in her mind. “The Trade Federation was
waging war on us.”

Leia nodded “Yes, they are.”

Padme closed her eyes. If only she had thought of it that way before all of this, she would have
handled this entire situation differently. Padme shoved that aside. She would dwell on this new
understanding later. Grandmother Alabre had always said, focus on the now. When you have time to
breath is how you figure out how to avoid the next trap.

Padme returned to the point that was relevant to her now. “I ask again, why pick Naboo? We aren’t
vitaly important to the economy of the Republic. We aren’t near a major hyper lane that you can
attack other worlds from. We have no natural resources that that you couldn’t find more of on another
planet. If what you are suggesting is true that the Sith are behind this,”
“Big if,” Eirtae snorted. Unable to keep her tone respectful. She was clearly losing patience with this farcical thought exercise. But Padme wasn’t done yet. No, she didn’t believe what Leia was saying, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t learning anything of value.

“Then why pick our world?” Padme pressed. If Leia was going to act as a teacher, then Padme wasn’t moving until she understood the lesson the woman was trying to lead her to. “Surely they don’t think taking Naboo will lead them to conquer the whole galaxy?”

Leia’s eyebrows quirked, and the smile on her face was warm. “No, not directly. But the largest avalanche can start with the smallest rock.”

Eirtae shook her head, “All subjection and speculation,” she said, voice firm. She looked critically at Leia “Even if you are right about the identity of the attacker, and that is a very big if, you could be wrong about his motives.”

Leia’s eyes focused in on Padme’s advisor “I could be,” she allowed. Then a look of deep grief passed over her face “But I’m not.”

Padme wanted to ask Leia what avalanche she thought would be started by a trade crisis, and how she was so certain of Padme’s attacker’s motives, but Panaka’s angry voice cut through her thoughts, “I don’t care, we are not bringing that body on board.” His angry tone was enough to bring her attention back to her more current problem.

Padme looked to Leia, then to Sabe, thinking hard. Her handmaiden’s face appeared to be remote, but Padme knew Sabe. She was losing patience with all of this, especially with Padme. They all had family on Naboo, and this pointless bickering was only delaying their arrival on Coruscant. It was time for Padme to stop this dithering and get her thoughts in order. She side glanced at Eirtae’s doubting face. She agreed with the blonde woman, what Leia said was nonsensical, and a flight of fancy. The Sith were gone. And if they hadn’t been eliminated a thousand years ago, at the founding of the Republic, Leia had failed to convince her that they would resurface now.

Then her eyes fell on Leia’s face. She had retreated into a blank mask, one Padme couldn’t even begin to make sense of what it was hiding. Again, the nagging feeling of familiarity was tugging at Padme’s mind. She was sure she had never met Leia Solo before yesterday, but the woman seemed so familiar. It was the way she carried herself, her body language, something that was just on the tip of Padme’s tongue, and if she could put it together, she was sure she would gain some insight into this woman.

Leia was returning Padme’s stare, not moving her eyes as she waited for a decision on Padme’s part. Well, wasn’t everyone on this ship? The longer they looked at each other, the more disappointment Padme could see flickering into that blank façade. Finally, Leia’s eyes fell in defeat, and she tilted her head to look at the bickering trio in the hatchway.

That small movement and the disappointed hopes clicked something in Padme’s head. Grandmother Alabre, she had looked at Padme like that sometimes. While Padme’s parents were always somewhat in awe of their daughter’s talents, her grandmother never had once let Padme coast along the easiest path. She was always pushing and challenging Padme.

About a year ago, as Padme was seeking advice on whether she should run for the Throne, she had visited her grandmother in her workshop, and asked what she had thought.

The woman hadn’t even looked up from her weaving as she said “You know what you are going to do, why are you wasting my time asking frivolous questions?”
Padme had recoiled back. This was a hard decision, the hardest of her life, and she wanted advice. Instead, she had gotten a dismissal and an insult of her abilities.

It didn’t take long before anger clawed its way up her throat. “Why are you like this?” she demanded of the woman.

Grandmother Alabre’s loom didn’t lose it’s smooth rhythm of clack, clack, as she answered “Because it is who I am, you might as well complain about water being wet,” she observed. “If you wanted pretty words, and someone to hold your hand, you should have gone to someone else.”

Padme pulled her hair in frustration, “No, not that. Why are you always so hard on me? You don’t treat Sola this way.”

Grandmother’s voice was cutting “I don’t love Sola anymore then I love you,” she said. “And now you are being silly as well as wasting my time.”

Padme stomped her foot, “No, you aren’t any nicer to her then you are to me. But you don’t push her like you do me. Whatever I do, it’s not enough for you. I get the best grades in my class, you tell me I should be getting the best grades in my region. I excel in the Apprentice Legislators, and you tell me that I should be involved in charity programs, not flattering my ego. I go on mercy missions to other worlds, you tell me that I should be in the Legislative Youth Program learning how to make a difference. Why is what I do never enough?”

The click-clack of the loom stopped, but Padme couldn’t see what was going on through the tears of frustration in her eyes. So, she was startled when she felt a hand cup her cheek.

“I don’t love Sola more than I love you,” Grandmother repeated, for once her voice soft “But I look at you, and I see me.” Her thumb brushed aside the tear that was falling down Padme’s cheek. “And I was never easy on myself.”

Padme blinked, “But-“

Grandmother’s weathered hands came up and cupped her cheeks, “Even at a young age I could see you were destined for more than just a simple life. You are smart and quick, and that helps, but you are filled with so much ambition that it scares me.” Those hands fell away.

Padme blinked “I don’t understand,” she said, looking around the room, “You think I would abandon my family just to pursue power?”

“I don’t now,“ Grandmother said. “Because I taught you better.” She grabbed Padme’s hands in her own. “You think you will understand what I will tell you now, but it won’t be until you are older that you will truly comprehend.”

Grandmother’s eye were sad and haunted, “There is a spine of durasteel to you, girl. You do not break. And that can be a great gift.” Padme wondered if it was such a great gift, why her Grandmother was crying about it. “But if I hadn’t taught you to temper your arrogance, your belief that you know best, it would have led you to places that were dangerous to go. Both for you, and those around you.”

“But-“

“Shush, and listen Padme,” Grandmother’s voice was back to its firm, no-nonsense attitude, “But there was a cost to what I did. You have a heart, and the will to use it. But if you are not careful, both will shatter you into a million pieces because it is not in your nature to bend, any more then it is mine to be nice.”
“I don’t think I know best!” Padme protested.

“Oh yes you do,” Grandmother said, releasing Padme’s hands and going back to her loom, “I said I tempered it, not purged it from you completely. You think you know how to solve all the galaxy’s ills, and if people would just get out of your way, you could. That’s why I knew you were running for the Throne the moment you opened your mouth to ask the question. There is plenty wrong right now on Naboo, and you think you can fix it.”

“You make me sound awful!” Padme protested.

“Why?” Grandmother asked, “Because you see a problem, and want to fix it?”

“No, because you make it sound like I would do anything to get what I want.”

Grandmother shook her head “No, Padme, you will never be able to discount the costs of anything. And I hope I’ve taught you the difference between ‘learning’, and how to learn.” The loom resumed it’s clacking rhythm, and that had been the end of that conversation.

Grandmother had died a few months after that, she hadn’t lived to see Padme take the throne, but Padme had tried to take the woman’s words to heart.

And her she saw an echo of that in Leia. Her grandmother never explained how she had learned the lesson of what her arrogance had cost her. She wasn’t one to wail about the unfairness of anything, simply dug her hands in and got to work. But there was an underlying note of sadness in the woman. A note that Leia possessed too, enhanced by the fact that she moved like a younger version of Grandmother Alabre.

The expression on Leia’s face looked so like Padme’s grandmother then. When the woman had left a puzzle for Padme to solve and was hoping she would get it right, but wasn’t going to tell her the way, because that would defeat the purpose of the lesson. And her grandmother was right, Padme did need to listen. No, she didn’t think Leia was right, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t making good points.

Padme turned to make sure that she had Sabe’s attention. She then flicked her eyes outside, and tapped her fingers twice on her leg, to say “Yes.” Sabe’s back slumped just the slightest in relief that she could finally speak and end this quarreling. Her voice betrayed none of that, keeping to the smooth slow cadence that was the voice of Queen Amidala, “We owe the Jedi much Captain. I don’t see the harm in honoring their request.”

Panaka looked taken aback, and his eyes slid over to Padme, well aware of who he had to convince. “But Your Majesty- “ he started to say.

Sabe’s voice became cold, both at his refusal to obey, and the fact that he had made such an obvious blunder that could expose Padme. “And we don’t have time to argue about this. I need to get to Coruscant.”
At her imperious command, the rest of the people who were loitering in the bay began to drift away. The show was over, and a decision was made. They probably all had duties to see to, Padme thought, now that they knew they were going to leave shortly. Or they were in search of a place to sleep.

“The freezer for the food supplies is almost empty,” Padawan Kenobi said, in a much more conciliatory tone than his master used. ‘We could put the body there.”

Panaka wasn’t happy, but he did respect the chain of command, no matter how he disagreed with the order. Padme supposed this was the first time she had so publicly contradicted what he wanted and advised her to do. That was the only reason she could think of that he was having such a hard time with this. “Alright,” he said through gritted teeth, but he was unable to leave it at that though “Before it’s brought onto this ship though, I will inspect the corpse myself to make sure there aren’t any booby traps on it.”

That was something people did? Why? Once you were dead, what was the point? Were their people that spiteful in the galaxy?

“There aren’t any.” Ani’s voice floated into the room, sure and confident.

Padme turned and wondered how distracted she was that she hadn’t noticed him enter. He was alone, at least Padme didn’t see Shmi anywhere. Leia didn’t look surprised to see him, but then she wouldn’t.

Padme wasn’t the only one who had turned to stare. Everybody was looking at him now, ranging from the disbelieving from Panaka to the worried from Padawan Kenobi. He stood there, looking back at all of them. As the silence grew longer, he started fidgeting and looked like he desperately wished he hadn’t opened his mouth.

“I’m not lying,” he muttered defensively, arms crossing “There aren’t any.”

Leia sighed and walked over to him. She reached out and tousled his hair, and Ani looked up at her, puzzlement in his eyes. “I know you aren’t lying Old Man,” she said fondly, then cupped his chin, so he would looked her straight in the eyes “But I don’t think these are the kind of people used to a nine-year-olds confidently proclaiming things like that as if they were fact.”

“It is a fact!” Ani protested.

Leia’s smile was sad, and she pulled him into a quick hug, “I know,” she said, weariness in her voice. Padme noticed that Padawan Kenobi had transferred his questioning gaze from Ani to Leia.

Ani sighed and pulled back from Leia’s embrace. He wasn’t feeling too sure though, because he grabbed her hand, twisting his small fingers into hers. “I thought I wouldn’t have to hide me.” He looked at the two Jedi, “at least not with them. Like I was when you first came, only now I could listen all the time.”

Leia looked warily over at the two Jedi. “Apparently they don’t hear as well either,” she said.

“Freak,” Ani muttered, looking heartbrokenly lost “I’m still a freak. I thought at least at the Temple I wouldn’t be.”

Leia frowned and looked down at him, “Hey,” she said pulling her hand out of his “If that is what you are, so am I,” then tapped him lightly on the nose, and asked playfully “Are you calling me a freak?” she mocked growled.
Ani’s face shifted from unhappy to stern, “You are not!” he said, shaking his finger in her face “You are my Leia!”

“Exactly,” Leia said, nodding her head in agreement “And if I’m not a freak, then you aren’t either.”

Ani looked like he didn’t quite believe her but desperately wanted to. “Okay,” he agreed. Then he peered at the Jedi. Master Jinn looked like he wanted to ask both of them more about what exactly the two of them meant, and Padawan Kenobi looked wary and upset. “But I don’t think they agree with you,” he said so softly that Padme almost didn’t catch the words.

“I don’t care what they think,” Leia said, just as quietly so that the Jedi couldn’t hear. But she didn’t seem too worried about Padme, and her blatant eavesdropping. “I care what you think about yourself, okay? You worry too much about how other people see you, and you will drive yourself mad.”

“It’s hard,” Ani said, shifting on his feet.

“Yes, it is,” Leia said, “Especially because you like people more then I do, but trust me on this okay?”

Ani nodded.

Sabe looked over at Padme, an eyebrow arched. She hadn’t caught the whole conversation, but she had heard enough to be curious as to what was going on. Padme could only shake her head. Things were going on in this conversation that Padme could take a very good guess at, but for Ani’s safety thought it was better not to confirm anything. Padme couldn’t tell what she didn’t know.

Panaka, realizing that his anger had hit an unintended target, spoke up, addressing Ani “I didn’t mean to imply I thought you were lying Mister…” his voice trailed off, and he frowned “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?” All his stiffness melted away, as he focused on the little boy who was looking so lost in the receiving bay.

Leia smiled at Panaka, a real one, and Ani looked at him surprised at being addressed as a “Mister.” “It’s uh Anakin, sir. Anakin Skywalker.”

“Mister Skywalker,” Panaka said, tilting his head. “I don’t doubt you believe what you say. But it’s my job to see to the Queen's safety, first and foremost. So, I need to check anyway.”

“Oh,” Ani said, looking a little relieved “Okay. Thank you for letting me know.”

“Of course,” Panaka’s friendly demeanor melted away as soon as his eyes meet Master Jinn’s. That man seemed to have that effect on a lot of people “If you gentlemen would help me?”

Padme watched the three men exit the hatch, and she looked away as Padawan Kenobi started to remove the blanket. She didn’t need to be here for this, and she wanted a report from Eirtae on just how things had gone down on the ship while she had been gone. Padme caught sight of Ani, still standing beside Leia and wondered about him.

He was a strange little boy, there was no arguing that, although she would never call him a freak even in the darkest corner of her mind. She owed him everything, he was the one who had gotten them the parts that they needed. It was the how he managed to do that, that worried Padme.

She didn’t know much about Force Sensitive children. Not only that, she didn’t know anybody who knew much about Force itself. The ones which were discovered were sent away so young to one of the Jedi temples, that she wasn’t sure how one raised outside of that life would act.
Padme didn’t know much about the Jedi other than what she had been taught in school. She had thought the stories of what they could do were exaggerated. Padme certainly hadn’t expected to encounter one in the courtyard of her palace to rescue her. She wondered, for the first time, how these two had even gotten involved in all of this. Master Jinn said that he had been sent on behalf of the Chancellor, but Padme couldn’t imagine that Senate had approved the mission. She was grateful the Chancellor had gone around them. She wasn’t sure that the ordinary guards for Ambassadors would have been able to achieve even a tenth of what the Jedi had already done. It turns out that all those stories she had dismissed as propaganda had underplayed what they were capable of.

Padme’s stomach let out a large gurgle, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten when she had returned to the ship. Sabe caught her eyes, and Padme understood that her handmaiden would play Queen a little longer, and oversee the corpse being brought on board, while Padme ate something.

Padme looked at Ani and Leia and wondered about them. She held her hand out to Ani, as she asked “You hungry? Because I certainly am.”

He brightened, and the shadows fell away from his eyes. “Yes!” he said.

“Let’s get you some food then,” she said as he came over and took her hand. She looked at Leia, who had a wistful expression on her face as she looked at them. “What about you?” she asked.

Leia brought her face up to look at Padme “Yes,” she said. “But what I would like is a shower, if you have the water.” She grimaced “It’s been a while since I’ve used anything but a sonic.”

“Of course,” Padme said, “I’ll show you the way.” It was the least she could do to repay these two for everything they had done. Eirtae fell in line behind her, and the four of them headed to the mess.

Leia didn’t end up joining them for their meal in the small mess. Padme didn’t know if it was because she took that long to shower, or if she had found food somewhere else. But Ani was lively company all on his own, so she didn’t mind much. He had a quick mind and seemed not to have a shy bone in his body as he went on about the mechanics of pod racing, the trouble he and his friends got into on Tatooine, and a great deal of gossip about the goings on in Jabba’s palace. He chattered the entire meal, in between shoving as much food as he could into his mouth. Padme marveled at how much of it Ani managed to pack away.

But when he started yawning, she asked Eirtae, who had accompanied them to the mess, to find his mother, and make sure the had somewhere to sleep.

“Where are you going?” Ani asked, rubbing his eyes sleepily. It was adorable, although she realized he was at the age where he probably wouldn’t appreciate that sentiment said out loud.

She smiled sadly, “Now that I have eaten, and am not so grumpy, I need to give my report to the Queen.”

“Okay,” he said, without missing a beat. He certainly didn’t have a problem keeping the secret of her dual identity, Padme thought ruefully, as she headed into the hallway to look for Sabe.

She found Rabe, who was standing guard over the “Queen’s” quarters. The woman put a hand out to stop Padme from entering.

“She’s sleeping Padme,” she said in a low voice, “If this is truly important, then, by all means, wake her, but she has had a very trying couple of days.”
Padme too had a hard last few days, but Sabe had never been subtle, and she was very unhappy with Padme. Padme didn’t doubt the woman was tired, she could imagine that the last day hadn’t been fun for Sabe, cooped up in this ship, with a group of very anxious people, and Padme, the woman she had sworn to protect, running around on an unknown, and very hostile world. But if she had wanted to, she would have stayed up. Padme had seen her go once without sleep for two days.

But Padme had come back, from a trip Sabe hadn’t wanted her to go on, and then ignored Sabe’s suggestion for sleep and food. To make matters worse, because Padme had done that, Sabe had to deal with the consequences of those foolish choices. As Master Jinn and Panaka had gotten into an argument, further straining an already tense mood, Padme hadn’t been focused enough to make a decision quickly.

As punishments went, it was effective. Padme hated not knowing. But she knew that the debrief of what had happened when she was gone wasn’t necessary right now. It could wait while everyone involved slept. Sabe was also aware that Padme would be reluctant to push her people too hard right now. Their future was very uncertain, and they should all rest when they could.

Padme’s shoulders slumped “I’ll come back later,” she said, turning to go back down the hallway.

Rabe abandoned her post by the door and stood in front of Padme. “You should sleep too,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “You look terrible.”

Padme blinked “I’m not tired,” she protested.

Rabe snorted, “Your face says otherwise.”

Padme shook her head “I can’t sleep,” she said.

“At least find somewhere to lay down and close your eyes,” Rabe suggested. “Eirtae is already in the handmaidens’ room. We aren’t going to arrive on Coruscant for at least half a day. In four hours Sabe wanted to get up, and we can all debrief then.” Rabe reached out and squeezed her shoulder. “You rest while you can.”

Padme was too keyed up to sleep, but she didn’t want to worry Rabe. So she nodded her head and went down the hallway heading towards the handmaidens’ cabin. She wasn’t going to stop there, though. No, she wasn’t going to wake Sabe, but she needed more intelligence on what was going on. Hitting upon an idea, she turned quickly and headed to the left towards the lift. Pressing a button, she took it down to the main communications hub of the ship. Sabe couldn’t give her a report right now, but that didn’t mean, but she couldn’t avail herself of the little information that was available.

The lights were off in the room when she entered it, the trail of her orange dress flowing behind her. Quickly she strode over to the communications panel and accessed all the of the incoming holo transmissions.

With a flick of her fingers, a miniature holo of Sio Bibble popped up. The governor of Naboo looked like he had aged a year since she had last seen him. His voice was quavering, and she could see the tremors in his hands, even through the bad quality of the holo.

“Your Majesty please,” he said, “I don’t know what to do.” He looked over to the side, eyes flickering to whoever was in the room with him, and off camera. “The death toll is catastrophic.” He pleaded into the void. “We must bow to their wishes. You must contact me.”

Padme shut it off, not wanting to see anymore. Bilbo looked scared and frightened, and she doubted that he had made that call willingly. He must have been recaptured. And what of, Yane and Sache?
They had stayed behind with him. Were they even now, being tortured to reveal where Padme had gone?

Naboo was a peaceful world, and there had been no call for military service in hundreds of years. But there was no precedent, no ritual words Padme knew to help these people if, no when, they freed her world. At least that was true among the human population, she didn’t know if the same was true among the Gungans. Oh, they were certainly enough rumors and fear mongering among some of the more small-minded citizens of Naboo that implied they were a warlike race, uncaring of anything but glory. But if that were the case, they would have conquered the humans living on Naboo long ago.

“Are you alright?” a voice asked into the darkness.

Padme whirled around, completely taken by surprise. She had been sure she was alone in this room when she entered. The voice had come from the small alcove that framed the eating table. With the dimmed lights in the room, she could just make out a small shadow figure sitting on the floor, staring at her intently. For the briefest of moments, Padme was convinced it was a gerubine, the monster of all Naboo children, who had come to take her away. Her grandmother had warned of them, small creatures who loved children so much, that they would steal them away to live with them in their dark worlds.

Then her eyes adjusted to the light, and the small otherworldly creature faded away to reveal Ani sitting there. She berated herself for her panic. She shook off the old childhood monster of her youth. She hadn’t believed that story when her grandmother had told her them when she was a child, there was no need to indulge in the fanciful now.

Then a small snore caught her attention, and she moved her gaze slightly to the right to see Jar-Jar sitting on a chair, feet propped up on the table, snoring away. She felt herself flush. She had been so intent on seeing the holo message that she had completely ignored the fact that this room was occupied.

Padme brought her mind back to the little boy, who was staring at her, openly curious. “Why are you here?” Padme asked. She thought she had instructed Eirtae to find him somewhere to sleep.

Ani shrugged “There wasn’t anywhere else to put us,” he said. He looked around the room “It’s not so bad. Mom and I have slept in worse places.”

Padme blinked and took several steps forward. As she moved closer, the table stopped blocking her view of Shmi, who was laid out on the floor, a blanket propped under her head, and another one wrapped around her.

“If you are supposed to be asleep, what are you still doing up?” Padme asked, walking all the way over to him, and kneeling in front of him.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he said, drawing in on himself. He was trying to sound like he didn’t care, but this close, Padme could see the shivers running through his body. He had given his mother his blanket. Padme realized so that she could be comfortable and warm. Padme wasn’t sure why she was so surprised by the gesture. Ani was nothing if not heart, even if it left him cold, and unable to sleep.

Frowning she got up and walked over to one of the side storage units. Rummaging around, she quickly found what she was looking for and pulled a blanket out. Coming back over to Ani, she sat on the floor and handed it to him. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I should have thought to make it clearer that you and your mother should have an actual room, not just somewhere to sleep.”

Ani grabbed the blanket from her “I told you,” he said, “there is nothing left.”
“Well at least I should have made sure that you had enough blankets,” Padme said.

“Why?” he asked confused, as he wrapped the blanket around him.

“Because you come from a warm planet,” She felt a small smile stretch her face “A little too warm for my tastes,” she confessed. “And space is very cold, even for the seasoned traveler.”

Ani snuggled into the blanket, and he looked a little silly, with the bright red fabric, and it’s intricate patterns sewn into it against his well-worn desert clothes, but Padme noticed that his shivering lessened.

“Not that,” Ani said, “I know other worlds are colder than Tatooine.”

Padme blinked “You do?”

He nodded seriously “Leia complains about the heat all the time.” So Leia wasn’t from Tatooine. And she said she wasn’t a child of the Republic. So where exactly was she from? And what was her connection to the Skywalkers?

“I mean, why should you care that I was cold?” Ani asked. “Or sleeping on the floor?”

Padme pulled her mind away from the puzzle of Leia Solo and found herself blinking in surprise at the honest confusion in Ani’s voice. “Because it’s polite,” she stammered “Because you helped me, and the least I can do is see to your comfort, and space is cold.”

“Okay,” Ani didn’t look convinced. Then his eyes flickered to where the holo had been projecting a few moments ago. “Was he talking about your people?” he asked.

Padme nodded. Ani’s eyes flew back to her face. “Can I help?” he asked.

Padme’s heart swelled at this sweet offer. He had already done so much for her, simply because she had asked. He had lived a life that she knew was a horror on every level, and he still had so much love and compassion to give. She knelt down and looked in straight in the eyes “No, this is something I have to do.”

Ani’s eyes widened “Are you going to fight?” he whispered. “Do you have an army?”

Padme laughed out loud “No, nothing like that.” Then the laughter faded away “I need to convince the Senate to intervene. Only I don’t know how.”

Ani looked disappointed. “I don’t really know anything about how to help that way,” he said sadly. “Leia’s been teaching me how to be arti-” his tongue stumbled over the word. “Art-” he tried again.

Not liking how frustrated he was looking, and noticing for the first time the circles under his eyes, Padme said softly “Articulate?”

He nodded “Yes. That one. She says words are your first, and best weapon.”

“So a bad philosophy,” Padme agreed.

He blinked “What does that word mean?”

Padme started “Philosophy?”

Ani nodded “Yes. Leia says if you use big words, you need to tell people what they mean. Otherwise, you are just using them to make other people feel small.”
Leia was very bossy, Padme thought ruefully, but once again Padme agreed with her point. “It means an idea or a set of morals to live by.”

“Oh.” Ani tried the word “Philomena?”

Padme said very clearly “Phil-loss-a-fee.”

Ani cocked his head, and then said very slowly back “Phil-loss-a-fee.” He nodded to himself and started repeating “Philoss-a-fee. Philossa-fee. Philosophy?” he looked to Padme for confirmation.

She smiled and nodded her head “Perfect,” she said.

“Huh, gonna have to remember that one,” Ani looked pleased with himself “Might come in handy when Leia goes on one of her lectures.”

His desire to learn, and to win, just might match Padme’s own. “Along with the curse words Leia used on Sebulba?” she teased.

Ani grinned, “Yeah. But unlike those words, I can say this one in front of Leia.” He let out a loud yawn.

“I should go,” Padme said, starting to rise to her feet, and was surprised by the wave of exhaustion that hit her suddenly. “and let you sleep.” Perhaps Rabe had been right, and she was more tired than she thought. She looked down at Ani. She felt bad that this boy, who had done so much for her people was going to sleep on this cold hard floor “Unless you want to share a bunk with me?” she offered impulsively “We are both small, I think we’ll fit.”

Ani looked at her, and she could see the temptation to take her up on her offer. Then his gaze fell back on his Mom. He shook his head. “I can’t,” he said regretfully “If I leave while Mom is sleeping like this. If she wakes up and I’m not here-” his voice trailed off as he looked at Padme, willing her to understand what he wasn’t saying.

Strange place, in space, and her son suddenly gone? Padme couldn’t imagine the nightmares Shmi had with that very situation being a real possibility.

“I understand,” Padme assured him, and patted him on the knee, and started to get up.

“Oh, wait” he cried out, catching her hand in one of his. He gave a guilty look at his Mother and Jar-Jar. Neither one of them had woken up at the loud exclamation. Breathing a sigh of relief, his other arm came out from underneath his blanket, cradling something in it. “I made this for you,” he said shyly. “So, you would remember me.”

Curious Padme reached out and grasped what was in his hand. It was a small little trinket, off-white in color, with symbols carved into it. It spoke of craftsmanship and was handmade, not manufactured in a factory.

“I carved it out of a japor snippet,” Ani said shyly, “It will bring you good fortune.”

He had made this for her? When? “It’s beautiful,” she whispered, clutching her hand around it. Just when she thought she understood the depths of this boy’s heart, he showed even more kindness. But the worry underneath his words bothered her. She leaned forward, and looked in straight in the eyes, “But I don’t need this to remember you by.”

“Really?” Ani asked. How many people had gone through his life, and not seen him. Just dismissed him into the background? Or stared too closely, awed by the power that lived under his skin. How
many people saw just Ani?

Padme nodded, “Trust me Ani, there is no way I could ever forget you.”

Ani looked relieved “Good because I know will meet again.” He sounded so sure. Padme wasn’t even sure she would live to see the next sunrise.

“I hope we do,” she said.

He looked at her, those blue eyes looking at something she couldn't see. “No,” he said, almost all emotion gone from his voice, “We will, I can see it.”

Padme shivered, then tried to lighten this strange mood he was in “Really? What am I wearing?”

He frowned, and his eyes squinted as if he was trying to peer into a cloudy mirror. Then he was a little boy again “I don’t know,” he admitted ruefully, head ducking down in embarrassment “I just know that it’s important we do.”

“Well,” Padme said standing up, “When you figure out when we will, please let me know. I never did like being late for important appointments.”

Padme had just gotten to sleep, or maybe she had been asleep for hours, she was in that state where it was hard to tell. Angry voices broke into her consciousness and shattered whatever peace she had found. Groaning she rolled over in her bunk, trying to ignore whoever was speaking, but it was too late now. Her anxious mind seized on the low, angry tones and had decided that she needed to know what was going on. She wasn’t going back to sleep, no matter how her rational brain tried to argue that was the best idea.

Huffing Padme sat up in the little bed, remembering just in time not to hit her head on the bottom of the bunk above her. She looked over, and saw Eirtae asleep in the bunk across the way, snoring lightly.

She sighed, and as quietly as she could, she slid out of bed. Pulling on her outer robe over her clothes, she entered into the hallway without bothering to draw up the hood.

As she followed the sound of voices to their source, she scowled when she made out who was speaking. Why was Panaka arguing with Master Jinn? Again? If this was another posturing contest between the two of them, she didn’t care how undignified it would be, she would knock their heads together.

Winding her way down the hallway, she fervently prayed that these two had only woken up her. She was surprised when she spotted them standing just outside the door to the cockpit. They were so intent on one another that neither man noticed her approaching. Padme was just about to order them both the shut the hell up when the slightest flick of orange deeper in the room caught her eye. One of the pilots was at the helm, which meant she, Padme, couldn't do the easy thing and order them to grow up.

She was now only five feet from them, and neither man had noticed her, although Panaka could perhaps be excused since his back was to her. His words came out hotly as he spat “We need to greet them when we arrive. The Jedi might be able to brush aside such trivialities as common courtesy, but her Highness cannot afford to alienate anyone.”

“And as I have explained several times already,” Master Jinn, leaning forward trying to use his
greater height to intimidate Panaka, “I can holo ahead and arrange for the greeting party to be delayed.”

“Oh, can you?” Panaka sneered.

“Gentle beings!” Padme snapped. Panaka immediately turned around, and she saw him catching himself before he gave a bow of contrition. Master Jinn was also staring at her, his tan face turned the tiniest bit pink in his embarrassment. Padme wondered if they were ashamed because they had woken her, or because they hadn’t noticed her approach? Padme didn’t care. Balling her fists at her sides and reminding herself that screaming at them would do no good, she fought to keep her voice level. “People are trying to rest on this ship,” she said, trying her best impression of her mother when she was lecturing Padme and Sola “Can you please keep your voices down?”

Master Jinn’s face smoothed out from his faint embarrassment, into that damn studied Jedi neutrality. “My apologies Padme for waking you,” he said, taking a slight bow that befitted her pretend status. “I’m afraid I became a little carried away in pressing my point.”

Panaka also bowed, “I offer my apologies as well,” he said.

Padme tilted her head, accepting both men’s apologies. But experience told her if she walked away now, these two would be at each other’s throats within five minutes. If she wanted to go back to sleep, she needed to resolve whatever was going on between the two of them. “What seems to be the issue?” she asked warily, longing for her small bunk. “And I hope it was important enough to possibly wake the Queen from her sleep,” she said warningly, not awake enough to temper her words, but annoyed enough to show her displeasure.

Both men’s eyes slid away at that. Great, more shame but no answers. Then Leia’s voice floated over Padme’s shoulder. “And it better have been important enough to disturb my sleep. Especially since there is no caf left on this ship,” her voice became a warning and threat all at once. “Because unlike Padme, I will shoot you.”

Padme watched as fear crossed both of those faces in front of her, and for a moment envy flared through her. She knew she could live to be a hundred, and she would never be someone who just walked into a room, and everyone knew that someone dangerous had just entered. There was a small part of her jealous of the fact that while Padme had shamed the men into stopping, they were afraid of Leia’s reaction. Padme didn’t want people to be completely afraid of her, not really. She just wanted the tiniest bit of fear, just enough to make people wary and make things move just a little bit faster. Was that so much to ask?

Then Leia came up to stand directly beside Padme. Padme looked over and was almost taken aback by the comfy, stretchy, pastel blue pants and oversized top that the woman was wearing. It looked soft, fuzzy, and was something Padme would never in a million years guessed Leia owned. She was also struck anew how tiny Leia was. Padme herself wasn’t that tall, but she felt like a giant standing next to Leia. The men’s fear was all the more impressive because frankly, on the surface, Leia didn’t look all that intimidating, with her soft clothes, tiny stature, and wild wisps of hair poking out everywhere that had escaped her braid.

“I’m waiting,” Leia said, voice cranky as her arms came across her chest. Padme wouldn’t be surprised if she started tapping her foot in impatience next. If they survived all of this, Padme was going to ask Leia for lessons on how to command a room like this.

“We need to-“

“He is trying to take comm-“ both men started to speak, and Padme put up her hand before they
could embarrass themselves further, and make her, and Leia, angrier.

“One at a time,” Padme ordered.

“Padme-,” both men started to say, and both men shut their mouths at the same time. Padme shared a glance over at Leia, who was looking like she was about to find a blaster.

“Let’s try this again,” Padme said, teeth grinding in irritation. “Without the whining perhaps? It’s too late for me to soothe your egos, when what I really want is to ask Leia to shoot you for me so that I can go back to bed.”

Leia’s head snapped over to look at her, and her mouth dropped open in shock at Padme’s harsh words. Padme closed her eyes in defeat over the loss of control. She was tired, and this was the second time in less than a day these two were doing this, but that was no excuse for her poor behavior.

Standing in this hallway, and wishing that she could sink into the floor wasn’t a solution either, and wouldn’t get her back in her bed any quicker. Padme opened her eyes, expecting withering disdain, or worse, disappointment in Leia’s face. But instead of reproach, the woman was looking at her with respect. That was nice.

Padme’s eyes slid to Panaka, who looked mortified, and Master Jinn had retreated behind his ‘I’m a Jedi,’ facade. She had no idea what the pilot was thinking, but from the shaking, she could see of his shoulders, she got the impression he was trying not to laugh.

“Captain Panaka?” she asked, trying to steer everyone back to the point, and not her rude behavior, “Please go first.”

He looked embarrassed, and cleared his throat “The Jedi-“

“You mean Jedi Master Jinn?” she said through clenched teeth. The man wasn’t five, he knew better than to use the word ‘the’ in front of any word when referring to a person. Padme could deal with his hurt ego and fragile sense of uselessness. Since Naboo had been invaded, she was flailing too, but she would not tolerate rudeness.

Panaka’s dark skin flushed a bit, and his eyes went down, “Yes,” he said, voice showing he was well aware he was on thin ice. “Master Jinn,” he said correctly, and Padme felt a little flare of triumph. One battle won. “He was trying to order the pilot to land at the Jedi Temple before we met up with Senator Palpatine.”

Padme arched her eyebrow at the Jedi. That was rather presumptuous of him to issue orders on a ship that wasn’t his. A ship that belonged to a sovereign government no less.

“In theory,” her grandmother’s voice whispered in the back of her mind.

Padme shoved thoughts of the invasion aside. It wasn’t legal yet, Naboo was still recognized as being ruled by her. “Master Jinn?” she asked.

Master Jinn flushed. “I wasn’t trying to order the pilot anywhere. I was only asking if we could stop at the Temple first.”

Leia snorted. Padme wished she could nod her head in agreement with that noise. She felt though, perhaps, she had used up all the rudeness she could this night. Master Jinn might have thought it was a request, but a lot of those that came out of his mouth tended to sound like orders. Still, he had a reason for the “request,” and she would hear it before making a decision.
“And why do you want to stop at the Temple first Master Jinn?” Padme asked.

“So we can get the body of your attacker off this ship, and immediately begin our investigation into who he is.” He looked at her reproachfully “I’m afraid in cases like this, time is of the essence. We don’t know when whoever sent him will notice that he is not reporting in, but when they do, they will begin to destroy any trail between them and him. I’m afraid I allowed my enthusiasm for the chase to override my manners.”

Padme had almost forgotten about that. Well, she wasn’t going to go back to sleep with that thought in her brain. She sighed. Which made her wonder how Panaka stumbled into this in the first place. The man was supposed to be resting as well. Was he following her Jedi guard in some misguided effort to protect her perceived power on this ship? “And you Captain? What were you doing up here?”

He straightened into parade rest immediately. “I was speaking over the coms channel to Senator Palpatine.”

Padme blinked “And you didn’t think to wake the Queen?” she hissed.

Panaka looked at her startled, “No Your Hi-Padme,” he said. He must be taken off guard by her anger if he almost slipped on her title. “I didn’t think it was important enough. It was just a courtesy to let us know that Chancellor Valorum will be joining him in greeting us when we arrive.” He glared at the Jedi “And it would be rude, not to mention foolish, to keep our strongest supporter in the Senate waiting.”

Their only supporter, if Palpatine was to be believed. But Panaka was rattled enough, there was no need to add to his worries.

“And as I was trying to tell Captain Panaka,” Master Jinn said. “I am friendly with the Chancellor. It would be the work of a few minutes to get him to push the meeting back.”

“Oh, and the Chancellor always come running to do the bidding of the Jedi?” Panaka’s voice was scornful.

Master Jinn looked triumphant “No, Captain Panaka. But Finis will do it as a favor to a friend. Which we have been long before he ever was elected Chancellor.”

Panaka frowned “I thought the Jedi didn’t have friends.”

Master Jinn shrugged “A common misinterpretation,” Then a wry grin crossed his face “Besides he owes me this. He’s the one who got me involved with all of this.”

“As a favor?” Padme had wondered how the Jedi had gotten involved. All requests that Naboo had sent to the Jedi Temple for assistance in mediating this dispute had been denied. Palpatine had been very apologetic about it, but once the Senate deemed the embargo legal, there was nothing he could do. The Jedi were already spread thin, they couldn’t afford to send anyone to a world where the problem wasn’t pressing.

Master Jinn nodded “Yes.” He looked at Padme “He was very concerned about the entire situation, and was troubled by how quickly the Trade Federation managed to make this legal. He thought if I went, it might force them to settlement.” His eyes grew clouded “I fear that all we did was push them to make a rash move. It made no sense for them to invade as they did.”

Panaka frowned, clearly he hadn’t put together that the invasion had happened because the Jedi had arrived. Padme thought it was likely that any ambassadors the Chancellor sent would have spooked
the Trade Federation. They had a long game, and Chancellor Valorum hadn’t played by their timetable.

Padme cleared her throat, she didn’t have enough information on the Trade Federation right now to even guess at their motives, better to solve the problem at hand. “Since Master Jinn has found an elegant solution to our problem, I suggest the Queen will be more than happy to accede to his request.”

Panaka looked unhappy “But-”

“And I don’t think we should reward an ally who did so much for us, by possibly entangling him into a scandal involving a dead body,” Padme said gently. And Valorum had. It sounded like he had sent the Jedi himself personally, bypassing the Senate altogether. She wondered if that came to light, how much political fallout there would be. “Which the Chancellor will be if he meets us when we arrive, and that corpse is still on the ship.”

“Padme is right,” Sabe said from behind them. All of them turned to face her. She was dressed in one of the simpler Queen’s outfits, it was a light gray dress, with only a wide black belt as an accessory, but there was intricate beaded embroidery along the hem and the bottom of the sleeves. Her hair was done in up in a trio of simple braided loops. The white makeup and painted lips were on full display. She stood there, looking annoyed, Eirtae at her side.

All of them bowed to her, except Leia. She just stood there watching Sabe with calculating eyes. Padme didn’t know if she declined to bow because she didn’t bow to anyone, because Sabe wasn’t really the Queen, or that she didn’t know the protocol involved. Padme was guessing it was the first reason.

“Your Majesty,” Panaka said, as he came out of his bow, and stood straight at attention. “I’m sorry for disturbing your sleep.”

“Yes,” Sabe mused, “That is unfortunate. And I’m sorry both Padme’s and Eirtae’s sleep was interrupted as well. They both have gotten even less sleep then I have.” Her voice was dripping with disapproval.

Panaka gulped, then bowed again. Padme didn’t blame him for being wary, Sabe had a long memory, and she wasn’t above using negative reinforcement to make sure that her lesson’s stuck.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” he said. “Again, my apologies.”

Master Jinn, to his credit, didn’t look triumphant as he bowed and said, “Then by your leave Your Highness, I will go to the communications hub and place the call to the Chancellor.”

“Please be quiet,” Leia said, looking over at him, “Ani, Shmi, and Jar-Jar are all asleep down there.”

Master Jinn inclined his head in Leia’s direction “Thank you for the warning,” he said and then left.

“Perhaps you should all go back to bed?” Panaka offered.

Sabe looked at Padme, who shook her head. She was awake now, and almost everyone she needed was here.

“No Captain,” Sabe said, “We are already here, perhaps it is time for Padme to debrief us on what happened on Tatooine and discuss our strategy when we arrive on Coruscant.”

Panaka nodded his head, and he quickly walked so that he was in front of Sabe, as protocol
demanded. As a group, they headed to the throne room of the ship.

It wasn’t until they were about to pass through the doors that Padme realized Leia had followed them here.

She looked at the older woman, “Why are you here?” she asked, “You should go back to bed.”

Leia tried to give her a reassuring smile. It didn’t quite meet her eyes though, something was troubling her “I’m not going back to sleep now,” she said. Then her eyes flicked into the chamber, where Sabe was already sitting on the throne “Besides I have a feeling your protectors want to question what I am doing here.”

Padme looked into the room, and yes, both Panaka and Sabe were regarding Leia with interest, but not enough to warrant the woman deciding to come along. She turned back to Leia.

“What is the real reason?” she asked, wondering how Leia would answer bluntness.

Leia looked amused “Who says that isn’t a real reason?”

It was like talking to a walking word trap. Padme hissed through her teeth. No matter that she knew she wasn’t getting back to sleep, her mind was tired, and she wasn’t following all the threads Leia was laying out. “Fine,” Padme conceded, “what is your other reason?” she huffed.

Leia tilted her head “I have a passing interest in politics,” she said as she brushed past Padme as she entered the room.

There was no way that was the real answer either, but Padme was too tired to think of a nice way to get the woman to leave. Besides, who would Leia possibly tell about their thoughts on political strategies? She had already demonstrated she had nothing but contempt for the Trade Federation, and she was a free agent, her only loyalty seemed to be Ani and Shmi. They certainly had no grudge against Padme nor Naboo.

Sabe looked at Leia seriously but didn’t relax the Queen’s face until the door was firmly closed behind them.

“Eirtae had some very pointed observations about you,” Sabe said in her regular voice. Padme looked at the blonde, who only shrugged and sat down on the couch, curling her feet underneath her as she got comfortable.

Leia nodded, not surprised “I seem to make an impression wherever I go.”

Panaka’s gaze was steady “And what is your angle here?” he asked.

“I don’t like bullies,” Leia said, shrugging her shoulders. Again, that rang true for Padme. But the woman also wasn’t saying everything she was thinking. It was both puzzling and fascinating to watch because Padme was almost certain that almost everyone in this room took Leia at face value, even though her answer was patently ridiculous. Who got involved in intrigue and danger simply because they had a vague policy against bullies? That wasn’t to say there weren’t plenty of people who didn’t like bullies, but most of them wouldn’t bother to throw themselves into a fight on behalf of someone they just met.

There was also the personal aspect of all of this. Padme wanted Leia to like her. It had been a long time since she had wanted someone specific to be her friend. Not that she didn’t want friends, it’s just that she found most people incapable of keeping up with her. One of the reasons she had been so glad that Palpatine had selected her, out of her entire class, to mentor in the Legislative Youth
Program. Partly for the opportunities it opened up for her, but also because for the first time in a long
time she had met an adult whose mind could keep up with hers, and delighted in it. Not that
everyone she met was stupid, but it was rare that she encountered someone who could pick up things
as quickly and easily as she did. Palpatine could be a bit stodgy and dull, his enthusiasm for Mon
Calamarian operas escaped Padme’s understanding, but the man learned fast and was always eager
to share the conclusions he came to.

Padme wasn’t sure that she could trust her read on Leia, because so much of her reaction to the
woman was purely instinctual. Part of her trust was in the fact that Leia reminded Padme so strongly
of her grandmother, whose cynicism and advice Padme could sorely use right now. Part of it had to
do with the fact that was, that what she had seen of the woman was impressive, and Padme wanted
the woman to teach her.

Panaka’s eyes narrowed, and he looked at Padme. Padme’s chin tilted up a bit “Over the little time
I’ve known Leia she has had a very…unique way of looking at things,” she said. “It couldn’t hurt to
get an outsider’s opinion.”

Panaka didn’t look happy, but mindful of the fact that they were all here because he had insisted on
making a stand with Master Jinn, he took a seat.

Padme opted to sit on the couches that flanked the throne rather than the throne itself. If someone did
disturb them, it would be difficult to explain why she was sitting there. Besides, for just a while
longer she wanted to be Padme, not wear Amidala. She would have to put herself into that role soon
enough.

“Should we include Rabe?” Sabe asked.

Padme shook her head, “No, one of us should be well rested, besides…” then her voice trailed off.

“It’s hard to give a debriefing about what happened on Tatooine when one of the people involved is
standing here?” Leia asked.

Panaka tilted his head “You seem very familiar with security protocol,” he observed, offering the
woman to explain herself.

Leia nodded, “I do, don’t I?” she said, not taking the bait.

Sabe snorted “Okay Eirtae, I see why you were tearing your hair out about her.”

Eirtae gave a sleepy nod. “I told you she was a difficult one.”

Leia only laughed out loud at the complaint. “You are hardly the first people to say that about me,”
she said. Then she grew serious and looked at Padme, “You really want my opinion on your plans?”
she asked.

Padme frowned. The words were completely serious, but there was a vulnerability to Leia for just a
second when she asked that question. Padme wondered why Leia would care what she, Padme,
thought of her.

“Yes,” Padme said, “You are smart, aren’t afraid to tell me what you think, and I am in need of both
right now.” She spread her arms out “While I have allies I would trust with my life, I am not so
foolish to turn away honest help when offered.”

Leia stared at her, then said softly “You are really good at this.”
Padme felt the smallest bit of challenge rise in her “For my age?” she asked, slightly mockingly. Many cultures had issues with that, and Leia wouldn’t be the first to remark on Padme’s age.

“No,” Leia said, “Period.”

Padme felt a real smile of pleasure cross her face, then fought to reign it in when she noticed the questioning looks Saba and Eirtae were sending her. She cleared her throat and assumed a more neutral expression.

Leia rocked on her toes a bit, then settled down “So, what is your plan when you arrive on Coruscant?” Leia asked.

“We need to get her onto the Senate floor,” Panaka said.

Leia cocked her head “The Senate?” she asked.

Eirtae spoke up “They are our best option. The courts take even longer to decide things.”

“And the Jedi?” Leia asked, “Can they do anything?”

Padme shook her head “No, the blockade was deemed legal. The Jedi are forbidden to be involved in matters of legislative wrangling unless the Senate decides to involve them.”

“Hence why the Chancellor asked his friend to get involved, and not the whole Jedi,” Leia mused.

Padme nodded.

“But this is not a blockade anymore,” Leia pointed out “It’s become an occupation. Surely that hasn’t been deemed a legal move in the Senate.”

“No,” Sabe said “In fact, that is why we need to get to Coruscant. To make the Senate aware.”

Leia bit her lip “Are you sure the Senate is your best option? Bureaucracy often moves at its own speed,” she warned.

Padme laughed “Now you sound like my mentor,” she said.

Leia tensed, and then her attention became focused and sharp on Padme “Your mentor?” she asked urgently.

Startled by her intensity Padme nodded “Yes,” she said, then realizing Leia had no idea if she had just been insulted or not, Padme hastened to add “It’s not a bad comparison,” she assured Leia, “I have nothing but respect for Senator Palpatine. He has been nothing but helpful and resourceful through this crisis.”

“Senator Palpatine,” Leia repeated. “He is your mentor.”

Padme cocked her head “Yes,” she said, puzzled “You’ve heard of him?” she asked.

Leia looked at her, tension vibrating all over her, and then once again, in a second all of it was gone, and there was nothing to read in her body language “Once or twice,” she said.

Eirtae’s sleepy gaze became sharp “How have you heard of him?” she asked Leia.

“How this again,” Padme huffed.
“Not what again?” Leia asked, looking between the two women.

Sabe commented wryly “Eirtae doesn’t like the good Senator.”

“He’s creepy,” Eirtae said, crossing her hands over her chest.

“He is not creepy.” Padme protested. “He can be a bit patronizing, but he is not creepy.” She looked at Leia, trying to explain “Eirtae doesn’t like the fact that he met when I was so young.”

Leia stiffened in outrage, “And what was he doing” she asked in a low voice “that brought him into contact with you? You can’t be more than fourteen now.”

There was a part of Padme that wanted to shrink away from the rage in that voice, but there was a larger part of her that was pleased. Leia wasn’t upset on behalf of some nameless child, or the Queen of Naboo. She was upset and protective of Padme, no matter how displaced the anger was.

“Because he is the Senator for Naboo Leia,” she said softly, “And we met while I was participating in the Junior Legislative Program and he came to Naboo for a few days to give a series of lectures,” Leia relaxed, but only slightly. “There was, and is,” and here Padme glared at Eirtae for putting the thought in Leia’s head “nothing like that between us.” Privately Padme wasn’t sure if Palpatine was even interested in sex, but given the stigma, such a thing carried on Naboo she had never voiced that thought aloud.

Padme relaxed back to the sofa as Leia seemed to grab hold of her temper, “There were fifty of us in that program that year, for some reason he chose me to mentor.” Padme gave a rueful shake of her head, “I’m only Queen now, because of his advice.”

“And pulling strings?” Leia asked, voice razor sharp and disappointed.

“No!” Padme sat up straight “I won fair and square,” she insisted “I did. But he was always there when I had questions or wanted someone to sound ideas off of. I would have made many foolish mistakes in my campaign if it hadn’t been for him.”

Eirtae only rolled her eyes. “You would have done fine,” she said, “You give him too much credit.” Then she looked at Leia appraisingly, “But if you have heard of him, maybe the slippery bastard finally screwed up.” She looked at Leia hopefully “Please tell me that he’s involved with smuggling, or drowning defenseless animals, or, even better the Hutts. If he’s involved with the Hutts that is something even he can’t wiggle out of.”

Leia blinked at Eirtae’s vehemence. Thoughtfully she said. “I have no idea if he drowns defenseless animals,” she said slowly, “but no, as far as I am aware he is not currently involved with smuggling, or the Hutts.”

Eirtae growled in frustration. “Just you wait,” she said, pointing at Padme “He’ll slip up, and then I will tell you-“

“I told you so,” Padme said. “I know, I know.”

“You are disregarding her advice?” Leia asked.

Padme looked at her, “No, not exactly. But I don’t see it. Neither do Sabe or Captain Panaka.”

Leia looked at them, Sabe shrugged “He’s ambitious,” she said “I think he’s tying himself to Padme because she is without a doubt the most gifted leader we have had on Naboo in a very long time. But there a lot of other people who do that to.” The woman gave Leia a sharp smile, visible even through
the Queen’s make-up, “I try not to hold it personally against him.”

Panaka shook his head “I’ve never gotten that impression from him.”

Leia looked at Eirtae, “You’ll see,” the blonde said. “Or maybe you won’t. He seems to have fooled everyone else in this room,” Eirtae waved her hand to encompass everyone.

“I don’t think that would be the wisest idea to met him,” Leia said. She was trying for nonchalance, but Padme wasn’t fooled, there was anger bordering on rage dancing in her eyes.

“Why not?” Padme looked at her, puzzled at this extreme reaction to something as mundane as a suggested meeting. Unless this had to do with Leia, and how those in the past treated her. Padme sat up straight, horrified that Leia might think she was a fair-weather friend. “Do you think I’m ashamed to be seen with a bounty hunter?”

Leia looked at her, for a moment Padme wasn’t even sure if she had heard the question, then that anger slid away. “No Padme, I don’t think that,” Leia said softly, “But appearances are everything in politics. My profession is not considered ‘respectable’ by any good core world citizen. Never mind how many of the rich and powerful pay is for our services.”

Padme frowned “But—“

Leia put up her finger “It would cut into any sympathy you can generate if it was known you were friendly with me. It’s not fair, it’s not right, but it is what it is. You can’t afford to jump into another political firestorm right now.”

Panaka’s eyes narrowed “And what do you know about maintaining public sympathies?”

“More then I care to,” Leia said flatly. There was a story there, but Padme wasn’t going to push, the grief and pain in Leia’s face made it seem callous to do so.

“How did you hear Senator Palpatine’s name?” Panaka asked icily. “He is a well-respected member of the Senate, but hardly a galaxy known name.”

Leia looked at him “As I told Padme, following politics is my hobby. Naboo is the closest world to Tatooine that is a full-fledged member of the Republic.” Bitterness filled her voice “You could say he’s my representative there.”

Padme had known, theoretically, that the Outer Rim was in the care of the Republic because they had a history of not being stable. But she had no idea, until she stepped foot on Tatooine, what a mockery that “care” was. Leia had every right to be bitter about that.

Padme cleared her throat, “The last time I talked to Senator Palpatine, he mentioned that it might be wise for me to come to Coruscant.”

Leia looked at her, “And you refused?”

Sabe snorted “Of course, she did.”

Leia looked at her “You didn’t approve of her staying on Naboo?” she asked.

Sabe looked at her “No, but managing the politics of something isn’t my main job. That is keeping her safe,” then she glared at Padme “When she lets’ me,” she muttered.

“And doesn’t go wandering off on unfamiliar worlds?” Leia suggested dryly.
Padme looked at Leia “It was worth it,” she said firmly “I met you, Ani, and Shmi.”

Leia met her gaze straight on “Get back to me in a few years about that one,” she warned.

Padme frowned “Why?”

Leia let out a bitter smile “I’m a bit much to take.”

“So?” Padme sniffed. “I am to.”

“Yes,” Leia agreed, fondness in her voice “You are.” She seemed to savor that for a moment, then she was once again all business “So when you get to the Senate, what are you going to do?”

“I testify to what the Trade Federation has done to my world,” Padme said simply. What else was there for her to do?

Lei’s head cocked. “And what evidence are you going to introduce?” she asked.

Panaka stiffened “Her word is enough.”

Leia looked at him, opened her mouth, then shut it closed. “You don’t have anything?” she asked incredulously “No records? Holos? A document signed by the Trade Federation conveniently outlying their plan?” There were shakes of heads all around the room.

“We left in quite the hurry,” Sabe explained, “There was no time to gather anything.”

Leia pinched the bridge of her nose “Do you have any allies in the Senate?” she asked.

“According to Palpatine, beside Chancellor Valorum, no we don’t,” Padme said.

Leia let out a long sigh, “Of course not,” she muttered, her hand falling away from her forehead. She looked at Padme, face worried “My honest opinion is that you are going to walk into that chamber, say about ten words, and the other delegates are going to tear you apart, led by the Representatives from the Trade Federation” she said.

Padme frowned “You really think my testimony won’t be enough?” she asked, shocked “I’m the sovereign leader of a known world.”

Leia snorted “I know it won’t be enough.” She looked Padme directly in the eyes “Begging your pardon, but the word of a politician isn’t considered all that trustworthy, no matter where they are from.”

This had to be Leia’s cynicism speaking. Both Valorum and the Jedi seemed to think her testimony would be of great importance. Otherwise why go to so much trouble to get her off Naboo? And if she couldn’t cause trouble, why had the Trade Federation gone to such lengths to try to get her back? Padme had no reason to lie and was young enough that there wasn’t much of a record for her opponents to dig through to find contradictions.

Sabe came to Padme’s defense. “Why wouldn’t they believe her?” she demanded “This dispute has been in the making for months. It’s not like this was something that happened randomly. It’s the natural escalation of events.”

“Who said the Senate was logical?” Leia asked, eyebrow arched.

“Everyone operates under some sort of logic,” Padme said firmly. She wouldn’t allow herself to believe anything else. Otherwise, the entire structure of her worldview would come crumbling down.
“It is my job to figure out what that logic is, and structure my arguments to it.”

Something like interest flickered in Leia’s eyes. She turned to study Padme “You really believe that, don’t you?” she asked.

Padme nodded “Otherwise our government, no, any government will fail. It will dissolve into a brute fight between various factions. In the end, it will be mob rule, with the most ruthless and powerful at the top, who will use any means necessary to get what they want.”

Leia leaned against the wall “So why fight the inevitable?” she asked.

Padme’s fist clenched at her side “Because it’s the right thing to do,” she said passionately. “And because it’s the better choice. A dictatorial government is an inherently unstable one because it’s enemy is its own people. Something like that cannot stand on its own for long.”

Leia scoffed “Long is a relative term, but other then that, you aren’t wrong.” She looked at Padme appraisingly. “That is a fairly good analysis.”

Padme flushed at Leia’s almost dismissive tone. She hadn’t been at her best over the last day, but she wasn’t an idiot. She wasn’t. Her chin rose in defiance. “I’m young and inexperienced, I will readily concede to that. But among my many faults, naivety is not one of them.”

Padme was astonished to see a red blush creep up Leia’s face, and the woman grimaced. But her eyes never let Padme’s as she said “I owe you an apology for that remark.”

Instantly all her handmaidens stiffened. They seemed to think that their jobs were to protect Padme from all cuts, even emotional ones. Padme found it ridiculous but appreciated. “It’s not important,” Padme said.

Leia shook her head and pushed herself straight up, back straightening as she did, with arms falling behind her. It almost looked like parade rest, although the movement wasn’t performed as sharply as the members of her security forces did it. She was out of practice, Padme realized. Leia was a soldier or had been at some time in her past.

“No, it is.” The woman gave her a rueful smile, but her body remained at attention like she was expecting Padme to dress her down. “I was angry, but it wasn’t with you. I should never have implied that you don’t care for your people, or that you aren’t doing your best by them,” Those tense shoulders somehow tightened even further “I know better than to talk to someone when my temper is riding me. You asked a legitimate question, and I exploded in your face.”

Padme frowned “Angry about what?” she asked, genuinely puzzled.

Leia let out a bitter laugh, and she fell out of the semi-parade rest she had been in. Padme noticed that the tension didn’t leave her shoulders though. “That Old Man’s destiny showed up at his doorstep,” she said.

“Destiny?” Sabe looked incredulous “What destiny could he possibly have? He’s just a little boy.”

Padme had her doubts about that. She wasn’t very familiar with pod racing, or any sport for that matter. Her life had been filled with so many other things, but what little she did know was that she couldn’t recall any humans racing. Let alone a nine-year-old child, who not only could do it, but win.

But she didn’t want to draw any more attention to Ani then she had too, so she maintained her silence, even from her handmaidens. Force-sensitive children were usually relinquished to the
Temple for a reason. There were a lot of people in this galaxy who would abuse such a person.

Leia’s mouth quirked “Yes,” she agreed, a smile of fondness and the barest hint of softness crossed her features “He is.”

Padme wasn’t sure if Leia was saying Ani was just a little boy, had a destiny, or both, but she knew if she asked Leia would not tell her. The woman was fanatical about his and Shmi’s safety.

Padme cleared her throat to bring everyone’s attention back to her. “Your apology is accepted,” she said. It was more then she got from most adults. Even Palpatine had on occasion treated her to a pat on her head, instead of an explanation or even a halfhearted sorry. And she was expected to let it go. Only when she was wearing the Queen’s face did anyone outside her circle treat her like she was a thinking person.

Sabe spoke up “Could the Jedi testify to what they saw on the ground? And what happened to the crew that came with them?” She looked around at the faces in the room. Padme didn’t know if they could or not.

“The Senate has to believe them?” Sabe looked at Leia and wasn’t reassured by what was on the woman’s face. “Don’t they?” she asked in a meeker voice.

Leia looked back at her blankly. “I have no idea.” Padme started. That was certainly nothing she ever expected Leia to admit to. Leia carried herself so confidently like she knew what she was doing, it was startling to realize that she was aware there were limits to her knowledge. That was a lesson Padme still had trouble accepting gracefully.

Leia started pacing around the room. “I know there are procedures about who can speak and when,” she said “Even if I am unfamiliar with the exact details of them. But, that brings up another question, are they even allowed to testify on the Senate floor? Especially given the sneaky way Valorum maneuvered around the Senate to get them to you in the first place.”

Padme opened her mouth and clicked it shut. She didn’t know. She knew the Senate had overall authority over the Jedi, and allocated them funds every year, but the actual day to day relationship between the two bodies was a mystery to her. She looked around the room, and everyone else looked as lost as she was. Leia, who had stopped moving at this point, came to the same conclusion as everyone else. “I will ask them,” she sighed.

Panaka snorted “And why should we do what you say?” he asked, tone rankled.

Leia just looked at him seriously “You don’t,” she said simply. “I’m just offering advice.”

“Master Jinn said you were a bounty hunter,” Panaka sneered “What does a bounty hunter know about politics?”

Leia’s mouth twitched in amusement as if Panaka had just said something that was very funny. At least she wasn’t reacting in anger. The incident yesterday in Mos Espa was very clear in Padme’s mind. She hadn’t seen Leia use violence, but the woman had shown she was not averse to it.

“Granted,” Leia allowed “I have no experience in the Republic Senate,” and the irony was thick in her voice “but if you have even heard of the Hutts you know they aren’t exactly the most honorable of species.” She gave the man a smirk “Politics is the way of life for any sentient living in a group Captain. The only difference I see between Jabba’s court and the Senate is I don’t know the players as well, and fewer people end up dead on the floor in the Senate over power plays.”

“What are you talking about?” Padme asked, horrified “People don’t die for power plays in the
Leia’s face swung back to her. There was such a look of pity on her face, and her voice was nothing but gentle “Padme,” she said gently “your people are dying now over a power play that originated in the Senate.”

Padme’s breath stuttered for a second. No, that wasn’t…that was exactly what this was, she realized dimly. The Trade Federation had started this because they wanted a monopoly on more trade routes. This wasn’t about ideology, or even trying to survive. It was an effort to grow and amass their power, and her people were suffering because of it. Because some Trade Federation bureaucrat, in some analysis center somewhere had run the numbers and picked her world as a target where they were most likely to succeed.

“Oh,” she whispered, feeling very young and very stupid all of a sudden. With that one little sentence, Leia had just taken her worldview, shaken it, and put it back on its side. This was all about power, who had it, and who wanted it. All Padme wanted was for her people to be safe and left to live their lives. She had thought that that was what the leaders of the Trade Federation were also trying to do. To ensure that their people had the best advantage they could get for them, albeit in a horribly misguided fashion. But that wasn’t what they were doing at all. They were trying to seize more power because they could.

“So, what was your back up plan?” Leia asked.

Padme wrestled her mind back to the here and now “Other plans?” she asked numbly.

“Always have a backup plan,” Leia said.


Leia snapped up to her full height. “What is your problem?” she demanded, “As I said before, you don’t have to do anything I say.”

“My problem is that you have assumed command, and that is Her Highnesses prerogative.” Panaka snapped back.

Leia scoffed “No, I haven’t.” That was true. Or Padme could see how Leia thought that was true. Much like Master Jinn, she had a tendency to utter things like they were commands. She didn’t say them as arrogantly as he did, but she still did it.

“Really?” Panaka demanded, “Did you, or did you just not, just tell everyone that you were going to talk to the Jedi and take over that responsibility?”

“Oh, of course, I did,” Leia said exasperatedly “because I wasn’t about to order someone else to do it.” She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest “What is with the attitude?”

Panaka didn’t answer her, and Padme had to wonder too. He hadn’t been his best over the few last days, but none of them had. But within minutes he had taken an instant dislike to Leia. Why?

Leia’s mind was faster than hers, because her eyes narrowed, and she spat out a word in a language Padme didn’t recognize, more than likely she was cursing again. “Oh, by all the gods!” she hissed, switching back to Basic “I’m not angling for your job!”

Panaka’s eyes flicked toward Padme “Oh?”

“No,” Leia’s hands flew out into a wide expansive gesture “Why would I? I have my own life, and
my own work."

“Then why are you doing this?” Panaka demanded, “If not to impress Her Highness?”

“Doing what?” Leia asked, looking puzzled. “Give advice? Because I’m bossy, and it costs me nothing.”

“Tangling with the Trade Federation isn’t nothing,” Panaka took a step forward. If he thought he could intimidate Leia with his height, he was in for a very rude shock. “Even by just being on this ship, never mind trying to “help” us, that is enough to draw their attention to you.” Panaka took a deep breath in, “Everyone knows that the Trade Federation isn’t an enemy to be taken lightly.”

Leia blinked, once, twice, and then she burst out laughing. Everyone in the room just stared at her, until she got a hold of herself. Leia shook her head, and still chuckling said “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m not mocking you. I’m really not. But you and I have very different ideas of what a dangerous enemy looks like.” Her eyes were nothing but mercilessly amused “Trust me when I tell you, that the Trade Federation doesn’t worry me.”

What enemy had Leia faced that was more powerful than the Trade Federation? The Hutts? But no, she lived openly and freely on Tatooine. If she were an enemy of the Hutts, that would not be the case. The Republic? But that didn’t make any sense. The first thing Master Jinn, never mind Panaka, would do when they left Tatooine, was to run her name, and description through various databases looking to see if Leia was wanted anywhere in the Republic. And if she was wanted, leaving the territory of the Outer Rim, and its many lawless places to hide would make no sense either. Leia was many things, but she was not a fool.

Her enemy certainly wasn’t the Jedi, Master Jinn very clearly had no idea who, or what, Leia was. Maybe some other minor gang? But Leia implied the enemy she fought was bigger than the Trade Federation, and only the Hutts rivaled them in the criminal world. The Banking Clan maybe? But Leia at one point had been a soldier, and Padme couldn’t remember any armed conflicts involving the Banking Clan over the last forty years. At least she wasn’t taught of any.

“They will go after everyone you love,” Panaka warned, bringing Padme’s mind back to this room.

Leia’s face immediately lost all its humor “Let them try,” she said in a cold frigid voice. Padme shuddered. That was the voice of the woman who so casually threatened to kill a business associate in front of witnesses.

“You can’t protect them all,” Panaka said.

“Why not?” Leia’s chin went up “There is only two of them.”

Panaka stopped at that. “What?”

“The rest of my family, hell even those who I loved who weren’t my family, they are gone Captain,” Leia’s eyes were as cold as the lakes of Naboo. “It’s just those two who are currently resting in the hold of this ship.” Her smile was bitter and cutting, and Padme didn’t need the Force to see the pain and grief bleeding from her. “Increases my chances of success don’t you think?

Panaka took a step back “I-“ he started to say. He fidgeted, then straighten his shoulders “What happened to them?”

Leia’s face didn’t flicker the tiniest bit “Time, and an old enemy I thought slain.”

What traumatic event had Leia witnessed? Padme knew that all of the galaxy wasn’t as safe as
Naboo had been until even a year ago, but she thought she would have learned of a tragedy the size Leia seemed to imply? What war had Leia fought in? And what tragedies had Padme made herself blind to beside the state of the Outer Rim?

Panaka was still trying to regain his footing “I’m sorry?”

Leia’s face went from frigid anger to a carefully constructed face of neutrality “Thank you,” she said tonelessly.

Panaka took a deep breath in as if finally realizing how rude he was being. “So, what would you suggest?” he asked, in an effort to extend courtesy.

Leia paused, taking a moment to clear her head. She might not be showing anyone her grief and anger, but that little hesitation told Padme clear enough that the emotion was there. She took a deep breath in and asked in a steady voice “Do you know a slicer?” she asked, “Not just a slicer, but a good one. Preferably on the more morally flexible side? But honest enough they won’t sell you out to the highest bidder?”

Panaka scowled automatically, then made an effort to control his face. “Begging your pardon,” he said, trying to keep his tone courteous “but I would have thought that in your line of work, you would already know someone like that.”

There was a long pause. “I have a name,” Leia said, “Please use it when addressing me.”

Leia had asked, not demanded. Acknowledge that he was trying, but with a firm request to extend it further. She was very good at this, Padme thought.

“What do you prefer Lady Solo or Leia?” Panaka asked.

Point made, and matched. She flickered her eyes to Sabe and Eirtae, both who were also watching this little interchange with rapt attention. If she could be convinced, Leia was going to give them all lessons in strategic wordplay, Padme decided.

“Leia is fine,” Leia said, a smile on her face as she went with the name that would annoy Panaka more. He preferred to be formal when he could. Rules were something Panaka took great comfort in.

“Leia then,” Panaka allowed grudgingly.

Leia nodded “I do know a slicer,” she said “You are not wrong about that. But he’s only…adequate. For trying to chase down the Trade Federation’s money trail, you are going to want more than that.” She shrugged “If we had more time, I wouldn’t be averse to using him.” Then she shot Panaka a sly look “But given your position in life and resources you have access to that I currently don’t, I’m betting you know someone better.”

Padme almost burst out laughing at that. Panaka? The man who had spent almost his entire life living by a set of strict rules and regulations? That Panaka? She managed not to laugh openly, but her voice was openly full of mirth. “Leia,” she said “I’m afraid you are-“ her voice trailed off as she noticed that neither Sabe or Eirtae looked amused at the suggestion. In fact, they were staring in shock at the woman.

Padme looked at her Captain of the Guard. Guilt was there, plain for even a child to see.

“What?” she asked, dumbfounded that she had misread him this badly.

“It’s not a contact,” he stressed, glaring at Leia.
She shrugged, not bothered in the slightest “Call it what you will then,” she said, “Let me guess, a card you left in your back pocket to play if things got really bad for one of your charges?”

Panaka snapped his mouth shut, “Yes,” he gritted out.

Padme was shocked to realize that her mouth was hanging open, She snapped it closed and glared at Leia. Why did this woman seem to know everything? “How did you know he would know one?” she demanded, hating how whiny her voice sounded. But really, how? Panaka was the very definition of uptight.

Leia looked at her calmly “He’s the head of your security. If he’s any good at his job, and given that you are still alive in a major dispute with a criminal organization, he is, he knows some shady people who owe him a favor.”

Padme closed her eyes. “The Trade Federation is not a criminal organization,” she said tiredly.

Leia snorted “No, you’re right. They're worse. They are criminals who get the laws re-written, so they are no longer illegal. At least the Hutts are honest about what they are.”

“Why do you want a slicer, Leia?” Panaka asked.

“Because someone put up money for that bounty on her,” Leia said.

Padme opened her eyes and frowned “You said a shell corporation was fronting it.”

Leia nodded. “It is, but there has to be a company that filed its paperwork, and a company that filed that company’s paperwork, and so forth and so on, until we get an account that has the money in it. Then the slicer traces where that account is getting money from until we arrive at the Trade Federation.” Her smile was bitter “Money does make the galaxy go round, and the company that put up your bounty?” Leia’s voice was mocking “They have a reputation for paying, and promptly.”

Panaka shook his head “We can't introduce evidence like that in the Senate. Not if we got it directly.”

Just when Padme was beginning to hope. “Give me the name,” Leia suggested “I’ll do it. And I’ll even pay for it,” she looked around at all of them “You can't be accused of tainted evidence if it is given to you anonymously. It will also add another layer of protection to you if there is a call for an investigation.”

They all stared at her. There was helping, and there was covering yourself in oil and throwing yourself into a fire.

“Why?” Panaka asked, suspicion lacing his voice. “Why take the risk at all? Why get this involved?”

Leia looked at him coolly “I need to be from Naboo to care?”

“For the amount of trouble you are courting, unless you are suicidal, then yes.” Sabe breathed. Then she backtracked as Leia’s annoyed gaze fell on her. “Unless you are from Naboo,” she said hastily, her hands rising in front of her in a hopeless gesture, “If you are, I apologize for assuming that you weren’t. It’s just…nobody said that you were,” she said defensively.

Leia looked at her “No,” she said, a trace of regret in her voice, “I’m not from Naboo.”

Padme gulped, there was such wistfulness in her voice “You’ve been there though, haven’t you?”
Leia’s eyes met hers, “Yes, several times. Although it has been many years since my last visit.”

Panaka shook his head, “Not that this isn’t fascinating, but that doesn’t answer my question.” He put up one warning finger “And don’t try to sell me the story that you are doing this from the goodness of your heart.”

Leia’s head cocked “Fine, you want a reason you’ll believe, I’ll give you one,” her smile was openly mocking “It’s even true.”

“And this reason is?” Panaka asked.

She shrugged “I need a slicer too. If yours is better, I would prefer to use them.”

Panaka’s eyes narrowed, but in suspicion, not disbelief “And why do you need a slicer?”

Leia’s face went into a forced friendliness, “None of your business,” she said sweetly.

Leia wasn’t going to answer Panaka. She hadn’t even given him the whole reason as to why she was so interested in what was going on. If this directly affected Shmi and Ani, Padme could see why Leia would be so worried about Naboo. But Leia had only asked for transport to Coruscant, nothing about help later, not that Padme was in a position currently to give it.

But she was interested. Leia had deliberately maneuvered herself into this conversation. The question was why? And no matter that she probably did need a slicer of her own, that wasn’t the whole reason she was getting involved. Sabe was right, this amount of effort made no sense.

“What is the real reason you are doing this Leia?’ Padme asked the woman directly. Leia liked her, Padme would bet anything that was true. And so far, that meant Leia hadn’t directly lied to her. Refused to answer her questions, or had very carefully danced around a straight answer, but Padme’s instincts were insisting Leia hadn’t lied, not directly. Since she had seen Leia do that with every other person on this ship, except Shmi and Ani, the only conclusion Padme could draw was that Leia liked her, and more importantly didn’t want to lie to her.

Leia turned her head to look at her, face angled down as she studied Padme’s face. Padme’s breath caught. There was a whole slew of emotions dancing on the older woman’s face. Grief, pain, regret, loss, fear. Then it all vanished in a moment, and Padme wondered if she had imagined the whole thing. Or did Leia did have that much control over her emotions?

Leia’s voice was hoarse as she said “I was once in a situation much like yours, and two strangers appeared out of nowhere and helped me out.” Her smile was fond, but sad too “Consider this my effort to repay fate.”

Padme crossed her hands over her chest. “I don’t believe you.”

Leia put on a look of wounded dignity “You think I’m lying to you?”

Padme opened her mouth, then thought better of it. There was the slightest hesitancy in those words, the slightest quiver. “No,” she said. “I think you are telling the truth, that did happen to you. But it’s not the whole truth.”

“We rarely get the whole truth Padme,” Leia said softly “Mostly because it’s very hard to put yourself in the mind of another deliberately. Especially if you loathe and despise them.”

“Because that would require a level of dispassion people aren’t capable of?” Padme asked. It’s what Palpatine would have told her, that people were impulsive at best, maliciously chaotic at their worst.
“No,” Leia said softly “because if you really do that if you really understand them, you can no longer hate them. Not truly.” She looked lost as she whispered, “And most of us are defined by who we so desperately do not want to be, instead of focusing on who we want to become.”

“And who did you define yourself against?” Eirtae asked softly, fascinated. “And when did that change?”

Leia looked at Padme as she answered “Time,” she said softly “I understood him because of time.”

“So, you just let it all go?” Padme asked. Leia didn’t strike her as the type.

Leia blinked and brought her focus back in on Padme. There was a long second as Leia thought about what Padme had said, and she let out a loud bark of a laugh. “Oh no,” she said, “I haven’t quite done that.” Then she sobered “But I have learned that things were not what I once thought them to be. And if I held onto my anger, I would be hurting people who were innocent, and had nothing to do with what caused my pain in the first place.”

“Ani and Shmi,” Padme said.

Leia nodded. “I owe them both more than I can ever possibly repay. I was so lost when they found me.” Her eyes lost focus, as she retreated somewhere in her own mind “In more ways than you could ever understand, I was lost. Old Man found me, and brought me home, then they both welcomed me to share it with them. And they gave me back a little of my family when I thought that was beyond my reach forever.”

Her eyes focused back on Padme, and a soft, fond smile broke out on her face “Old Man is quite taken with you. And I have found he has excellent instincts when it comes to people.”

Padme dismissed that explanation too. Leia loved Ani, there was no doubt about that, but there was no need for the woman to go to such incredible lengths for him, and his boyish crush. Leia hadn’t given her an answer, not directly, but she had revealed something personal, an insight into herself that Padme got the feeling most people didn’t get.

Leia also wasn’t wrong about her involvement putting another layer of security between the information they needed, and it being traced back to them. And if Leia didn’t want to answer a question, then she wouldn’t answer a question. Padme had already seen Master Jinn bang his head against that wall too many times to think she would be capable of breaking Leia’s resolve.

Padme sighed, “Panaka, please give her your contact.”

Panaka was horrified “Your Highness, you have no idea what she is going to do. We could be implicated in multiple crimes. We could be responsible for who knows what-”

“I’m going to steal money out of a slush fund.” Leia cut him off, sounding bored, retreating behind her detached persona.

Panaka frowned “A what now?”

“A slush fund,” Leia’s smile was amused “It is the personal account of a very wealthy politician, who doesn’t want his wife to find out about his,” she nonchalantly tapped her chin, “let’s say, extracurricular activities.”

Padme frowned. While she understood why a crooked politician would want a separate account if he were giving out bribes, why would he be more worried about his wife finding out?
Her eyes widened “Oh,” she squeaked “that kind of slush fund.”

Leia’s voice was implacable “I’m not fleecing anyone out of their life savings or planning to bring down a major institution. I know the bank he is using, and the false name it’s registered under. It’s his personal funds, so I’m not even robbing any innocent bystander or public funds.”

Panaka didn’t look appeased “Who?” he demanded.

Padme should stop this. She had given Panaka a direct order, and he was disobeying her. But, he was right to be concerned. Leia didn’t seem to have the same definition of what a “real” enemy looked that the rest of them did. Padme, and Naboo, was in a too precarious situation to unwillingly make more political enemies.

Leia’s eyes narrowed “I don’t indulge in petty gossip Captain.”

Panaka didn’t look convinced by that line of reasoning. “So, instead of blackmailing him, you decided to rob him?”

“I don’t like blackmail,” Leia said, “It’s too personal, and it too quickly slides into vengeance.” Padme was inclined to believe Leia was telling the truth about her distaste for blackmail. She seemed to be a very direct soul, and sulking in the shadows and toying with someone wasn’t her style. She would just walk up to you and shoot you.

“That isn’t what this is about,” Leia said firmly.

“Then what is it about?” Sabe asked.

Leia didn’t take her eyes from Panaka’s challenging stare. “Survival,” Leia answered.

“Whose survival?” Padme wondered.

“So you can live in the lap of luxury on someone else's money?” The sarcasm was thick in Panaka’s voice. Even beyond his aversion to rule breaking, this would be a touchy issue for him. For months he had been witness to Padme negotiations with the Trade Federation where they too had claimed that the goods that were moved along their routes were theirs.

Leia stiffened “I have every right to those funds,” she growled. Leia didn’t strike Padme as someone who would be anyone’s mistress or plaything, so why would she claim she had a right to the money? And if she wasn’t one of this man’s former…paid companions, then how did Leia even know about the account? Maybe a previous client of hers had told her? Or a friend? No, Padme dismissed that. Leia didn’t seem the type to have a lot of friends. The woman was too reserved and prickly by half.


Leia looked at Padme, apparently done with the farce that it was Panaka she had to convince. “You aren’t going to order him to tell me until you have that name are you?” she asked Padme resigned.

Padme shook her head “No, I am not.”

“Why?” Leia demanded.

“Because I want to know what I’m jumping into the middle off,” Padme answered “I’m already in one political firestorm. I don’t need to drag my people into another one.”

Leia hissed through her teeth as her own words were used against her. “It’s very annoying how
clever you are."

Padme nodded her head “So I’ve been told. By my mother mostly.”

Leia looked curious, then she shook her head. “It’s the King of Alderaan,” she said.

Sabe whistled out loud, and several things became much clearer to Padme. No wonder Leia was treading delicately. Alderaan was a powerful and wealthy world. While they were a pacifists society, that didn’t mean there weren’t elements on that world that could make Leia’s life very uncomfortable if she made trouble for them. And this was trouble, of the highest kind.

Alderaan was a matriarchal society. But their current ruler, King Beon, was the only true heir of the House of Organa, the family that had ruled the planet for centuries. He had come to the throne unexpectedly thirty years ago when his two older sisters, along with his parents, had died in a hyperspace accident.

He had been single at the time, and it was no secret that the marriage arranged then was a political one. Alderaan preferred female rulers, and there was something that had happened in Beon’s youth that made his people wary of him. Padme had never gotten the details about just what exactly he had done. But combined with the fact that he needed an heir, and quickly, a marriage had been arranged with a woman of one of the more prominent Royal Houses.

Beon had a daughter, or maybe it was a son? Padme couldn’t remember. Either way, there was an heir, and his Queen was respected, but she was not beloved. But if real proof became available, and not just gossip and rumors, that he was cheating on his wife, true heir or not, crowned King or not, the other royal houses of Alderaan would turn on him. Padme didn’t know if his current child was old enough to take the throne, but if they weren’t, it could throw one of the most economically important, and stable worlds of the Core, into chaos.

Panaka blinked. “Oh,” he said faintly.

“Yes,” Leia said, face red in embarrassment, “That is why I am treading so carefully. I am well aware of what damage this could do.” Why was she embarrassed? Was she one of King Beon’s former paramours after all?

Panaka shook his head, “You’re right, this isn’t information that could help us. Odds are, it would probably harm us if we tried to use it against His Majesty.” He looked at Leia seriously, then reached into his belt. He withdrew a small data chip. “Her name is Nabariana,” he said softly. “When she answers, tell her Quarsh Panaka sent you, and that I still can see the stars.”

Leia cocked her head “Quarsh?” asked.

Panaka stiffened “Yes?” he said questioningly. Leia didn't answer him, just peered into his face, studying it for a moment. “Is there something wrong with my name?” he asked. “Or my face?”

Leia shook her head, and quickly reached out to take the chip from him “No,” she said. “You just don’t look like a Quarsh Panaka.”

“How do I not-” Panaka started to say, but Leia cut him off.

“Is this contact an old flame?” she asked.

Panaka looked frustrated at Leia’s evasion, but he answered her question “No, not even a friend.” He gave Leia a bitter smile “But someone who I thought was doing the right thing, the exact wrong way.” He looked at her seriously “She is on Coruscant now,”
“That’s handy,” Leia said. “Makes things easier for me.”

“Please,” he said “I owe her my life. Be careful not to lead anyone back to her.”

Leia looked at him seriously “Not just your life,” she said softly “You wouldn’t have let her go if she had just saved your life. What did she do for you?”

Panaka shook his head “My business,” he said.

“Alright,” Leia said firmly, “I will be careful.” She looked at Padme, “If you will excuse me, I’ll go contact her now.”

“You just said-“ Panaka hissed.

Leia cut him off, “Captain if you think I don’t have a com channel scrambler in my gear, you are severely underestimating my paranoia.” She softened her tone “The Trade Federation isn’t stupid. There are going to be hundreds, if not thousands of roadblocks between that bounty and them. The more time she has, the more likely she is to be successful.”

“You don’t know Nabariana,” Panaka said, “She is very good at what she does.”

“What did she do for you?” Leia asked, then shook her head, “Not important. Sabe, Eirtae, Captain” she said, inclining her head in farewell to each one at their name. Then she turned back to Padme “Your Highness,” she said formally, and even in her loose and fuzzy clothes, executed a perfect curtsey.

“Leia,” Padme said back, “I have one more question for you before you go?”

Leia looked at her warily. “And that is?”

Padme gestured to the woman’s soft, comfy clothes “Is sleepwear also something you consider an essential part of your gear, along with comm channel scrambler and blasters?” she teased.

Leia looked down at herself, and then laughed “A good night’s sleep is very important for a woman my age,” she said. “And I sleep better when I’m comfortable” Padme was delighted to notice that the woman wiggled her toes to emphasize her point.

“I will keep that in mind,” Padme said gravely. Leia gave her a playful wink and left the room.

There was a long pause, then Sabe said softly “Oh, I like her. Can we keep her?”

Eirtae shook her head, “You have the worst taste in woman,” she complained, “She is old enough to be your mother, possibly even your grandmother, and she is the very definition of trouble.”

“Worth it,” Sabe said.

Padme shook her head. “Since you are so interested, would you like to hear how I met her?”

Everyone’s eyes turned to Padme. Sabe nodded, “Eirtae can go get Rabe-“

“And some food,” Eirtae said.

“And some food,” Sabe allowed, “Then I would very much like to know where you found her, and that boy and his mother.”

Panaka said nothing, but Padme could see the interest in his eyes.
“Alright,” she said, leaning back into the couch. “Let’s go get Rabe then.”

Padme had never been to Coruscant before. She had seen holos of course, but they were a far cry from the reality of what it is. She was in the cockpit, peering out the viewport as the approached the planet. It was rather crowded, with her, Rabe, Ani, Leia, and Shmi. Plus both Master Jinn and Padawan Kenobi. Padme wanted to see this planet that she had heard so much about. As they came in, she marveled at the long thin lines of lights that criss crossed over it. As the ship headed towards the dayside, she blinked as those features fell away, replaced by a grey steel color. There were large odd circles, dotted across the land. Padme wondered how such a thing had formed, before she realized she was looking, from space, the various districts that made up the “city” of Coruscant. Although city was a poor word for this vast mechanized sprawl. The spaces between those circles appeared to be flat, although Padme guessed that was where the industrial and power plants for the planet were.

It was one thing to know that the entire planet was one large city, another to look at and see nothing but what had been built by sentient hands.

“Whoa,” Ani breathed, peering out the viewport on the other side of the ship. He was holding Shmi’s hand tightly, but there was nothing but excitement on his face. Shmi, on the other hand, looked apprehensive.

Ani turned to Leia, “Is it how you remembered?”

Leia shook her head, looking a little fond “Old Man, this far out, there isn’t much difference to see.”

“You’ve been to Coruscant before?” Master Jinn asked.

Leia looked at him neutrally “Yes,” she said, no further explanation offered. She really had taken a dislike to him.

“Coruscant and Naboo?” Padme asked teasingly, “How many planets have you been too?”

Leia looked at her, all irritation falling away, “Too many to remember,” she said ruefully.

“Always on the move?” Master Jinn inquired, and Padme regretted her question. She had only been trying to make Leia smile, he was taking it as an opportunity to probe more into Leia’s past.

Leia’s mouth tightened, “Not by choice,” she said, then resumed her staring out the viewport.

Padawan Kenobi looked disappointingly at his Master, then moved to the front of the cockpit, “I’ll com the Temple to let them know we are here, and find out which hanger bay they want us to land in,” he said.

Rabe moved closer to her ear “How is this man a diplomat?” she asked in a hush whispered.

Padme shrugged and continued to watch the view as the small buildings grew larger and larger in her eyes as they approached the planet. It wasn’t until they were within the flow and hustle of the open airships that she realized just how tall these buildings were. She tried to peer down, looking for the ground, but all she saw was darkness.

“I’m told that sight is a bit disorienting for people to see the first time they come to this world,” Padawan Kenobi said gently.
Padme started, she had been so busy trying to figure out how these impossibly tall buildings were standing she had completely lost focus. He was standing next to her, arms clasped in front of him, a pleasant smile on his face.

“It is,” she agreed, trying to focus on the conversation at hand. “How?” she asked.

“I’m not a structural engineer,” he said, leaning against the window casually as he peered into the streets, “but there has been building on this planet for so long, buildings that placed on top of other buildings, and eventually the ground was covered in what is essentially a sediment layer made of durasteel and titanium. For the megastructures, they are anchored to the ground, and repulsor lifts are used at the top to help support the weight.”

“Oh?” she said.

He nodded. “When a developer wants to put up a new building, what they do for is tear away the external casing, and interior walls, leaving the old support beams in place, so they don’t have to re-dig to place new struts.” He looked thoughtful “I don’t think a new foundation has been laid for one of those buildings in about, ohhh, a hundred years or so, in the Senatorial district.”

“So it’s a really long way to the ground?” she said.

Padawan Kenobi laughed “Yes,”

Then a building caught her attention, and she eagerly moved forward. From what she could see, it looked like two huge pyramids sitting side by side, with a long rectangle column sitting between the two of them. But instead of coming to a point, both sections leveled off to a flat plane, and she could see two graceful towers sitting on that flat surface, along the farthest perimeter. Both of those were dwarfed by the third tower which sat in the middle of the other two.

Even this far out, the walls gleaned a soft warm white, and Padme blinked as they came close and realized the entire thing was made of stone. In this world where even the ground was made durasteel and titanium, the walls of this building were made of stone. It must have cost a fortune to get that much natural material to this world.

“Is that the Jedi Temple?” Ani’s hushed voice asked.

Master Jinn let out a chuckle, “Yes, it is.”

The ship veered slightly to the right, and the new angle made it so Padme could see that there were four of those massive flat-topped pyramids that made up the entirety of the temple. She couldn’t even begin to comprehend the amount of space this building took up. On their flight here, she had seen buildings that were taller than this temple, but none that took up this much room.

“It’s a buffer,” Padawan Kenobi breathed into her ears.

Padme turned her head to look at him. He gave her a small smile. “When people see the temple for the first time, that is always the question on their minds. If the Jedi live a life of no wealth, why this huge building?”

Beside her Rabe nodded “That amount of real estate on Coruscant,” she breathed. “It has to be priceless.”

Padawan Kenobi nodded, “Yes, although when it was built a thousand years ago, it was not as valuable as it is now.” He looked both of them in the eyes “We need to be apart, at least a little. To be on a world with this many living creatures,” he gave a small shudder “The more sensitive of us to
emotions would be quickly overwhelmed.”

“To visit the Temple proper requires passes,” Master Jinn chimed in. “But the lands around the Temple are open to anyone.” Padme looked over at him, and she was surprised to see Leia was looking at him without hostility. “There are quite a few parks, and libraries that we maintain that are open to all,” Master Jinn said. “We need to have a bit of space but are well aware we need to be gracious neighbors.”

Leia’s eyes slid away from his, and she looked back out the viewport.

“Did you see the Jedi Temple the last time you were on Coruscant?” Master Jinn asked, and Padme wanted to roll her eyes. The man couldn’t resist pushing at Leia until he had cataloged her fully.

Leia didn’t seem to take offense, for once, at his probing. Her gaze remained lock on the building as it grew larger and larger in the viewport. “No,” she said sadly “I never had the chance.”

“A pity,” Master Jinn’s voice remained light, “The grounds are quite lovely.”

Leia pressed her fingers against the viewport and closed her eyes “So I had been told,” she said, voice distant. “The reality…” her fingers slid down the pane, and her eyes opened back up to state at Master Jinn “I wasn’t prepared,” she said. Padme had the feeling neither she nor Master Jinn were talking about the view, but unlike Master Jinn she was very carefully not thinking about what Leia’s words implied about her.

Beside Leia, Ani was practically vibrating. His eyes were darting everywhere as he tried to take in the ships, the temple, everything. Shmi had her eyes closed and was quietly murmuring something under her breath.

Padme frowned. The woman didn’t look good. She could understand how growing up on Tatooine, and then seeing this would be very disorienting, but it was odd that neither Ani or Leia had noticed.

“Shmi?” she asked, concerned.

Instantly both Ani and Leia’s head swiveled to look at the woman.

“I’m fine,” Shmi said. “I just need to give myself some time to adjust.”

“Grandmother,” Leia said, and took her elbow, “It’s okay.”

“So many people, so many ships,” Shmi said. “How does anyone deal with this?”

“Time,” Leia said, “It takes time. I want you to look at me, not out the viewport okay?”

Shmi did as she asked, and immediate her shoulders began to relax.

“How could you have lived here?” Shmi asked Leia, and Padme kept her shock to herself. Visiting was one thing, but Leia had lived here?

“It wasn’t my first choice,” Leia said dryly, “But you will adjust, I promise.”

Shmi shook her head “Too old,” she said, “I am too old for this.”

Ani took his mother’s hand, looking up at her in concern. “Mom?” he asked, and for the first time since she met him, Padme heard fear in his voice.

That seemed to catch Shmi’s attention because she looked down at him “Ani,” she said softly, trying
to gather herself together for her son “Sorry, I was just-”

“Overwhelmed?” Leia said, “You aren’t the first or the last to have that reaction.”

“Lady Solo is right,” Padawan Kenobi said softly, “Your reaction isn’t uncommon.”

Shmi gave him a small smile “Thank you,” she said. “You are very kind.”

Padawan Kenobi ducked his head, looking bashful at the sincere praise. He looked out the viewport, “It will be easier when we are on the ground,” he assured her. Padme could see he was right, the impressively tall walls of a hanger bay were in the viewport.

Padawan Kenobi cleared his throat, “Master?” he said, looking at Master Jinn, who was still lost in thought. “We are here.”

Master Jinn seemed to shake himself, “Of course,” he said. And Padme felt the small thump as the ship landed on the tarmac. The older Jedi looked at Leia, Ani, and Shmi, “I suppose this is where we leave you,” he said softly, eyes intent on Ani.

Leia straightened up, her melancholy mood falling away, “Once again you would be incorrect,” she said dryly. She looked down at Ani, her face worried “I have some errands to run, and I was wondering if they could go to the temple with you.”

Master Jinn’s eyebrow went up “Oh?” he said, trying to hide his pleased shock.

Leia hissed through her teeth, “Yes,” she said “Oh.”

Padme looked at her worried. She didn’t understand why Leia wanted Ani to stay away from the Jedi, but the woman was going out of her way to help her, and she didn’t want Leia to regret that by forcing the woman to leave him here at the temple. “They could come with us,” she said, “I’m sure Senator Palpatine wouldn’t mind housing two more.”

Leia’s face contorted, “No,” she said, her voice low and savage. Padme took a step back at the vehemence in her tone. Leia’s face smoothed out at Padme’s flinch “Thank you Padme,” she said, voice very controlled now “But I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“Why?” Padme asked, hurt that Leia would rather have Ani and Shmi somewhere she very clearly didn’t want them, rather than trust them with Padme.

Leia blinked, and contrition filled her face as she realized how her words must have sounded. “Because neither Shmi or Ani have any vaccinations,” she said, without missing a beat. “And I would rather expose them to as few people as possible until that is resolved. Especially on this world.” She looked at Master Jinn challengingly “I can pay for it of course, but I assumed you have a medical wing or facility here?”

Padme felt a blush creep up her face. That hadn’t even occurred to her that would be an issue. Had Watto been so cheap that he had not even paid for basic health care?

She wasn’t the only one taken aback, Master Jinn also had a look of embarrassment on his face. “No need,” he said. “We, of course, will see to it.”

He bowed to Shmi, “Lady Skywalker,” he said, “if you will follow me?”

Shmi looked at Leia, and Leia smiled reassuringly “Go,” Leia said, “I promise, I won’t be long.”
Shmi didn’t look reassured “Whenever you say that things end up exploding,” she said.

Leia rolled her eyes “One time, that happened one time,” she said. She came forward and gathered Shmi in a hug “I promise, it’s just an errand. I will be back before you know it.”

Shmi returned the hug, then let her go. Leia looked down at Ani, “You have choices,” she said firmly “please promise me you’ll keep that in mind.”

“I promise,” he said, but his eyes were looking out the window, to the group of Jedi who were walking across the tarmac.

“Old Man,” she growled.

He snapped his head back to hers. He looked apologetic as he said more firmly, “I promise Leia.”

She sighed and shook her head, then glared at Master Jinn. “What harm do you think will come to them here?” he asked, his annoyance starting to show as he crossed his arms across his chest.

Leia let out a bitter laugh “Oh,” she said “You have no idea what haunts my nightmares. And pray that you never do.”

Master Jinn blinked, but it was Padawan Kenobi who spoke up “Do you need transportation Lady Solo?” he inquired, trying to smooth the tension between the two of them.

Leia blinked and looked at him, eyes sharp “Yes,” she said.

“Then may I offer you the use of one of the Jedi open aired vehicles,” he said. “To better assist you,” He bowed “It’s the least we can do after you so graciously helped us escape from Tatooine.”

Leia folded her arms over her chest, “Not bad,” she murmured “but next time, tone down the innocent act just a little bit.”

“Lady Solo?” he asked, eyes going wide, as he came up out of his bow.

She smirked “Oh, don’t get me wrong, you are very charming,” she said “And I’m sure that youthful face has gotten you out of many a tight spot. But you are offering me the ship to get me away from your Master before I really lose my temper, we all fight, and everyone is delayed.”

Padawans Kenobi’s face broke out into confusion “How did you know?” he asked, and Padme blinked. She hadn’t sensed anything like that.

Leia shrugged, “The offer of a ship was a bit over the top,” she said “but it was the eyes. Just a smidge too wide”

Master Jinn looked like he didn’t know if he was offended on his padawan’s behalf, or wanted to laugh at loud at his being called out. Leia gave Padawan Kenobi a small smile. “I’m still taking the offer you understand,” she said, “but it was well done. I think you have a great future as a negotiator.”

Padawan Kenobi’s eyebrow went up “I’m already good at it,” he said.

Leia smirked “I’m better,” she said. She looked at Padme “I will see you later,” she said, “And I promise, I’ll have what you need.”

Padme contained her shiver. Leia sounded like she would burn half of Coruscant to the ground to get this data. Was the woman this intense about everything?
“Do you have a com I can contact you on?” Padme asked.

Leia waved her hand, “Don’t worry, I’ll find you.”

“How?” Padme asked, looking out into that crowded sky. If this was the traffic around the Jedi Temple, what would it look like in the more crowded areas of Coruscant?

Leia smiled “I’m a bounty hunter. I find people for a living.” Then she looked at Padawan Kenobi, and gestured to the door “If you don’t mind.”

Padawan Kenobi looked at his Master, who only shook his head “You are the one who made the offer,” he said, “You are the one who has to convince the deck master to release the ship to her.”

The younger Jedi grumbled something under his breath, but he bowed to his Master, then walked out of the hatch, Leia on his heels.

Master Jinn watched them go, then turned to Shmi and Ani, “If you will follow me,” he turned to Padme, and she could see his curiosity about what Leia was actually doing for Padme, but he only bowed to her and said “Please let Her Highness know we will have that cargo off the ship as soon as we can. And please convey our thanks for her consideration.”

“Of course,” Padme said.

Ani looked at her, then Qui-Gon “We are leaving?” he asked, “Now?”

“Ani,” Shmi gently chided “Padme, and the Queen need to get to the Senate.”

Ani looked at her, then quickly ran over to her, his arms wrapped around her. Padme was almost knocked over in his enthusiasm, but she returned the gesture.

“In case I don’t see you again,” he mumbled into her clothes.

She couldn’t promise him that they would, but as she drew back, she withdrew a small data chip from her belt. “Here,” she said.

He looked at it curiously, “What is it?” he asked, taking it from her hand.

“My personal com frequency,” she said. “As long as I am on this planet, you can use it to contact me.” She looked him straight in the face “And I promise, if I leave, I will tell you.”

“Okay,” he said. Then he walked back over to his mother, and all three of them exited the cockpit. Padme prayed that this wasn’t the last time she ever saw him again.

Master Jinn was as good as his word, within ten minutes the body was off the ship, and Padme felt like a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. It was silly, and she knew it. She hadn’t killed him, in fact, he had come to Tatooine to harm her, but she couldn’t help the fact that she felt better with the body gone.

The Jedi Temple was only a few minutes trip from the Senatorial district, and the landing platform where they were to meet Senator Palpatine, and Chancellor Valorum.

She was standing to Sabe’s right, her orange hood already pulled up. Sabe was dressed in one of Amidala’s official mourning dress. They had all agreed that it would be best to meet the Chancellor reflecting the state that their world was currently in. More than likely they would have to choose
something more ornate, and colorful, for the address to the Senate, but for now, this would do.

Sabe was tense, and Padme whispered, “Regretting not switching?” she asked.

Sabe shook her head, causing the feathers of her headdress to twitch. For all it’s ornateness, it was one of the lighter ones of the Queens. It was a shame, from Padme’s perspective, that they hadn’t used that design on one of the outfits she wore more on a day to day basis.

“Still too risky,” Sabe said. “We are going to be out in the open, and we have done no security sweeps of the area.”

“You think the Trade Federation will try to attack me here?” Padme asked shocked.

“I’m not paid to think,” Sabe said, and Padme snorted “I’m paid to protect you. And this is too open.”

Padme would have argued with that, but the doorway to the ship opened, and Panaka strode out in front as protocol demanded. Sabe waited for a beat, then followed the Master of the Guard, with Padme, Rabe, and Eirtae, flanking behind her.

The royal guards were already on the platform. They formed two rows, forming a line between where the arriving Naboo delegation was and the other end of the platform, where Palpatine and the Chancellor both stood waiting. They were impressive figures, with their bright blue uniforms, staff weapons, and covered faces. As they walked past them, Padme wondered what the history was behind the color choice and the ceremonial black crests on their helmets.

She yanked her thoughts for useless trivia and paid attention to the faces of the two men who were even now waiting to greet them.

As soon as they were within acceptable distance, Panaka bowed to the Chancellor, who acknowledge the movement with an incline of his head. Palpatine gave out a warm smile, and took two steps up to Sabe, “It is a great gift to see you alive, Your Majesty,” he said, “With the communications breakdown, we’ve been very concerned. I’m anxious to hear your report on the situation.”

Padme watched him closely, as he looked at Sabe intently. She had never told Palpatine the extent she switched with Sabe. He was aware she did it of course, but not how often they did. He knew her, as Padme had told Leia, he had known her for years, and most of the time, he was well aware of when they switched. But Padme knew him too, and she was very aware of his tells. Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, he didn’t know. It was a point of pride for Sabe that she could fool him. This was not one of them though. Padme could feel his eyes slide over all the handmaidens, and he paid attention to her. He was aware of where the Queen actually was.

He didn't say anything though, merely turned slightly, and said pleasantly, “May I present Supreme Chancellor Valorum?” he said to Sabe.

Padme had spoked to Valorum on several occasions over holo, but she had never met him in person. He was taller than she was expecting. The white hair wasn’t a surprise, but the vivid shade of blue was much more fetching in person. He was dressed in a simple black frock, with a dark robe overlaying it. It was well made and fitted to him, but it lacked any adornments or flourishes. Padme found that she was surprised. In all the holo calls, he had never worn anything elaborate, but she had thought that was because whenever he placed a call to her, it was very clear he was doing it in his own private time. She would have thought a man in his position would be more ornately dressed.
Palpatine was also a very simple dresser, especially given the standards of Naboo, but his fabrics were always of the highest quality, and more importantly, they looked it. Chancellor Valorum was from Coruscant, shouldn’t his clothes be…well more? Or was this part of his persona, one that said he was a man of the people, despite belonging to a very old, and prominent political family?

“Welcome Your Highness,” he said to Sabe, voice grave. His eyes were worried as he looked Sabe up and down, and Padme realized he was checking for any visible injuries. Touched, she felt a bit ashamed that she had been so dismissive of his appearance. Maybe the modest clothes were a practiced political ploy, maybe it was simply personal preference, but the fact that he was worried about her physical health spoke well of his character.

Sabe nodded her head, the gesture made all the more pronounced by the black headdress “Thank you, Supreme Chancellor,” she responded, her speech patterns falling into the Queen’s slow, deliberate rhythm.

The Chancellor nodded his head and started walking back to his ship, Sabe falling into step with him, and Palpatine falling behind them both to fall beside Padme. He looked at her gravely and nodded his head to the two. Padme pushed down her irritation. Yes, she was aware she needed to pay attention to what was being said, not talk to Palpatine. She wasn’t twelve anymore, she didn’t need things spelled out for her like that.

“I must relay to you how distressed everyone is over the current situation.” The Chancellor’s voice was heavy, and he sounded tired. “I’ve called for a special session of the Senate to hear your position.”

Sabe stopped walking at that, and it took Chancellor Valorum about two steps before he realized that she was no longer by his side. Padme wasn’t irritated with her guard with the lapse in manners. She probably would have done the same thing in Sabe’s place. This was no minor placating act that he had done. The Senate was in recess and was supposed to be that way for another month. It most of cost him quite a bit of political capital to order all those people to come back here, away from their homes.

Sabe got a hold of herself and took the steps needed to come face to face with the Chancellor. “I’m grateful for your concern Chancellor,” she said, eyes meeting his. Her voice didn’t lose its deliberate speed, but Padme saw the Chancellor’s eyes crinkle slightly up as he acknowledged her understated thanks. He was a man who not only dressed subtly but noticed it in others.

Palpatine frowned, and then looked behind them back towards the ship. “Where are your guards?” he asked, turning to face Sabe. “I was given to understand that the Jedi rescued you from Naboo?”

Valorum was the one who answered the question, for all that it had been directed at Sabe. “I’m afraid one of them was injured,” he said. “They contacted my office to see if they could delay this meeting a few minutes so that the ship could bring them to the Temple first, and the healers there.”

“Oh no,” Palpatine looked concerned. “Not gravely I hope?”

Panaka shook his head “It was a bit of trouble with the local gangsters on the planet we landed on for repairs.” He wasn’t happy about having to lie to the Senator, but he did understand the needs of an ongoing investigation. Until they were sure who had sent that man to Tatooine, everyone who was on the ship was under Padme’s orders not to say anything about it until the Jedi could identify where he came from.

Palpatine clasped his hands tighter “I am so happy to hear that,” he said. He turned to Sabe, “There is a question of procedure,” Palpatine said, as always, the practical one. “But I’m confident we can
overcome it.”

Chancellor Valorum nodded his head to Palpatine “Yes,” he said, “I believe you will.” He looked at all of them, “I’m afraid that I have to leave you now. But please believe me when I tell you are not friendless here.”

They all bowed, and Sabe said “Thank you for meeting us here today Chancellor,”

“Of course,” he headed back into his ship. His guards turned as one and filed in behind him.

They waited until the ship took off, and Palpatine offered his arm to Sabe “Come, Your Majesty,” he said, “My ship is here, and I’m sure you want to freshen up before we talk over our plans.”

He wanted to talk to Padme, not Sabe, but given all the witness on the landing dock, he couldn’t say that out loud.

“Thank you, Senator,” Sabe murmured, as he helped her into his ship “Your kindness is appreciated.”

And it was, but Padme wondered what he wanted to tell her, that he wouldn’t say in front of the Chancellor. And even more worryingly, why he wanted her reactions, not the ones filtered through Sabe. That never boded well.

In thirty minutes, she found herself sitting on the couch located in Palpatine’s office in his apartment. Although the walls that sectioned it off from the rest of his home where made of glass, there was a door, so that the rest of the refugees that had been rescued from Naboo wouldn’t be able to hear them speak.

Palpatine’s quarters were close enough to the Senate dome that Padme could see the great structure outside of the bank of windows that lined one wall of his home. It was an incredible view. That was, unfortunately, the only part of the apartment Padme liked. Every room she had seen was decorated in red. Red carpet, red walls, even the furniture was red. There was a smattering of black and silver accents pieces, but the whole place felt rigid and vaguely threatening and didn’t show a flicker of the man who was its occupant. Padme wondered if this was Palpatine’s design presence, or if he had hired some an interior designer, in an attempt to curry favor with someone else.

Padme’s chosen outfit didn’t match the decor, and if it had been anyone else but Palpatine, she wouldn’t have chosen this particular outfit. But she knew he didn’t care about using clothes to fit into the environment he was in. He preferred to choose the most basic clothes he could, it meant he never really stood out, but he also never really clashed either. So Padme had gone for the Queen’s outfit she could get into the fastest. It did have three layers to it, but it was a light rose shift, made of a gossamer fabric that was hardly there, with a thicker white overshirt over that. Both of those shifts were overlaid with a medium grey dress, that wasn’t fitted, but instead used a wide fabric belt looped around her waist to create her silhouette.

There was no beadwork on this outfit, just a scrolling pattern of embroidery. Padme’s headdress was more intricate. Of all of her headdresses, it was the one she liked wearing the least, for all that it was one of her lightest. The beaded fringe on the top, with the black crest arching over it, was certainly eye-catching and helped add a trace of elegance to the outfit. It was the string of beaded fringe flowing down from the headdress and cascading onto her shoulders she had a problem with. She still wasn’t used to the quiet tinkling noises the beads made in her ears when she moved her head, and every time she heard it she was momentarily distracted.

But the makeup on her face was something that there was no way to cut down on. Her face needed
to be completely covered in the white shade, so that she appeared as if she wasn’t human, with theloody red mark on her lip, and the two spots on her cheeks. The handmaid's could get it on her face
in ten minutes, and that had taken hours of practice, but they as of yet, hadn’t found a way to speed it
up more then that. So, she was wearing this outfit, with this headdress, so Palpatine wasn’t waiting
for long as she changed.

She sat on the couch, Sabe and Rabe cloaked in their red robes, hoods down over their faces to hide
what they were thinking. Padme’s eyes followed Palpatine as he paced in front of her.

“There is no civility, only politics,” he told her, sounding tired as he moved. Senator Palpatine
normally was a contained man, but he did tend to prowl around a room when he was agitated. “The
Republic is not what it once was.”

Panaka entered the room at that point, but Padme only briefly glanced his way as he came to stand
directly behind her. When she and the rest of them had arrived, he had insisted on doing a perimeter
check, and to verify for himself the security measures around Senator Palpatine’s apartment. Padme
thought it was probably a waste of his time, but she saw no benefit in telling him not to do it either.
Since he was not ordering her to leave for a safer location immediately, she assumed he found
everything to his satisfaction.

Palpatine waited until he was sure that he had Panaka’s attention before he started talking again.
“The Senate is full of greedy, squabbling delegates. There is no interest in the common good.” He
turned, and looked at her for a moment, sorrow on his face, as he waited for her to process this. The
man had some of the sharpest instincts Padme had ever seen for understanding and communicating to
a crowd in front of him, but she did find his style of speaking unnecessarily dramatic when he did it
when it was just the two of them.

Slight disappoint flickered in his eyes, as she failed to give him the reaction he wanted to his
pronouncement, and he turned away, to begin pacing again. “I must be frank, Your Majesty,” he
said, voice dropping into a much more lecturing tone, “There is little chance they will act on the
invasion.”

Padme supposed she would have been more shocked by that if she hadn’t had her conversation with
Leia on her journey here. It only told her that Leia’s understanding of politics, although mysterious in
origin, were correct. She felt another lick of gratitude to the woman for helping brace her for this
possibility. She didn’t know how she would have reacted if she had come all this way believing that
the Senate would do something, only to be told after everything that had happened, that there was
little hope. It probably would have led her to some very desperate decision making, she admitted
ruefully to herself.

She fought to keep all of that off her face though. Palpatine had told her time and time again, “Think
what you want Padme, but never let it show on your face, let them see what they want to see.”

She was fairly certain that he hadn’t meant for her to apply that advice to him, but he was trying to
lead her somewhere. An action he thought she wouldn’t normally want to do.

“Chancellor Valorum seems to think there is hope,” she countered, her voice artificially lowered and
evenly paced. More then hope, he seemed certain. If Valorum thought that there was nothing he
could do, he wouldn’t have exposed himself to charges of weakness by calling an unnecessary
special session.

Palpatine looked at her pityingly, “If I may say so, Your Majesty, the Chancellor has little real
power.” Padme blinked. No real power? Then how had he gotten the session called? Was there a
bureaucratic trick he had used to get around the rules? But nobody had told her that when she
arrived, and it was something she needed to know. Or perhaps, more unlikely, Palpatine was, in the stress of the moment, he was misreading the state of the Senate?

Palpatine went on, “He is mired by baseless accusations of corruption.” Baseless was correct. Padme knew what a corrupt politician looked like, she had replaced one, and Valorum didn’t have it in him. If he was corrupt why risk so much to help them? But just because he wasn’t corrupt, that didn’t mean he was an effective ally. She needed to remember that. Her people couldn’t afford for her to forget that.

“The bureaucrats are in charge now,” Palpatine said mournfully. It was a familiar refrain from him and his favorite subject of ire when discussing the inadequacies of their governing system.

“What options have we?” Padme was surprised at how calm her voice was. What she wanted to do was scream at him. How could he string her along with hope all these months while she was on Naboo? She was his Queen, and she had needed to know how large their peril was. Instead, he had encouraged her to reach out to Valorum, encouraged her to have patience. Encouraged false hope. It was probably done to protect her, but if that was his motive, he had failed miserably. And now she, and more importantly their people, were suffering.

He stared at her for a moment, and it took everything in her not to demand that he get to whatever point he was trying to get her to grasp.

“Our best choice would be to push for the election of a stronger supreme chancellor one who could control the bureaucrats and give us justice.” He looked at her, then said softly, as though the thought had just occurred to him “You could call for a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum.”

Padme felt her heart sink. No, this was not something she would be comfortable doing, and he knew it. This was why he had been laying out the issues he saw, right now, as fast as he could, in order to overwhelm her into this. “He has been our strongest support,” she protested, and this would be a horrible way to repay that support.

Defeat was in eyes, and desperation. Padme realized he truly believed that this was the last move they could make. That he had exercised all other options, but now his back was against the wall. “Our only other choice would be to submit a plea to the courts,” he said after a moment’s hesitation.

She put her full displeasure in her next words “The courts take even longer to decide things than the Senate.” That had been an option they had discarded months ago. Because while they waited for their case to be heard, the embargo would be left in effect. Naboo’s prosperity wouldn’t last under years of an embargo, and that was a realistic look at how long it would be before their case was decided. And if an embargo of that length would be devastating, Padme wasn’t sure there would be much left of Naboo, or their way of life, if an occupation lasted that long.

He turned away from her, and although he didn’t say anything, every line of his body showed resigned acceptance. Padme narrowed her eyes. What did he know? He was here on Coruscant. He hadn’t faced the sight of the droid armies rolling into Theed. He hadn’t seen the people rounded up, and taken away, looking terrified. This was all theoretical to him, and thanks to all the communications from Naboo being jammed, he didn’t know what the Trade Federation was doing.

“Our people are dying Senator,” she said, all of her hurt and anger in her voice “We must do something quickly to stop the Federation.”

He turned back to her, and there was nothing but condescension on his face. “To be realistic Your Majesty, I think we’re going to have to accept Federation control for the time being.”
Because he hadn’t thought of a solution, she couldn’t? Padme narrowed her eyes. But she had, hadn’t she? Even now Leia was traveling to the seedier parts of this planet, looking for the information Padme needed. “That is something I cannot do,” she told Palpatine.

He sighed. “The session in the Senate will start within the hour.” He looked her up and down, “Your Majesty, I would like you to consider what I said. I understand I took you by surprise, and that is my fault,” He gestured his hands out, “I should have been more truthful with you about how strangled everything has become here,”

“Yes,” Padme said, voice disapproving “you should have.”

Palpatine shook his head “I didn’t want to add to your worries, and I was so sure that I could do something, find some solution, before this all blew up into a crisis. I failed you in that,” he looked at her “And I apologize profusely for it. I thought I was doing my best to protect you.”

“I am now your Queen,” Padme said, “and while I will always appreciate your advice and I am grateful for your tutelage, we cannot afford for you to treat me like a student anymore.” She tilted her chin up, ever so slightly, meeting his eyes challenging, “Our people cannot afford it.”

At his hurt look, she softened her tone, “And perhaps the fault is also mine. I was reluctant to push, reluctant to challenge you, and that was my error in all of this.”

Palpatine bowed swiftly, “If you wish for my resignation when this is all over—” he offered.

Padme cut him off, “For being human?” she asked drolly “For making a mistake born of concern?” She shook her head “No Senator. If I punished everyone around me for not being perfect, I would soon find myself very alone.”

A grateful smile crossed his face “Thank you, Your Majesty,” he said. Then he looked her up and down critically “If I might make a suggestion?”

“Yes?” she asked, already aware of where this was going to go, but wondering why he felt the need to say anything at all to her about it.

He gestured to her outfit, “May I suggest you find something a bit more colorful?” he said “I understand the point you are making by wearing dark clothes, but not every world adheres to black as a mourning color. It would perhaps be more helpful to go for something more…colorful?”

Padme cocked her head “Why?” she asked, curious. She would have thought looking more modest would sell better to the Senate.

“For the holo cams,” he explained “Because the dome so large, not everyone will be able to see you when you present your speech. There will be holo cams capturing your image, and voice to project across several screens that are placed within the dome, so everyone can see and hear you. If you are wearing something colorful—”

“I stand out more,” she said, understanding.

He nodded “Precisely,” he said.

Padme stood, “Thank you, Senator, I will take that under advisement.” He bowed and exited the room.

Panaka waited for a beat before he came up behind her “Why didn’t you mention tracing the bounty back to the Trade Federation to him?” he asked softly, for her ears only.
Padme turned to look at him, the beads tickling in her ears. “As Leia is a layer of protection between our request and us, his ignorance is a layer of protection for him.”

Panaka looked surprised, Padme sighed “I am well aware that this could all go very badly. No matter how much we protest otherwise, this is information that is being acquired illegally.”

Sabe snorted from beneath her hood, “Yes, some minor slicing into illegal operations to prove there is an attack on a sovereign world, is surely a very serious crime.”

Padme shook her head “It’s a loophole, and if the Trade Federation is good at anything, it is slipping through loopholes.”

She watched through the glass doors as Palpatine exited his apartment “He is a good and loyal public servant,” she said “I know what risks I am taking. I will not drag him, and his career down along with me if this fails.”

“Didn’t you just lecture the man on trying to protect you?” Panaka asked.

“Yes,” Padme said, looking at her Captain of the Guard “I did. But the difference is, I am his Queen. It is my job to protect him, as one of my citizens.”

She sighed and rubbed her forehead, “Colorful?” she asked Sabe.

Sabe laughed “You know what outfit that means,” she said.

Padme rolled her shoulders, already feeling the headache this was going to cause her starting to build. “Yes, I do. We should get started now,” she allowed, “It’s going to take forever to get into the damn thing, and we don’t have a lot of time.”

“Is she here?” Panaka demanded, for the fifth time since they had arrived in the Senate Dome.

Padme fought not to shift. “I have not seen her, no.” she said. They had ten minutes before they would be called unto the Senate floor, and Leia still hadn’t arrived.

The Naboo delegation’s pod was on one of the mid-level ranges of the Senate dome. While the placement wasn’t ideal, the closer you were to the Chancellor, the more power your world held, the entrance to their pod was directly off the main hall of the Senate Building. Padme looked up the to see at least ten more floors between her, and the windows at the top of the hall, letting in all the light of the day.

She looked down to the hallway, where masses of people were still streaming in from the main entrance to the Senate Building. She couldn’t make out faces, not from this height, but that didn’t stop her anxious mind from scanning the crowd, looking for one small human dressed in rough clothes. At the very least Leia’s outfit would be noticeable among all this finery.

“Your Majesty?” Palpatine called from the door leading to his Senatorial pod, “It is almost time,”

Padme opened her mouth to make up some excuse to remain her until the last possible minute when she felt her wrist buzz slightly. She brought it up to her face to see who was calling, and fought the smile that almost broke out. “Excuse me, Senator,” she said to Palpatine, “but I need to take this.”

“We will be starting soon,” he warned her.
Padme thought of all those people still coming into the building, and very much doubted that, but she could understand the optics of not being late.

“Of course,” she said.

She withdrew several feet from Panaka and settled herself in a small alcove that was in the hallway for as much privacy as she could get in this crowded space. She brought her wrist up and flicked the holo on. “Hello Ani,” she said in her real voice, terrified that he wouldn’t recognize her with all her regal regalia.

Ani appeared in front of her “Hi!” he said cheerfully “I was just calling to wish you luck, and whoa!” his eyes went very wide as he got a good look at her on his own com “What are you wearing?”

The most eye-catching outfit she had with her. The entire outfit comprised of four layers. There was the first shift, made of sturdy fabric to protect her skin from the first underlying dress. That layer was made of a subdued orange material, that reflected light beautifully, giving it a glossy sheen, but was horribly itchy to the skin. Overlaying the top of the orange dress, was an intricately beaded collar, that even now was pressing into the skin where it rested on the back of her neck. The collar itself wasn’t so bad, but the strands of beads woven into it, that fell into a golden waterfall pattern that covered a portion of her chest were heavy, and the weight pulling on neck added to the ache building between her shoulders.

Then there was the overcoat. The deep red color was a nice compliment to the orange trim that was made of the same fabric as the underdress. But instead of a light fabric, it was a crushed velvet, which again, looked beautiful, but was monstrously hot.

She could have dealt with all of that. She had plenty of outfits that were as detailed and as uncomfortable as this one. It was the headdress and the cloak which pushed it over into Padme’s most hated Amidala outfit.

The headdress was heavy. Her hair, while long, wasn’t long enough to form the two crests the were pulled in two directions at the top of the headdress. So it was human hair woven into the piece, dyed to look like hers. Then those crests were finished off by two golden rods, that were at least a foot long.

Padme’s actual hair was pulled sharply into a high ponytail, that was tamed by an intricately woven rope tied into the middle of it. Having that much hair up that far on the back of her head, always gave her a headache after just an hour, and that wasn’t including the weight of the headdress.

The outfit required that Padme constantly keep her head at a perfect angle, slowing her movements unless she wanted it to yank on her neck muscles. If that wasn’t heavy enough, her brown fur overcoat was hooked into the headdress, adding to the weight on to her already overburdened head, and adding another layer of warmth. Naboo was mostly a temperate planet, they did not have winters cold enough to justify this many layers of heavy fabric. And Coruscant, being a giant city, was even warmer. Even in this cool air-conditioned hall, she could feel the sweat beginning to build at the base of her spine.

But it was an impressive outfit, and it certainly met Palpatine’s suggestion of eye-catching.

She gave Ani a small smile “You don’t like it?” she asked.

“No…,” he said, very slowly. “It’s very...Queeny.” He cocked his head “It doesn’t look very much like you though.”
“Because I am not me, right now Ani,” she said “I’m the Queen. And I need to look impressive.”

He looked thoughtful at that. “Why don’t you just go in there wearing as many blasters as you can find?” he asked, “I think that would be more impressive.”

Padme fought the urge to burst out laughing at that. She was being quiet, but there were still people walking by, and she didn’t want to give them the wrong impression that she was anything but a furious, and wronged, ruler. But oh, how he had just lightened her heavy heart for a moment “You are absolutely right,” she said, small giggles escaping her “but unfortunately there is a strict, no blaster policy, on the Senate floor.”

“Oh,” he said “That makes sense. Then yes, I guess this is very impressive too.”

Padme smiled “Thank you for thinking of me,” then she frowned “How did you know I was about to speak?”

“Obi-Wan told me,” he promptly answered. “So, I thought I should call and tell you that you are going to do great.”

“Thank you,” she said again.

He frowned “You looked worried,” he said, “What’s wrong?”

“Leia isn’t here yet,” she confessed.

“She will be,” he said. “Leia never fails on what she sets out to do.”

Padme nodded slowly “Alright,” she said. She took a deep breath in, “But if you do see her, can you tell her to com me on this channel?”

“Sure!” he said, “But I’m telling you, she’ll pop up when you least expect it.”

“Alright,” she said, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

He waved at her “Bye Padme.”

“Goodbye Ani,” she said, disconnecting the call.

She returned to the balcony, and Panaka, who was staring into the crowds below.

“We are running out of time,” Panaka warned.

“Valorum isn’t here,” Padme pointed out.

“Your Majesty,” he started to say.

“Don’t,” she warned. “She’ll be here,” Padme intoned her voice to the studied neutrality of the Queen.

Panaka snorted in derision, then said in a gentle voice “Your Majesty, I think it’s time to understand that she isn’t coming.” Padme moved her eyes to meet his. He looked at her earnestly, as he said “She took what she needed, committed her crime, and left us in the lurch.”

Padma’s lips flattened in displeasure, “She wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“Your Majesty,” Panaka said patiently. “What do you really know about this woman?”
Next to nothing. “She wouldn’t,” Padme insisted again, but even to her own ears, the protest sounded weak.

Panaka shook his head “I know this hard to take, but she took advantage of you. She is very…” and his voice contained a flicker of resentment as he conceded “competent, but she owes us nothing and has no reason to help us at all. She’s probably halfway back to Tatooine by now.”

Padme shook her head. No, she didn’t know much about Leia, not her age, where she was from, or what she wanted, but she did know one thing for certain, Leia would rather die than abandon Ani and Shmi.

“No, she is not.” Panaka’s face bunched to protest, but Padme went on, “Leia would never leave Ani and Shmi.” As she took a deep breath in, she felt the press of the japor snippet against her chest, where it hung from a chain she had borrowed from Rabe. Padme wasn’t superstitious, but it was reassuring to feel the physical weight of someone’s unconditional support. The only thing Ani seemed to want from her, was to make her happy.

Panaka let out a long sigh. “Your Majesty, you have lived a very sheltered life” his polite way of reminding her that she was very young “and you have never dealt with this kind of person. She was clearly using those two vulnerable slaves to make herself seem more trustworthy to any target that crossed her path.”

Padme stiffened, insulted, and immediately felt the ache of the headdress as it’s pressure points changed on her head. The pain just spurred her on. Yes, she was young. But Panaka had not been on Tatooine with Padme. He hadn’t seen what she had. Leia loved those two. Padme would bet her life on that. Leia could have left them both at any time, but instead, she stayed to protect them. And she had done everything within her power to set them free. Those were not the actions of someone who blithely cut herself loose from her responsibilities.

“And what kind of person would that be Captain?” she asked in her most frigid tone.

He ignored her anger, and leaned forward until he was mere inches from her face, “A bounty hunter,” he spat “Someone whose loyalty is offered to the highest bidder. Someone who will sell out their closest friends for a reward. Someone who has no loyalty, no honor, and no friends. Who can’t even begin to understand the responsibilities and work of your position.”

His eyes flickered briefly to something over Padme’s shoulder. Probably Palpatine, approaching them to let them know it was time. “In short, someone who can’t be trusted. She is part of the dredges of the galaxy…” His voice trailed off as he registered they were no longer alone.

Padme’s eyes narrowed at him. He might as well finish what he was going to say, Palpatine or no Palpatine. It would in no way change the lecture she was about to deliver, and she doubted she could get any angrier. “Please go on Captain.”

“Yes,” Leia’s voice chimed over Padme’s shoulder. “Please do go on. I’m very curious to think what you think a low born scoundrel is like.”

Panaka’s mouth clicked shut. Padme felt a blush come up her face as she realized that Leia had just heard Padme not defend her from any of the charges Panaka had accused her of. This was no way to treat an ally. An ally who had turned up just when Padme needed her and might refuse to hand over the information that was so desperately needed because her Captain of the Guard wasn’t paying attention to the people who were approaching Padme.

Padme turned around slowly, to see the woman looking at the Captain. Despite her words, she
looked amused at Panaka’s dumbfounded face. Then Padme understood why it had taken Panaka several seconds to recognize her. Leia looked like a completely different person.

Gone was her cheap leggings and tunic, replaced by a soft grey gown, which if Padme’s eyes didn’t deceive her, was made of silk. It had long sleeves that came to a triangle point on to Leia’s hands. Her leather belt, with its blaster, and many pockets, was gone. It had been replaced by a slim, silver, woven rope, tied around Leia’s waist, and providing definition to her outline. The dress wasn’t custom made, Padme could see that by the way it didn’t quite fit Leia across the shoulders, and it was just half an inch too long. But even so, it was beautifully made and crafted and must have cost Leia a small fortune.

Leia had also changed her hair. Instead of the braids looped around her head, it was pulled back into two large elegant rolls, that rested lightly on the nape of her neck. There was a pair of grey pearls in her ears, the exact shade of the dress.

Padme blinked. “Were you carrying this in your essentials bag?” she asked.

Leia laughed and came closer to Padme. Even the way she walked was different. Instead of that confident stride eating up the ground beneath her, Leia’s movements were slow and deliberate. She was using a cane, Padme saw, a twisted old wooden thing, that looked very well used. And she was leaning on it like she needed it.

“No,” Leia said, coming up to the two of them. “I picked it up on my way here.” She thumped the cane onto the floor “Along with this. Don’t worry,” she said to Padme’s stricken face “I’m fine, it’s just for show.”

“You went shopping?” Panaka said, voice aghast. “Now?”

Leia arched an eyebrow “You told me to take every precaution so that no one would connect Leia Solo, bounty hunter, with your ‘anonymous source’. You also wanted me to make it hard for anyone to trace this chip back to your contact.”

She gave him a beautiful wide smile and chuckled like he had said something very funny. Padme saw Leia’s eyes flick to the corner for a second, then back at them. Even though her face was open and smiling, her eyes were hard and challenging “Do you think anyone looking through the security feed later, and seeing this, will ever be able to connect this woman standing here to the uncouth bounty hunter you gave a ride to from Tatooine?” The security cams, Padme realized, Leia was showing her where the security cams were in this spot with that eye flick.

Panaka’s mouth dropped open. “But, how?” he asked, baffled at this transformation.

Padme cut him off. She had her own questions, and they were more worrying than Leia’s ability to change her looks. “How did you come in from behind me?” she asked.

Leia looked at her, eyebrow arched. Padme cocked her own right back at her, “Don’t play coy,” she said, the Queen’s voice lending her tone a sharper edge. “The public elevators to this floor were in my line of sight, and Panaka’s, the entire time.”

“Maybe you were too involved in swallowing your temper at our doubting Captain to notice me?” Leia suggested.

While relieved that Leia was aware of what Padme had been doing during that conversation, that didn’t answer her question. “No, I was not.” Padme said, “The elevators from the direction you came from are restricted,” she said, and beside her, Panaka stiffened as he realized what that meant.
Leia’s mouth twitched in amusement “Oh, I know a trick or two,” she said carelessly.

Padme wanted to shake her for being so careless about Padme’s life. If Padme died here and now, there was no one she could trust to have the ability to help her people. “Is it a trick anyone else knows?” she asked, “Say assassins coming after me?”

Leia blinked as if that thought hadn’t occurred to her, and all mocking dropped from her face. “No,” she said softly “it is not. I promise on Ani’s life, and mine, it is not.”

“Then how do you know it?” Padme wanted to demand, but Panaka cut that line of thinking off.

“Do you have it?” he asked.

Leia nodded, and her fingers caressed the side of her cane. There must be a hidden latch or lever in the thing, because a data chip popped out of the side, near the top. In an instant, Leia’s fingers had plucked it up, and it was hidden in the palm of her hand.

“As promised.” She reached out her hand, taking one of Padme’s in her own, and Padme felt Leia transfer the small chip into Padme’s hand.

Leia looked at Panaka “I am sorry for cutting it close, but the Trade Federation is nothing if not tricky in their dealings.”

Padme withdrew her hand from Lea’s clutching that tiny chip, with all the hopes for her people on it. “It’s all here?” she asked hoarsely.

Leia nodded “Yes. It’s as I suspected. There is a long line of shell corporations, limited liability corporations, and nonprofits, between the company that placed the bounty and the Trade Federation,” she looked at Panaka and gave him a nod. “You were right though. Your slicer is very good, and managed to follow the trail to the end.”

“Thank you,” Padme said, voice grave and serious as she looked at the woman “From the bottom of my heart, I thank you. I and my people owe you a great debt. I can’t even begin to know how to repay you.”

Leia looked at her, her own face a twisted mess of emotions. She closed her eyes, and then, as elegantly as she could with the cane in her hand, curtseyed to Padme, at the exact depth for someone of lower rank to a higher one on Naboo. Where had she learned to do that so precisely?

“You are quite welcome,” she said “But there is no debt between me and you. And there is certainly not one me and your people either.” A grim light entered her eyes “I would have done more than just run into the seedier side of Coruscant to get you this information.”

Padme blinked. Leia’s resolve made no sense in this context. Yes, it was important, vitally so to Padme, but Leia made it sound like proving the Trade Federation was involved in dirty dealing was vital to the fate of the galaxy itself.

Panaka’s voice was humble, aware of what Leia had just given them, but there was a strong current of defensiveness to it. “You are right, there is no debt. It’s not like you weren’t already compensated.” He looked at her outfit, clearly calculating how much such a dress would have cost Leia. “I assume my contact got what you needed?”

“Within five minutes,” Leia answered back politely, “And don’t worry, I even left enough in his account so he can give a final payment to his latest mistress if he so chooses.”
For the woman’s sake, Padme hoped King Beon did.

Panaka’s face looked troubled, but he didn’t say anything further. Bowing to Padme, he said, “If I may have your leave, your Majesty, I would like to check the pod now for security purposes.”

Padme almost said no. She didn’t see the point, any more then she had when they arrived at Palpatine’s apartment, but then she remembered that Leia, by all rights, shouldn’t have been able to access those elevators. She felt the fear clamp around her heart. She couldn’t come this close to victory, and then have it all taken away by one carefully placed shot. “Of course Captain,” she said.

He left them, and Leia looked at her. “Nervous?” she asked.

Padme nodded, “And terrified,” her hand worried the data chip between her fingers “What if this isn’t enough?” she asked Leia, in her normal speaking voice.

Leia looked at her sympathetically “I believe it’s enough to get more forces there. More Jedi for certain, appropriately this time, and possibly Judicial.”

Padme looked at her “What if I fail?” she asked.

Leia looked back at her “Then you fail,” she said simply.

“How can you say that?” Padme demanded, “You know what rides on this?”

“As do you,” Leia said. She came forward and put her arms on Padme’s shoulders and looked her directly in the eyes “You have more strength then you know.”

“I have the strength to do this?” Padme asked weakly. “I’ve spoken in public before, and I’m good at it. I wouldn’t have won my position if I wasn’t,” Padme had no false modesty about that, she was good at public speaking.

“Then what is the problem?” Leia asked.

“That was Naboo,” Padme said, “And if I didn’t convince people that I was right, the worst that could happen is that we wouldn’t have as an effective leader.” She gestured to the open door leading to the Naboo Senatorial pod, behind Leia “This is the Senate, if I fail here, it could lead to the destruction of my people.”

She looked pleadingly at Leia “I need them to believe me. I need them to care. My people need them.” She looked at Leia doubtfully “I don’t think I ever had enough strength to do this.”

Leia shook her head “No, that wasn’t what I meant,” she said, “It doesn’t take strength to be eloquent. It doesn’t even take strength for you to speak to all those people. That is experience and ability, both which you already know you have.” She cupped Padme’s chin in her hand “What I meant is that you have the strength to understand that if you fail here, you will pick yourself right back up, and continue to fight like hell.”

Padme gave a chuckle. “I’ve never heard it quite put that way before.”

Leia’s face was amused “If you let your fear of failure overwhelm you, you won’t do anything. And from what I’ve seen, and how you conducted yourself so far, you haven’t let the fact that you are terrified stop you from what needs to be done.” Her hand dropped from Padme’s face, “Just remember, you have more options than just this,” she waved her hand to the door leading to the Senate floor. “And if anyone else is trying to tell you otherwise, they are stupid or trying to manipulate you.”
Padme didn’t think Palpatine was trying to manipulate her, but he was far from stupid. A bit stodgy perhaps, but not stupid. “Senator Palpatine said otherwise,” Padme murmured.

Leia’s eyes became very sharp, and very worried “Did he now?” she asked.

Padme nodded, “He said our only choice might be a vote of no confidence in Chancellor Valorum.” She looked at Leia, but there was no shock on her face, just a deep wariness.

“Maybe,” the older woman conceded, looking troubled. Her face grew distant, as if she was weighing very carefully what her next words should be. That made Padme nervous. Leia, in the short time she had known the woman, had never felt the need to edit her words around Padme. What could possibly be so important about what she was about to say that she felt she had too now?

After that long pause, Leia’s focus came back to Padme “I have a question for you.”

Padme blinked. “Which is?”

“Do you know who will replace Valorum?” Leia’s face was earnest, and there wasn’t even the hint of censure in her voice at Padme considering betraying someone who had done so much for her. “Is it someone who will be sympathetic to you? Or more hostile?”

Padme opened her mouth, then shut it very carefully “I don’t know,” she confessed, wanting to rub her forehead to ease the ache that was suddenly there. She couldn’t of course, not unless she wanted to smear her white mask. “I’m not very familiar with the current factions and who controls them in the Senate. A lapse on my part,”

“Learn and move on,” Leia said, then drily added, “It’s not like you weren’t facing your own political problems at home.”

Padme still felt the helpless rage that there had been another thing she was failing her people in. “I suppose the only Senator in that room that I can count on to be sympathetic to the plight of my people is Senator Palpatine,” she mused.

Leia looked at her “Does he have the votes to be Chancellor?” she asked casually.

Padme let out a surprised bark of laughter “No,” she said, semi-hysterically. “Why would he?”

“I don’t know,” Leia said. “It seems like a reasonable motivation for suggesting such a strategy.”

Padme’s shoulders shook, as she fought to restrain the laughter “We are not a powerful or wealthy world. Palpatine has served faithfully here, but we don’t have enough money, or political pull to make him in any way able to influence enough of the delegates to vote for him.”

“Then it’s a risky strategy,” Leia said. “And more than likely a lengthy one. Bureaucratic debate can be so tedious.”

“And how would you know that?” Padme asked curiously.

“Debate school,” Leia said with a straight face.

Padme waved her hands “Fine, don’t answer.”

The door behind them opened

Your Majesty?” Panaka asked.
“I’m coming,” she told him, then looked at Leia “I wish you could come into that pod with me,” she said.

Leia looked back at her “You don’t know how much I wish I could too,” she said. But the rules were very clear on that. Leia was not a senate aid, or an invited ruler. For all Padme knew, she wasn’t even a citizen of the Republic. She was not allowed to be there, no matter how much it would calm Padme if she was.

Leia looked at Padme and, then turned around to look through the open door. Padme saw her hand tighten on the cane and was surprised at such an open show of frustration from the woman. Perhaps she shouldn’t be. Ani had said Leia always finished what was put in front of her. She was someone who saw problems, came up with a plan, and then executed them. It must be frustrating to her, on a personal level, that she couldn’t march into that pod, and finish this mission she had started on Padme’s behalf.

Padme took a step forward, intending to head to the door, when Leia’s hand came out and clamped on her arm, stopping her. Padme looked at her startled.

Leia took in a deep breath, “My final advice,” she said, “Think before you do anything. And be aware, as much as you possibly can be, of what people want from you, and figure out why they want it before you give it to them.”

Padme blinked “Thank you, Leia,” she said. While helpful, it was rather vague. Was there someone in that room Leia was specifically concerned about?

“May the Force be with you, Your Majesty,” Leia said gravely, and turned to walk away.

The Senate Dome itself was a large cavernous space. Padme could see all the thousands of pods lining the walls, even with her limited ability to turn her head, and most of them were occupied. She gratefully sat down on the bench provided, and took in a few deep breaths. She wouldn’t be speaking immediately. Any session of this legislative body had to start with the minutes and business of the day.

The lights in the chamber dimmed, and then one solo light was brought up to the pod that was located in the center of the room. It was attached to a tall platform, almost at the bottom of this great space. That was the Chancellor’s seat, and because of its location, everyone could see it, even if the Chancellor would become only the smallest of specs for those Senators whose Senators were at the top of the dome. Padme had been wondering why the Chancellor was at the bottom of all of this, instead of the top.

The Naboo contingent wasn’t at the very top, but it was close, perhaps less than a fifth of the way down. Padme thought about Leia’s warning yesterday about the Core cutting off the outer rim, and the further out Mid-Rim worlds. Well if she wanted proof of how the rest of the galaxy saw Naboo, this seat was certainly the way to do it.

Palpatine sat next to her “Do you have any questions Your Majesty?” he asked.

Padme looked at him “Where is the Trade Federation delegation?”

Palpatine looked surprised, but he turned his head, scanning the room. He pointed towards a pod that was much closer to the bottom. “There,” he said. “Their Senator is named Lott Dodd,” He sniffed “A rather blatantly ambitious man.”

They were near the Chancellor’s podium, near the seat of power. Padme took a deep breath in.
Power was important, but the Republic was built on more than that.

Thanks to the projections screens she could see when Valorum enter in with a tall Chagrian and a human woman flanking him, “The human is the Chancellor’s Staff Aide, Sei Taria” Palpatine murmured into her ear, “and the man is Vice Chancellor Mas Amedda.”

Padme inclined her head to signal she had heard him.

“This session of the Galactic Senate will come to order!” the Vice Chancellor boomed.

The rest of the overhead lights dimmed, only leaving the illumination strips on the front of the pods, and the personal lights inside the pods as the only source of light in this giant room.

As the minutes of the last session were entered into the record, Padme let her mind wander as she tried to collect her thoughts together. She could hear her heartbeat thudding in her ears, but Palpatine was here. Sabe and Rabe were also here, and they would stand by her no matter what happened today.

“The chair recognizes the Senator from the sovereign system of Naboo.”

Padme started a little, she hadn’t realized she had been so lost in her thoughts that she had lost track of what was going on. She heard the murmurings from the Senators who were clustered around them as Palpatine got up. He walked calmly to the front of the pod, and the control console there. Gracefully the pod came loose of its mooring into the door, and floated down, heading toward the Chancellor’s podium

When he was halfway there, he began speaking, aware of all the eyes tracking the movement of his pod. His grandfatherly voice was inviting, but firm “Supreme Chancellor, delegates of the Senate, a tragedy has occurred, which started right here with the taxation of trade routes,” and here his head turned as he leveled the next words at the pod of the Trade Federation, which had against protocol, also entered the space around the Chancellor’s podium, “and has now engulfed our entire planet in the oppression of the Trade Federation.”

“This is outrageous!” a voice boomed over the com system. Padme didn’t turn her head, but she knew the objection could only be coming from Senator Dod of the Trade Federation delegation. “I object to the Senator’s statements!” he called.

Annoyance flashed briefly on Valorum’s face and his voice boomed out “The chair does not recognize the Senator from the Trade Federation at this time.”

The Trade Federation might have bought their way into this organization, despite not being a planet, Padme thought righteously, but that doesn’t mean they own everyone here.

“To state our allegations,” Palpatine went on smoothly as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “I present Queen Amidala, recently elected ruler of the Naboo, who speaks on our behalf.” Padme understood why Palpatine was doing this. He was very good at manipulating people, and she knew the young prodigy sold well, it’s how she was elected, but she wished so hard that her age wasn’t the first thing anyone ever mentioned about her. She wasn’t even the youngest leader the Naboo had ever elected.

But this piteous whining had no place here. She rose, and came forward to the speaking podium, at the front of the pod.

She could hear the low murmurs of the crowd as they understood that they would be getting a more of a show then they had expected. It was rare that a non-senator could speak on this floor, Padme knew. At least to a full assembly. As witnesses, yes, but that was mostly in front of committees, but
not the whole body. It was an honor Padme could have done without.

“Honorable representatives of the Republic,” she said, making sure that her voice didn’t speed up to match the beating rhythm of her heart. Padme noticed the small camera droids float around her pod, mercilessly carrying every motion and sound she made, for all to see. She didn’t like the makeup she was required to wear as Queen on most days. She was thankful now that it was there, it smoothed away most expressions, making a nervous twitch hard to see. Which was one of the reasons it existed of course. And as a reminder that the Ruler and the person were not the same thing. “I come to you under the gravest of circumstances, Naboo’s systems has been invaded by the droid armies of the Trade Federation.”

“I object!” Senator Dod cried out again. Padme moved her head slowly and saw that he had not returned his pod to the docking moor, and he was still floating near the Chancellor. “There is no proof!”

Padme thought briefly of simply talking over the Senator, but she was a guest here, and uncertain of the rules governing when she could or could not speak. If this was out of line, Valorum would make the call for order once again.

Seizing the silence, Dod went on. “This is incredible!” he said, indignation making him quiver “We recommend a commission be sent to Naboo to ascertain the truth.”

“The Congress of Malastare concurs with the honorable delegate from the Trade Federation.” Another voice called out, and Padme could hear the hum of another pod coming to hover behind her. “A commission must be appointed.”

Malastare? Why were they getting involved? They had an abundance of fuel if she remembered correctly, that was used all over the galaxy. They didn’t need the Trade Federation, they had something that was essential to all walks of life, and could probably create their own trade fleet if they wished. Did the Trade Federation pay the Senator personally to back him? Or was the Malastare Senator honing in on some obscure rule that she had violated? Or perhaps he was striking back at Naboo for some reason she couldn’t see? For all she knew he didn’t like Palpatine on a personal level and was punishing him. Padme felt out of her depth, on Naboo she knew the players, and what they wanted, here she could only offer guesses, and it crippled her ability to make effective arguments back.

“The point-“ Valorum started to say, then was cut off as his aid whispered in his ear.

Palpatine leaned over “Enter the bureaucrat,” he said, voice dripping with distaste “The true rulers of the Republic.” There was a long, significant pause, then he whispered as if telling some great secret, “And on the payroll of the Trade Federation I might add,” he glared over at Mas Amedda. “This is where Chancellor Valorum’s strength will disappear.” He went back to his seat, tsking under his breath. Padme was left alone, to stare out at the room.

Padme’s heart sank. Everywhere she looked around her, there were heads nodding in agreement in the pods she could see. These were the representatives of the Core Worlds, they had the most influence and power, but either they thought she was lying, or were so married to the idea of ‘protocol’ they couldn’t see the cost it was inflicting.

“Padme,” she could her grandmother’s voice in her head “You are so clever, but you do not know what someone is going to do until they do it. Wait, then react.”

It didn’t take long. Mas Amedda withdrew from his hushed conference with Valorum, “The point is conceded,” the Chancellor sounded beaten. He looked over straight at Padme, addressing her
directly. “Will you defer your motion to allow a commission to explore the validity of your
accusations?”

He was only doing his job, Padme tried to reason with herself. He knew, he knew, she wasn’t lying.
That her world had been invaded, and that the ones who had done it were manipulating the process
to stop the only body who could stop them, from finding out what they had done. He had supported
her all these long months and given her hope. But his truth, her truth, they meant nothing. He had
been outmaneuvered, Palpatine was right, he was powerless.

“I will not defer.” Padme allowed her voice to rise in volume slightly “I have come before you to
resolve this attack on our sovereignty now. I was not elected to watch my people suffer and die
while you debate this invasion in a committee.”

There was worry in Valorum’s eyes, as he realized that she would not follow his request. That she
would fight, and that his kindness meant nothing when faced with the catastrophe facing her people.
Padme opened her mouth, to call for a vote of no confidence when Leia’s voice rang in her head.

“And be aware, as much as you possibly can be, of what people want from you, and figure out why
they want it before you give it to them.”

She didn’t have to do this. Palpatine wanted her to, and she trusted his judgment, she did, but Leia
had asked some very pertinent questions about who would replace Valorum and the costs of that.
Padme wasn’t sure why Palpatine was so convinced that removing Valorum was the only way to
save their world. Besides, she had not exercised every option she had, and she owed the Chancellor
at least that much before she moved against him.

She allowed herself for the first time to turn her head so that she was looking directly into the Trade
Federation’s pod. It was done slowly, always so slowly, so that the headdress remained balance, but
it had the effect of catching everyone’s attention. “Senator Dod,” she asked, “if there is no validity to
my claims, why did you place a bounty on my head to be returned to Naboo?” she challenged.

The silence in the room was broken by an outright roar as thousands as voices cried out their denial.

“Preposterous!” Senator Dod screamed.

“Your Highness,” Palpatine was back at her side, “What are you doing?” he sounded panicked.

She turned to look him straight in the eyes. “Proving my claim Senator.” She brought the data chip
out of her hand, and carefully inserted into the receiver on the control console. Flicking a button, she
sent the data to every Senator’s pod. Within a moment, the data trail linking the Trade Federation to
the bounty Leia had seen on the net in the Outer Rim holonet was available to every Senator. She
knew because there was the chime of soft chimes echoing around the room as the data arrived.

“I have proof, Senator Dod,” she said calmly, looking at the suddenly very nervous Neimoidian.
“What do you have?” she taunted.

At first, there wasn’t much of a reaction. She wasn’t even sure most of them would look at it. Then a
cry of outrage came from the top. There were murmurings now, and the Padme could hear the
sounds of gasps coming from the pods around her, as more and more people began looking at the
data, curious as to what their neighbors were reacting to.

The sound of the crowd grew louder and louder, and Padme could see Senator after Senator turn
their gazes to the Trade Federation delegate, who was still floating near the Chancellor’s podium.

Senator Dod seemed to be aware that he had lost the crowd because he started to try to once again
“deny what was in front of everyone, “This is…”

“An outrage?” Valorum asked, wry amusement in his voice as he looked up from his own datapad. Beside him, Mas Amedda had gone a lighter shade of blue as he peered over the Chancellor's shoulder.

“A fraud!” Senator Dod said. “We would never condone such an action.”

Padme kept her gaze on him steady. “I think this evidence says otherwise.” She turned her head, and spoke directly to Chancellor Valorum “How long until they target you? Any of you? The Trade Federation is not just content to warp our laws to bend to their will, but to use violence.” She felt her voice growing stronger “This august body has endured, and survived for a thousand years because we all submit to the rule of law. If we are to continue for another thousand, then we must all agree to abide by the compacts we make.”

Senator Dod pointed his finger towards her “And how did you come across this information?” He lashed out. “By the looks of it, several of the banking clans institutions were sliced into to get this!”

Padme kept her calm. Even if he had more time, there was nothing he could find to tie her to this. “Are you conceding the veracity of the data?” she asked.

“No!” he said, backing up quickly as he realized what he had just inadvertently admitted. Then he switched tactics, “This is obviously falsified information. You created this to -“

“Chancellor Valorum,” a smooth male voice cut off the Senator. It hadn’t come from the speakers in her pod though, she had heard it with her ears. Whoever had spoken, they were near her. Padme turned her head to the direction of that voice and saw a tall human male stand up in his pod. It was in the direct sight line of the Chancellor’s podium. The occupant came to his control podium. “If I may?”

Chancellor Valorum looked at the approaching Senator. “The chair recognizes Senator Antilles, representing the Alderaan system.”

A hush fell over the Senate as one, almost all of them leaned forward to see what was said. Alderaan was a wealthy world, and a generous one, but they almost never involved themselves in matters such as these though, at least not openly.

Senator Antilles pod detached from the wall and floated until he was directly across from Padme’s. “Delegates,” Senator Antilles said, craning his head up, looking up into the rafters themselves, instead of addressing the camera droids who had floated over to his pod.

“I’m deeply troubled by this evidence brought before us.” He lifted the datapad in his hand, making sure that everyone was focused on what he spoke of, “If Queen Amidala’s accusation is true then it is the highest breach of the trust we place in each other to deal fairly, and without violence with each other.” He brought his gaze down so that he could look directly into the Trade Federation’s pod, “I do however concede the point that this information needs to be verified.”

“Exactly,” the Trade Representative said, “We would be happy to turn over all records that the Senate would like in regards to this matter.”

Senator Antilles looked at Senator Dod, and said “A generous offer Senator Dod, I thank you.”

Padme wanted to scream. She had been so close, and once again, another avenue of hope was destroyed. The Trade Federation would never turn over their own books. They would hand over falsified ones. This had all been a desperate gamble, but she had failed. She should cede the floor,
and crawl home now.

"You have the strength to understand that if you fail here, you will pick yourself right back up, and continue to fight like hell." Leia’s voice said in her mind. Padme grabbed onto those words. She might have lost this battle, but she hadn’t lost the war, not yet. She wouldn’t retreat until she was forced from this floor.

Senator Antilles wasn’t done talking yet. “I do, however, think that without evidence to the contrary, we must treat Queen Amidala’s request as an legitimate one.” He looked into her pod, and Padme’s spirits lifted immediately. He believed her, and Alderaan had many resources to bring to this fight. “No matter how illegal the means she used to require it.”

“They were given to me by an anonymous source,” she said, answering the Senator’s unspoken question if any of this could be tied to her.

He nodded his head towards her, and then turned to face Valorum “I submit that the along with the records that the Trade Federation offers us, that the Senate subpoena all records from the Banking Clans.”

The representative from the Banking Clan sputtered “We could not possibly-“ he started to say.

“Just for these accounts gentlebeings,” Senator Antilles said. “We don’t want to turn this into a large-scale fishing operation into every banking transaction by the Trade Federation.” Although by the look on his face he dearly wanted to. Padme knew that the Trade Federation had allies in the Senate, both through money and fear, and according to Palpatine they were legion. It never occurred to her to ask him who the Trade Federation’s enemies were, and if they would be willing to help Naboo.

Senator Antilles’ voice was grave “Either way, this matter represents an attack on our sovereignty.” He gave a pointed look to Senator Dod, “Either a member of this body conspired to kidnap the duly recognized leader of a sovereign world,” and then he looked at Padme, tone still firm, but his face much softer, leaving no one who was paying attention in doubt as to who he believed “or a massive fraud is being played out on us against a member.”

Valorum titled his head “Your motion is so hereby entered.”

Padme wanted to shout in triumph, as a chant of voices cried out “Vote now! Vote now!”

“Order!” Vice Chancellor Amedda cried out, trying to gain control of the chamber.

There were so many voices, it wouldn’t surprise Padme to learn that all of the Senator’s were crying out, even the ones that were on the Trade Federation’s payroll. Either they were caught up in the mob fervor or they were worried that the Trade Federation would also turn on them.

Chancellor Valorum waited until the chamber as quiet enough for him to be heard, “Thank you, Your Highness,” he said, voice controlled “Your testimony has been most enlightening. You are dismissed from this chamber.”

Padme nodded her head in acknowledgment “I thank this august body for its time.”

She sat back down, and Palpatine stood up to steer the pod back to its slot so she, Sabe, and Rabe could depart.

To Padme, it felt like only seconds before she was back into the hallway, the wave of euphoria taking away all her sense of time. Panaka, because he wasn’t an aide, or an aide to an invited guest, was waiting by the door for them. He came up to full attention as she exited back into the great hall.
“Did it work?” he asked.

Padme nodded and opened her mouth to tell him exactly what happened, when a hand grabbed her elbow, the sharp pain of it dissipating all the joy in her heart.

Startled she looked up to see her attacker, to find Palpatine looming over her “Where did you get that data?” he hissed.

His reaction was so intense, and out of place, it took Padme several moments to understand what she saw on his face. Palpatine was furious.

She felt herself tighten up, and beside her Sabe and Rabe came in closer. They had no weapons, they weren’t permitted in the Senate building, but that didn’t mean that they weren’t deadly with their fists.

Padme fought to keep her voice the Queen’s and not hers, “As I told the Senate, it was given to me by an anonymous source,” she said, voice cautious.

Palpatine hissed in aggravation, and his fingers tightened even more on Padme’s arm. Even through the thick layers of cloth protecting her, Padme could feel the bruise start to form. “You foolish girl,” he spat, and there were white lines of anger around his mouth. For a second Padme was sure he was going to hit her.

Panaka stepped forward ”Senator Palpatine,” he said, voice tight, “You need to take a step back.”

Palpatine rounded on Panaka, his face twisting into something Padme didn’t recognize. Then like a summer storm, all that emotion was gone as if it had never been. She could see the moment when he realized where they were, and what he was doing. He looked down at his own hand on her arm and dropped it hastily.

“My dear girl I am so sorry,” he said, backing away from her, horror in his eyes as he looked at her. “I don’t know what came over me, I should never have grabbed you like that.”

“Apology accepted,” Padme said, but put no forgiveness or mercy in her tone.

“There aren’t enough words to make amends for what I have just done,” he said contrite, “My only excuse is the stress of the last months must have affected me more then I realized.” He gave a slow shuddering breath “But I don’t think you understand how risky what you just did in there was. What it could have cost us.”

“I fail to see how,” Padme said.

His smile was of the indulging teacher, but Padme was in no mood to play student. “My dear, it is quite clear that evidence was obtained through illegal means The Trade Federation could have claimed that it was a breach of their rights and demanded that Naboo surrender all rights to sovereignty as compensation.”

“I find that unlikely,” Padme said. “As I said, it was given to me. I have not paid for this information in anyway, and even the most through and independent of investigations would prove that.”

Palpatine didn’t look convinced, but he stopped pressing the point. He shook his head “Your faith in people does you credit, but the mob mentality cannot be trusted.” He looked back through the door to the Senate entrance “It could have so easily been turned against us.”

Then he turned to look at her, “And I would have liked to have been warned that you had this.”
Padme nodded her head, acknowledging his point “As you said, I might not be aware of all the
dangers posed by introducing that, but I was aware enough to know it was a gamble. You have been
a loyal servant to Naboo.” She gave a small smile. “And I didn't want to put you in the position
where you might be expelled from the Senate.”

“Yes,” Palpatine murmured “I can see how you came to that conclusion.” He straightened “However
Your Majesty, you have put me in the position where the delegates on that floor know that I do not
have your full trust. It will undercut any future discussions with them and harm my effectiveness in
this body. I’m not sure that can ever be repaired.”

Perhaps not, but to save their people, Padme would do far worse. “I am sorry,” she said “But given
our relationship, I thought I was doing my best to protect you. In the future, I will take those
concerns into account.”

She could see the frustration on his face as she used his own words against him, but he bowed and
said, “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She nodded back, “And now I am heading back to your apartments Senator,” she gestured to the
door “Perhaps you should return to the Senate floor?”

“Of course,” he said, and walked away. Padme watched him go, and for the first time, she
understood what Eirtae found so disquieting about the man.

“My lady?” Sabe asked, “Shall we go?”

“Yes,” Padme said, thinking as she turned to head to the exit, that soon this would all be over.

It was a few hours later, as she stared out into the night sky of Coruscant that she remembered that
soon had many definitions. There had been such a fervor in the crowd that she hadn’t expected to
even reach Senator’s Palpatine’s apartment before being called back. That had been hours ago, and
the Senate was still in session. What could possibly be the cause of the delay?

Her handmaidens were in the other room, giving her space to think. Padme wasn’t sure how long she
stared out into that unfamiliar skyline before she heard Jar-Jar come up beside her.

“Yousa thinking yousa people going to die?” he asked.

Padme continued to stare out the window “I don’t know,” she said.

Jar-Jar shifted on his feet. “Gungans get pasted too, eh?” he asked worriedly.

“I hope not.” There was bad blood between the two races of Naboo, but the Gungans didn’t deserve
this. They were truly innocent in all on this. They didn’t even interact with the outside galaxy, never
mind conduct trade with it. And now they would be rounded up, and killed along with her people.
None of this was right or fair.

Jar-Jar made a dismissive noise “Gungans no dying’ without a fight. Wesa warriors.” He gave a
wide gesture with his hands wide. “Wesa got a grand army.”

It took a moment for those words to register with Padme. And when they did, she turned to look at
the Gungan in surprise. They did? And not once in the last century and a half had they ever tried to
use it against the human population of Naboo? Perhaps their entreaties that they merely wished to be
left alone were true. Her people had no standing army or a culture that embraced the warrior life.
They were easy targets. If relations had been better between their people, and it was common knowledge there was a fighting force on Naboo, would the Trade Federation had even chosen their world at all? Did that matter? They would have chosen some world to do this to.

Jar-Jar looked back at her, eyes steady. “Dat’s why you no liken us, mesa think.”

Padme wondered, for the first time, how old Jar-Jar was. That was a rather simple, and childlike, explanation of the issue between their two races. It had been going on for so long, no one was even sure what had started it.

For a second hope bloomed. An army, an army that wasn’t a known element. The Trade Federation had brought enough of their droid army for a soft target. Had they brought enough for one that had weapons?

She dismissed the thought almost immediately. Even if there was an army on Naboo, what could she do with it? Her understanding of battle tactics was based on her lessons from books, she had no practical experience with how to lead one, never mind on what to do with one. That was supposing that this army was of any size to matter, not just some small guerrilla group.

Jar-Jar sounded so certain though. And what else was her alternative? Stay here, being useless, while the Senate debated endlessly about what to do?

Padme took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She knew what Panaka would say if she asked for his advice. He would tell her to stay here, that is was too risky to go home. And even though he did have experience in fighting, from his time in the Republic Special Task Force, that had been against pirates, not an army.

But he wasn’t the only person on this planet that she knew had military experience, was he?

She moved back into Palpatine’s living room, away from Jar-Jar. This required privacy because it was Padme who wanted to know, not Amidala. She brought her wrist up, and activated her personal communications com, dialing the frequency that Ani had used earlier in the day.

It took a few moments before he answered. His face was drawn, and he looked sad. When he saw her though, he broke out into a fierce grin, “Hi!” he chirped.

“Hello Ani,” she said, wondering at what caused his black mood.

He blinked and asked, “Did you change outfits?”

She nodded “I did yes.”

He looked at her critically, taking in the elaborate hairstyle, and soft black embroidered velvet robes. “I like this one better,” he said. “But it’s still not you.”

Who would have thought that a nine-year-old would have such decided opinions on her wardrobe? “I’m waiting for the Senate to make a decision,” she explained, “And I need to be in formal wear, in case they call me back in a hurry, but this outfit is more comfortable than the last one.”

“Oh,” he said, “that makes sense I suppose.” He frowned “Did everything go okay?”

“As well as it could,” Padme said. She wouldn’t lie to him, but she also didn’t want to add to his worries. “I am sorry to bother you, but I was wondering if you knew where Leia was?”

He looked a little disappointed that she didn’t want to talk longer, but he answered her promptly
enough, “I don’t where she is. She left about an hour ago.”

“To go where?” Padme blurted out, surprised.

Ani looked uncomfortable “She was really mad, said she needed to cool off.”

Padme frowned “Does this have something to do with why you looked so sad when you answered the com?”

Ani shook his head “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

“Allright,” Padme soothed, not wanting to push him when he was already so upset “But I want you to know I am here if you do.”

He nodded, then bit his lip. “I don’t know where Leia is,” he repeated, “But I do know her com frequency.” She saw him reach down, and push something. A moment later her own com beeped with an incoming data message.

“Thank you, Ani,” she said gratefully.

He nodded and cut the connection. Padme brought up the frequency and quickly called it.

Leia took even longer to answer then Ani had. And when she did, it was with a rough voice, no holo, “Shmi, I told you I just needed some time to think. I will-“

“It’s not Shmi,” Padme said hastily, cutting Leia off before she said something private.

There was a long pause, then “Padme?” Leia asked. Then her full form popped up. She looked tired, and there were dark circles under her eyes, even through the grainy texture of the holo. What had happened to her in the last few hours?

“How did you get this frequency?” Leia demanded.

“Ani gave it to me,” Padme said, hoping she wasn’t getting the boy in trouble.

Leia’s head cocked “Why did you want to speak with me?”

“I would like to ask your opinion,” Padme said. “And you were the only one I could think to ask.” Suddenly aware of how needy she sounded, and that Padme had clearly interrupted the woman when she wanted to be alone, she hastened to add “And I can now see that I’m interrupting you-“

Leia’s mouth twitched “Please,” she said “Interrupt. I’m only out here brooding in my own head and feeling sorry for myself.”

“What happened?” Padme asked before she could think better of it.

Leia let out a long huffy breath “I failed to heed my own advice and didn’t have a backup plan.” She rubbed her hand over her face, looking very tired. “And now I don’t know what to do.”

That didn’t sound like Leia. “Maybe there is a way to fix it,” Padme offered “I’m willing to listen, if you want.”

Leia’s mouth twitched “That is very generous of you Padme, but I am afraid I’m on my own with this.” Bitterness filled her face “It won’t be the first time in my life I’ve had to forge ahead on my own because people wouldn’t listen to reason.”
Padme swallowed hard. Leia sounded so alone right now, as alone as Padme felt. “You are not alone Leia,” Padme said. “You have Ani, you have Shmi.” Padme swallowed hard, aware of how foolish this was, but wanting to help someone who had done so much for her, while asking for so little. “And you have me, if you want.”

Leia looked at her, vulnerability radiating from her. “You have no idea how much that means to me to hear that right now.” she said hoarsely.

Padme cleared her throat, seeking to lighten the suddenly somber mood. “If you want I can lecture whoever isn’t listening to you?”

Leia looked at her for a moment, then a low chuckle escaped her. “I’m afraid that won’t work either,” she said ruefully.

Pleased that she managed even this small relief, Padme pressed “Are you sure?” She gestured with her free hand at her face “People get very attentive when they are being lectured by royalty,” she said, “Even royalty from a small world.”

Leia’s eyes twinkled, but there was an element of grief there now. “That won’t work on them I’m afraid. You also have enough to do. I told you I was feeling sorry for myself. It was simply a combination of a long day, on a planet I’m not used to anymore, followed by a session of questions I made very clear I won’t answer, from a group of people who are very used to getting their own way.”

Padme cocked her head, Ani was at the Temple, and had said Leia had been there as of an hour ago. That narrowed down the “group” of people she could have been talking to, and wouldn’t be impressed with royalty.

Padme fought the nervous giggle that wanted to escape her throat. “Did you yell at the Jedi Council?” she asked, awed.

“Yell is a strong word,” Leia said, “Lecture is more like it.”

“About what?” Padme asked baffled.

Leia snorted “About how they are wrong, and their inability to see what is right in front of their noses.” She let out a long sigh, “But enough about me, what did you want advice on?”

Padme really wanted to know what Leia thought about the Jedi Council, but now was not the time, and she had called for another reason entirely. “Do you think I should go back to Naboo?” Padme asked.

Leia’s face grew serious. “I suppose that would depend on why?”

“Because there is nothing I can do here,” Padme said, voice rising. Eirtae and Sabe looked over in concern, and she hastily dropped her voice “This isn’t my arena.”

Leia looked at her thoughtfully “I can understand that,” she said, “But if you go back, and the Trade Federation captures you, they will make you sign that treaty. Everything that you have sacrificed, everything that was sacrificed to get you here, it will all have been for nothing.”

“I will sign no treaty,” Padme said, her voice instinctively dropping into Queen Amidala’s voice.

Leia looked taken aback for a moment, then a wide approving grin crossed her face. “No,” she said wonderingly “I don’t believe you would.” Then the smile faded away, “That doesn’t mean it’s wise
for you to give them a bargaining chip.”

“There is an army on Naboo,” Padme said rushed.

Leia didn’t even blink at that revelation “Why haven’t you used it before now?” she asked non-judgmentally.

“Because it’s the Gungans,” Padme said, “And we, I mean the human population of Naboo, haven’t always gotten along with them.”

Leia looked at her “Are you hoping to convince them to help you?”

“They are in danger too,” Padme said. “And they don’t have a chance without my help.” Leia arched an eyebrow in silent rebuke, and Padme winced, that did sound horribly arrogant. “What I should have said was that they will not win any battle with the droid army without the help of the pilots we rescued.”

“But because they are needed to take out the control ship,” Leia nodded. “Yes, you do need each other.” She started drumming her fingers on her leg absently as she thought about that. “The question is can you make them see that?”

“I hope so?” Padme said.

Leia’s fingers stopped moving, “Hope is a dangerous thing Padme,” she warned, “It can be your greatest strength and the sharpest weapon used against you.”

Padme started to pace, trying to burn off some of this anxiety she was feeling. Leia said nothing, just watched her with hooded eyes.

After a minute of this, feeling a little more settled, Padme stopped her movement. She took a deep breath in, and then made sure that her eyes met the ones of the tiny holo of Leia “Earlier when you said I had the strength to live with failure?” she asked, her mind trying to form the words to define the thoughts she was having.

“Yes?” Leia asked as Padme didn’t finish her question.

“You might be right about that,” Padme admitted, then she squared her shoulders, and met Leia’s questioning face. In her voice, not the Queen’s voice, she stated, “But I don’t have the strength to live with not trying. Especially if it was because I was afraid.”

Leia said nothing at that, but there was clear grief on her face. What ghost was she seeing in front of her now? Whose words was Padme echoing?

Leia cleared her throat. “That is a good way to get yourself killed,” she cautioned, voice rough.

“Maybe,” Padme agreed, “But a life built out of fear is no way to live.”

Leia sighed, “If my Papa was here, he would say that this is fate’s way of showing me the folly of my own youth.”

Padme felt herself frown “You think I’m being foolish?” she asked.

Leia shook her head, “Oh no, I agree.” She gave Padme a forced smile “But it is very hard to hear that from someone so young, knowing what you are proposing to face. I’m just realizing now how hard it was for him to hear that from me when I was not much older than you.”
Padme wondered, what enemy had frightened Leia’s father? Was it the one she failed to kill? “What did you father say to you when you told him that?”

Leia looked up at her, startled. Then she let out a long laugh. Padme frowned, “What did he say Leia?” she asked again, annoyed.

Chuckling Leia answered her, “That I was too like my mother for him to believe I would ever obey him if he was foolish enough to try to forbid me from trying to get involved.” The chuckles died away as Leia’s face sobered. “According to him, she never gave up when she was fighting for what she believed in.”

“You never knew her?” Padme asked puzzled.

Leia’s face grew sad, “No, she died when I was born.”

“I’m sorry,” Padme said.

“I know,” Leia said softly.

“But you think I’m like her?” Padme asked. “That I have the same will?”

Leia hesitated then nodded. “Yes.” She put her hand up in warning “But as the seasoned older adult, I felt I should warn you there will be consequences for this.”

“Then I will bear those costs,” Padme said firmly. Then a little of her resolve faded a bit, “I was wondering though…” she trailed off, not sure how the polite way to phrase this was.

“Yes?” Leia asked.

The gods take it, this wasn’t anything she knew how to say delicately, so she might as well go for bluntness “Can you come with me to Naboo?”

Leia’s eyes widened, and her mouth dropped open. “Excuse me?” she stuttered.

Padme felt a blush creep up her face. This was a horrible idea. Leia barely knew Padme, and she had just invited the woman into a war zone. Padme scrambled “I will pay you of course. Both for your time and your expertise. And of course you can refuse, I just-”

Leia put up a hand “Stop,” she said, and Padme gratefully shut her mouth to keep her desperate words in. “You don’t need to pay me Padme,” she said gently, “I was just shocked you asked me. You barely know me, and I’m wondering why you would want a bounty hunter on a battlefield?”

“Because you are a soldier,” Padme answered promptly. Leia’s face paled, and Padme hastily explained “Or at least you were one. At one time. In your past.” Which Padme was pointedly not going to ask Leia about. The woman had made very clear where her boundaries were.

Leia looked confused for a second, and Padme could see that mind whirling as she went over the last few days. Then she closed her eyes “My apology,” Leia said, half to herself, “You noticed my body language.”

Padme nodded. “Yes.”

Leia’s eyes opened, and there was respect there. “Clever,” she murmured. “Not many people pay that close attention.”

Padme smirked “You are very hard to overlook,” she said. Her small bit of humor fled, and she
addressed Leia seriously “I’m not asking for me. I trust Captain Panaka and my handmaidens with my life. But their first responsibility is to my safety.”

“And who are you asking for?” Leia asked.

“My people,” Padme said simply “I have never been in a battle. I will need advice and a clear head. You are qualified and have shown a willingness to tell me things I don’t want to hear.”

Leia’s mouth twitched “True,” she allowed. Looking uncomfortable she said softly “And I am flattered Padme, truly. But if you return to Naboo, you will not be alone in that regard. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan are still tasked with protecting you, and will accompany you.”

“Then why aren’t they here now?” Padme hissed. Leia’s face grew frustrated, and that beaten look returned into her eyes. “The only reason they are not here now is because of what you told them?” Padme asked, unable to bring herself to even say the word Sith. It was all so outlandish.

Leia nodded, “For all the good it did me,” she said bitterly. Then she shook her head. “Nevertheless, they will follow you there, and they are certainly as well versed in battle tactics as I am.”

“They also have their own agenda. But you,” Padme looked at her “If you come to Naboo, your priority will be my people, and what you think needs to happen to ensure their survival.”

Leia looked thoughtful for a second. “Just for Naboo?” she asked “Nothing else? I’m not to sneak off and assassinating the Viceroy, or some other deed you don’t want to dirty your hands with?”

“No,” Padme said, wondering who had betrayed this woman that she felt the need to poke everything. “All I want is your advice, your cool head, and your blaster at my side.”

Leia looked at her, then nodded firmly “I’ll be there.”

“Really?” Padme’s voice went up in surprise.

Leia’s eyebrow went up “Really,” she said.

“Oh,” Padme said, scrambling. She hadn’t thought Leia would say yes, and she was caught unprepared. “Ah, we’ll be at the temple in about an hour.”

Leia nodded her head “I’ll inform Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.”

“Thank you, Leia,” Padme said fervently “from the bottom of my heart thank you.”

Leia looked at her warningly, “Don’t thank me yet,” she said, “Not until we’ve won, and you know the cost you are going to pay.” She cut off the com before Padme could say anything.

Padme took a deep breath in. Yes, there was a lot of fear running in her, but there was a calmness too. Now that she had a path forward, she felt ready for anything.

“Captain Panaka,” she said, turning to address the room “Please pack your things. Sabe could you inform the others that we are going home.”

When everyone understood she wasn’t joking, that they were really were going home, Padme wasn’t surprised that everyone wanted to return to Naboo. Even Panaka, who did put up a protest, but Padme could see in his eyes he did it because he felt it was his duty to warn her, not because he really disagreed.
Within the promised hour, the Royal Ship landed into the busy hangar bay of the Jedi Temple. When the ramp came down, Padme, still dressed as Amidala, descended down it, Sabe and Panaka at her side. She walked about thirty feet away from the ship, to greet C3-PO, who was standing there waiting for them.

Padme looked at him curiously “Will you be joining us?” she asked the droid.

“Oh no Your Majesty!” the droid said, arms flailing in panic at the thought “I was merely asked to wait here for your arrival, in case you appeared before Mistress Leia.” The droid looked at her “I’m afraid battle is no place for a protocol droid, so I will be remaining here at the Temple with Master Ani and Mistress Shmi.”

Padme knew that made sense, but her heart lurched a little at not being able to say goodbye to those two. She had no idea if she would be coming back.

“Can you convene a message to them?” she asked.

The droid perked up “Of course!” he said.

“Please tell them that they have my, and my people’s undying gratitude for their help,” she said, “And if there is ever need, they shouldn’t hesitate to ask me for whatever is in my power to give.” She leaned forward, and said softly “And if you could tell Ani that I’m sorry I wasn’t able to say goodbye in person.”

“As soon as I see them, I will let them know,” C3-PO promised. He was a cheerful thing, as long as he had a task to do, Padme thought wryly as she stepped back to be more in line with her escorts.

The hangar was busy, even though it was late into the night. As Padme watched, at least one ship took off, and another landed. There was personnel running around everywhere, and droids of all sizes, whirling and moving along. She was so busy watching all the movement, wondering how all these people and droids didn’t run into each other, she missed the doors on the wall closest to her opening.

Sabe gave a slight nudge to her arm, and Padme turned her head to see four figures walking up to them. It as Leia, Master Jinn, Padawan Kenobi, and a fourth man Padme didn’t recognize. But if she was going by the brown cloak, tan tunic and pants she could see peeking out from underneath the cloak, he was also a Jedi.

When they arrived, Leia gently took C3-PO’s arm. “Thank you Threepio,” she said. “I’ve got it from here.”

“Of course, Mistress Leia,” the droid shuffled off, and Padme didn’t miss the grateful look on Master Jinn’s face as he left.

“Your Majesty,” Master Jinn said, as he and Padawan Kenobi bowed “It is our pleasure to continue to serve and protect you.” As he came up from his bow, he gestured to the man standing next to Leia. “And this is Jedi Master Mace Windu.”

Master Windu was tall for a human, with dark skin and a shaved head. He gave a low bow to her “Your Majesty,” he said, his voice low and smooth.

“Master Windu,” Padme said, inclining her head.

“If you don’t mind, he will be accompanying us to Naboo,” Master Jinn said.

Padme arched her eyebrow “I welcome your help,” she said to the Jedi Master. “But do you really
Leia let out a snort “Oh, he’s not here for you,” she said, arms coming across her chest “He’s here to watch me.”

Padme turned her head “Watch you do what Lady Solo?”

Leia glared at Master Windu “Be me,” she spat.

Master Windu looked at her calmly, “You know that is not what I am observing,” he said, reproach in his voice.

Leia rolled her eyes “Yes, yes. You need to make sure I’m not some evil mastermind, bent on dominating the galaxy to my will.” She gave a dismissive wave of her hand “As if you would know what that looks like.”

Just how badly had that meeting between Leia and the Jedi Council gone? Did the Jedi really think that of Leia? Leia? Padme felt a wash of remorse sweep through her as she realized her request had placed Leia in the same company with people she didn’t want to be around.

She looked in the face, offering what payment the woman would take “I thank you for your help as well, Lady Solo.”

Leia’s irritation faded away as she looked at Padme, face softening as she said, “It’s no problem.” That was a lie, it very clearly was a problem. But it was a lie of manners, so Padme let it drop.

Then Leia made a face, “Please call me Leia,” she said, ”Lady Solo makes me sound like a character in a bad holo drama.”

Padme wondered, if Leia didn’t like the name, why she had made it up? Solo was just too close to the mark for who Leia was for it to be her real last name. “Did you ever think to change it?” she inquired politely

Leia’s face instantly became shuttered “No,” she said, “It was my husband’s, and it is all I have left of him.”

Padme immediately wanted to claw those words back. She knew that Leia had lost her entire family, save Ani and Shmi, and the last thing she wanted to do was poke the woman’s grief. Behind her, Padme could hear Sabe’s sad sigh. This crush of Sabe’s was really getting out of control. Unfortunately, this would only heighten Leia’s appeal to her. The grieving widow, who was perhaps in need of some distraction?

Leia turned to Master Windu, holding her hand out “I want it back now,” she said.

He looked down at her outstretched hand, amused. “Not until we are on the ship,” he said. “Technically that is Naboo space, and while we are standing on the ground, we are still on the Temple grounds.”

Leia growled. It was Panaka who asked the Jedi “Is there something wrong?”

“There are no weapons allowed in the Jedi Temple,” Padawan Kenobi said smoothly “Leia was forced to relinquish it when she entered the temple.”

“Oh, there are plenty of weapons allowed,” Leia snapped at him “But only Jedi can carry them.”
Panaka didn’t look like he approved of the Jedi taking Leia’s weapon away either. In the contest of who he disliked more, the Jedi seemed to be the clear winners.

Master Windu nodded his head “As you say,” then walked to the ship, disappearing as he walked up the ramp.

Master Jinn shook his head “Your paranoia will lead to your downfall,” he warned Leia. He gestured around them “What possible threat do you think will attack you here?”

“I don’t know,” Leia said through gritted teeth “That’s why I want it back. And my ‘paranoia’ as you call it is the only reason I am still alive.”

Master Jinn shook his head sadly and went up the ramp, Padawan Kenobi on his heels.

Leia’s breath hissed out between her teeth. She looked at Padme, “You know what the sad thing is,” she asked to Padme’s bemused face. “Qui-Gon is the most reasonable Jedi Master out of the whole bunch.”

“What about Padawan Kenobi?” Padme asked.

Leia waved her hand “Oh, he’s not a Master yet. He hasn’t been quite locked into the mindset they are all in.” She looked thoughtfully at the ship, “He’s a bit of a stickler for rules though, but there is still hope for him.”

Padme blinked “If you are so hostile to the Jedi, why are you leaving Ani and Shmi here?”

Leia shook her head “No better options for now,” she made a face “I can’t leave them on this planet with no protection of any kind.”

“I see,” Padme said, not really seeing anything of the sort. Leia could have asked Padme to set them up at Palpatine’s, but it was a moot point now. Padme was about to tell everyone they should head to the ship, when the roar of another ship lying right overhead them and landing in the spot next to them interrupted her.

Padme still had her gaze on Leia, while Panaka and Sabe turned to see who had just arrived. She was the only witness to what Leia did when Senator Palpatine's voice cried out “Your Majesty, where are you going?”

Leia’s face went so pale that Padme was afraid the woman was going to faint on her. She immediate stiffened, and her hands dropped to her waist, scrambling for her blaster that wasn’t there.

Padme, on instinct, whispered softly “Leia?” The woman didn’t hear her, just slowly turned her head to face the rapidly approaching Senator. Padme expected to see anger on that face, with how her body was reacting, but Leia’s face was filled with terror.

Shaken, Padme stepped forward, and placed herself between the approaching Senator and Leia. The woman didn’t even seem to notice, her brown eyes were completely blown out, and she was visibly shaking.

“Leia,” she said again, urgently, trying to get Leia’s attention. She reached down and clasped Leia’s arm, stilling it. “What is wrong?”

Leia’s pupils abruptly contracted, and she was suddenly very intently looking at Padme. Her fear was gone in an instant, but as she stared at Padme, Leia’s face was replaced with a grief so profound it stole Padme’s breath away.
“Leia,” Padme whispered, frightened. At the sound of Padme’s voice, all that emotion was gone from Leia’s face and body in an instant, leaving someone who was staring at Padme with remote eyes.

Palpatine’s voice floated over her shoulder, “Your Majesty?”

“Leia?” Padme asked as quietly as she could, as Leia shuddered, and suddenly was gripping Padme’s hands, hard.

“Your Majesty?” Palpatine demanded again. “Who are you talking to?” With the tall black feather headdress, he couldn’t see past Padme to see who she was talking too.

Leia shook her head and dropped her hands from Padme. Looking at her friend worriedly, Padme wondered what she had just witnessed. Then swallowing everything down she turned to Palpatine, using her body to shield Leia from his line of sight. She didn’t know what was going on with the woman, but the least she could do was give her time to compose herself.

“Senator,” she said gravelly “What can I do for you?”

Palpatine was five feet away, being gently held back by Panaka from approaching closer. After the incident this afternoon in the Senate Dome Padme couldn’t say she was displeased with her Captain of the Guard’s choice to keep the man away until Padme was prepared.

Palpatine tried to look over her shoulder, to get a look at Leia, who he still couldn’t see properly. Padme shuffled herself sideways, not much, but just enough to let him know that person standing behind her was not a subject open for conversation.

Palpatine, understanding her silent command, straightened himself, and his slightly crumpled coat from where Panaka had been gripping him. “You can tell me what you are doing here?” Palpatine asked, panting a little, face flushed from his run from his ship to her.

“I am going home,” Padme said.

“Home?” he stuttered “When I read the message you left I thought surely,” he trailed off as he watched her chin come up.

“But you can’t!” he protested. “The Trade Federation will destroy you.” He came closer, and once again, Panaka stopped him. Flashing the man an irate look, Palpatine took a step back.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “please be reasonable.”

“No,” she said “I will not. Our enemy is not being reasonable. Logic has failed to sway them, it is time for action.”

“Please Your Majesty,” he said, “give me a little more time. I’m sure the Senate can be brought to reason.”

Padme shook her head “If I don’t go now, I fear there will be little left of our people left.”

Palpatine’s face fell, and he slumped. Then taking in a deep breath, he straightened “Then I will come with you,” he said, “I will not abandon you to such a fight alone.”

Padme felt her heart lighten just a little, although practically speaking she had no idea what he thought he could do. She opened her mouth to thank him, Leia’s voice floated over her shoulder “Are you sure that is the wisest idea Your Majesty?” she asked in a drawl. Padme stopped,
something was wrong, Leia’s voice didn’t sound right.

Padme turned around to look at Leia, being careful to make sure that Palpatine still couldn’t get a good look at the woman. Leia was standing at parade rest again, and she was pointedly looking at Padme.

Behind her, Palpatine took in a sharp breath “I beg your pardon,” he said, anger living under that gentle voice “But I don’t believe we have been introduced.”

Padme, still with her back to Palpatine, slowly mouthed to Leia “Are you alright?”

Leia’s eyes darted from side to side, like she was looking for somewhere to run. Then she closed her eyes and gave a very brief nod.

Padme, not liking how tense Leia was, but unable to politely turn Palpatine away, moved out of the way so he could see Leia.

“Senator Palpatine.” Padme said, “May I introduce Leia Solo?” She gestured to Leia, “Leia, this is my mentor, Senator Sheev Palpatine.”

In that one moment Padme had turned away from her, Leia changed. She went from her straight and correct posture to her shoulders rounding as she stood with a slight slump to her back. Her hands had moved to her belt, where the resting comfortably. Her legs had gone from a military rest to having one foot crossed in front of the other, making it look like she was waiting impatiently in a line, instead of meeting an esteemed member of the Senate. The largest changes were on her face though. Leia’s serious, warn demeanor was gone, replaced by someone with calculating eyes as they looked Palpatine up and down. Padme could practically see the woman calculating how much his clothes were worth.

“Pleasure,” Leia drawled, her voice still not sounding right. Her accent, Padme realized. Leia suddenly had a thick, and almost indescribable Outer Rim accent.

Behind her, Sabe muffled her sharp gasp as she got a look at Leia too. Padme was too shocked to manage even that. Leia had gone from a respectable, if ragged looking, bounty hunter, to every stereotype of an Outer Rim mercenary, only out for what money she could make. How had she done that? She hadn’t changed her clothes, hadn’t changed her makeup, nothing. And yet the evidence of the transformation was right in front of Padme’s eyes.

Palpatine looked at Leia, seeing her well-worn clothes, grey hair, and cynical eyes. “Charmed I’m sure,” he said slowly, then looked at Padme, baffled. “I’m sorry Your Majesty, but who is this?”

His eyebrow went up in surprise, “And while that is helpful, that doesn’t tell me who she is.” He peered at Leia suspiciously “Are you Nabooian?” His expression revealed how unlikely he thought that was “Or perhaps someone who has been betrayed by the Trade Federation?”

Leia huffed, “Hardly.” She thumbed her hands through her belt, “Look, I’ll make it easy for you. I’m not in this for your revolution, and I’m not in it because of her,” she pointed her forefinger at Padme dismissively “I expect to get well paid.”

Palpatine looked down at the finger she was pointing, then raised his head to stare at Leia blankly. Leia rolled her eyes, and said in an exaggerated fashion like she was talking to a someone very stupid “I am in it for the money.”
Padme wanted to grit her teeth. What was Leia doing? Padme needed Palpatine to like Leia. Or at least not question why Padme was bringing the woman along. She was already going to have to defend the decision to go home with everything she had. Palpatine was too protective of Padme to let her go without a fight. Leia’s behavior toward him wasn’t helping make the case for Padme’s competency.

Palpatine looked at Padme in shock “You paid her?”

It was Panaka who answered before Padme could. “No,” he said, taking a step forward, “I did.”

Padme swung her head to Panaka. He didn’t even like Leia, hadn’t wanted her to come along, what was he doing?

Palpatine’s eyes narrowed “You?” he asked.

Panaka nodded, “Me.” He looked at Padme, “When Her Highness said she wanted to go home I reached out to some old contacts on the Republic Special Forces. They recommended her,” he nodded his head to Leia.

“For what?” Palpatine asked, genuinely baffled.

Leia shrugged “All types of things,” she gave Palpatine a conspiratory smirk “Probably best you don’t ask those questions. “

Palpatine’s eyes went wide, and his mouth dropped opened as he looked at Panaka.

Panaka shrugged “When you don’t have the necessary expertise you buy it.”

Padme finally found her voice, “As I have made very clear Lady Solo,” she said “there will be no ‘extra’ activities. Your job is to advise only.” She shot Leia a hard look, but the woman only shrugged.

“Whatever you want sister,” she remarked carelessly.

“Her Majesty,” Sabe’s voice was frigid and very exact.

Leia gave a careless salute with three fingers, “Your Majesty,” she said easily.

Palpatine gathered himself, “And what is your profession Lady Solo?” he asked. “What skills are the people of Naboo paying for?”

Leia rocked on her heels, “Mercenary,” she said carelessly. “Former soldier.” And then her eyes narrowed, “And I don’t work for the people of Naboo,” she said. She looked at Panaka, “I work for him.”

Palpatine’s face shifted slightly “Ahh,” he said, looking at Panaka, understanding dawning. He gave Leia a weak version of his grandfatherly smile. “Then you will understand if I need to speak to her Majesty alone for a moment. State business you see.”

Leia’s smile was friendly, but regretful, “I mind,” she said.

Palpatine started “I beg your pardon?” he said.

“I said I mind,” Leia repeated, rolling her shoulders in an insolent shrug “As I said,” she pointed at Panaka, “He’s the boss. I am under contract not to leave her Majesty’s side. Anywhere she goes, I go.”
Palpatine sputtered “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said, Leia didn’t answer him, just shrugged her shoulders.

“You can’t be serious,” he said looking at Panaka.

Panaka looked uncomfortable with the position Leia had placed him in, but he went along. “She is,” he said. “Leia may be….unconventional, but everyone I talked to says she gets the job done. As long as I allow her to do it.”

Palpatine looked at Padme “Your Majesty,” he said, “this is ridiculous. You already have protection,” he gestured to Panaka and Sabe. “And more besides.”

Padme shook her head. “The protection detail was Panaka’s choice. I wanted someone with experience in insurgent movements.”

Palpatine sputtered “But you don’t know anything about her, or her ‘expertise’”

Padme looked at Leia “He makes a good point,” she said. “Convince me why Senator Palpatine should stay here.”

Leia looked at Palpatine “Do you know how to fire a blaster?” she asked.

“Of course not!” Palpatine looked offended at the mere idea.

“Know how to work a rifle?”

Palatine stuttered, “Ah, once, when I was young, my father took me on a hunting trip?”

“Oh, once,” Leia said mockingly. “That makes you an expert.” She cocked her head thoughtfully “Have you studied military tactics? Hand to hand combat?” she pressed.

Palpatine blinked “No,” he said.

“Do you know how to use a saber? A staff weapon? Anything?” Leia asked.

“No, young lady” Palpatine gritted out, trying to regain the upper hand “I have no experience in weapons.”

“Then you are hardly a threat.” Leia said dismissively. “And worse, useless.”

Palpatine’s face flushed with embarrassment “I am not useless,” he protested.

Leia walked up to him, and then smirking said “On second thought, we could use you as a diversionary target. While the droids are shooting at you, we could all run away.” She took a step back “It’s the only thing we could use you for since you are out of breath from a thirty-foot jog from your ship to here.”

“I see your point, Lady Solo,” Padme said.

Leia looked at her, eyes calculating “Unless Panaka pays me, I’m not protecting another useless body in a war zone.” She crossed her arms over her chest, “I think the whole thing is a fool’s errand, but you are the client, and the client gets what they want.”

Padme looked at Palpatine “She is right. You are better suited to the fight in the Senate.”

“But your Majesty!” Palpatine protested.
Leia looked at him “Maybe you can convince her that this will get all her people killed.”

Padme kept the look of betrayal off her face. Palpatine looked at Leia suspiciously “And why would you advocate for the option that doesn’t get you paid?”

Leia spread her hands out “Hey, there is a ten thousand credit cancellation fee in my contract,” she smirked “Not as much money, but I don’t have to do anything for it, so as far as I see it, it’s win-win all around.”

“A woman who knows what she wants.” Palpatine said “How refreshing.” He looked at Padme “Please Your Highness,” he said, “Even your expert ” and there was such contempt in that word, “thinks this is a bad idea.”

“But she is not Queen,” Padme said, “And I am.” She glared at Leia.

Leia just looked at Panaka “We still going?” she asked.

Panaka nodded, Leia turned back to Padme, and gave her saucy grin, as if Padme’s ire was nothing but a minor inconvenience.

“Whatever the client wants,” she said.

“Then I insist. I should be there with you, on the ground.” Palpatine took a step forward.

Padme shook her head “No Senator, you will stay here.”

“But your Majesty-“ Palpatine’s voice took on a commanding note, and for a second Padme felt like the walls of this vast hall were closing in on her.

Then she got a hold of herself. She had quite enough out of Leia and Palpatine at the moment “That is an order Senator,” she said coldly.

For a second in the pale lights of the hanger, Palpatine’s face transformed into something monstrous. Then it was gone, “Of course your Majesty,” he said, bowing.

Padme nodded, “Now,” she said, “if we may?”

They walked across the tarmac and up the ramp and where they were greeted by Eirtae.

“Then Senator doesn’t look happy,” she murmured to Padme, as she looked out the rapidly closing hatch.

Padme didn’t say anything, just focused on her breathing, she heard the hatch give a small hiss as it sealed. Under her feet the engines came to life, and she felt the telltale sensation of a ship taking off.

Eirtae looked at her, “And you don’t look happy either,” she said surprised. Her eyes narrowed “What happened? Did he attack you again?”

“When did he attack you?” Leia sounded like Leia again, all traces of that horrible accent gone. But it had been replaced by a quiet fury. Padme whirled on the woman, and saw that somehow, Leia looked like Leia again, but she was too furious to even wonder how she had done that.

“What was that?” Padme demanded.

Eirtae looked from Padme to Leia “What was what?” she asked.
Panaka’s voice was cautious “Leia just gave a very convincing impression of an Outer Rim street thug.”

Leia shook her head “He was a smuggler actually,” she rolled her head, trying to relieve the tension. What could she be so tense about? She hadn’t just been embarrassed in front of her oldest friend and supporter.


“And I want to know when he had the nerve to attack you,” and Leia turned on Sabe, pointing a finger “And why he is still breathing.”

Padme almost took a step back but stopped the motion before she could complete it. Although all of this cold fury was on her behalf, Padme wasn’t afraid to admit she was a little frightened of Leia right this moment.

“Eirtae is exaggerating,” Padme said, and Leia’s head turned slowly to look at Padme. “He grabbed my arm, and didn’t realize how tight his grip was. It is only a light bruise,”

Leia’s eyes flickered down to Padme’s arms. “I’m fine Leia,” Padme repeated, voice calm and steady.

Leia shuddered, and rubbed her hands over her eyes. She straightened and then bowed to Sabe “My apologizes Sabe,” she said, voice still a little wobbly “I didn’t mean to imply that you failed in seeing to your duties.”

Sabe nodded her head, but her hood was shielding her face from Padme’s gaze, so she didn’t know what the woman was thinking.

Leia looked around, and shook her head “Well, I’m just putting my foot in my mouth all day today,” She looked at Padme, and her face was lined with exhaustion. “That little act back there was protection,” she said.

Padme asked “For who?”

“You,” Leia said. “And me.” She shook her head “This was why I wanted to avoid meeting the Senator.”

“Why?” Sabe asked.

“Because he was about two seconds away from knowing I was your source for that data,” Leia said, “Now,” she gave a bitter chuckle “now he thinks I’m an insolent hired goon, who would prefer to shoot her way out of problems then use a softer touch.”

Padme shook her head “That doesn’t make sense,” she said.

“I don’t know him,” Leia said through gritted teeth, “I have no idea what he would do if he knew you committed perjury in the Senate.”

“Palpatine wouldn’t betray me,” Padme said.

Leia’s eyebrow arched “Are you sure of that?”

Padme wanted to protest that Palpatine would never hurt her, but he had, hadn’t he? Even now her arm ached, which might cause problems with shooting a blaster accurately when they arrived on
Naboo.

“I’m sorry I took you by surprise,” Leia said, then looked at Panaka, “Although I am surprised you played along.”

Panaka looked at her thoughtfully “I don’t understand why you are doing this, but I know it’s not because of money,” he said. “I would probably feel better about you if it was.”

“Then why?” Leia pressed.

Panaka looked at her understandingly “Because I saw your face when you looked at him.”

Padme looked at him, Panaka had seen that? And he hadn’t tackled Leia to the ground? No, he hadn’t seen Leia go for a weapon that wasn’t there, but he had seen that look of harrowing fear on her face before she brought it under control.

“Lady Solo,” he said gently, “When were you when you heard him speak?” Leia frowned, “Where did your mind say you were?” he clarified.

Leia’s face immediately closed down “Somewhere I had no wish to return to.”

Panaka nodded, understanding. Padme frowned, that made one of them.

“Captain? Padme asked. He looked at her, then looked down to Leia.

“Battle flashes,” Leia said tiredly. “He was asking me if I experienced one on the tarmac.”

“A what?” Sabe said.

“Battle flashes,” Panaka said, “Happens to soldiers sometimes. You hear something, smell something, or just move a certain way, and suddenly your mind brings you back to a battle or a fight.” He looked at Leia curiously. “Who did you hear instead of Senator Palpatine?”

She looked at him “Does it matter?” she asked.

“No,” he said gently, “But talking might help you.”

Leia snorted, “No, getting back to work will help me. Finishing this mission will help me.”

Padme stepped forward, and took Leia’s hand in her own, her compassion ridding her of the rest of her anger. Lost in the past, disoriented and confronted with a stranger who Leia thought was an enemy. No wonder she had reacted so strangely. Padme didn’t have the heart to tell Leia that Palpatine never let his temper rule him for long. Within hours, he would come to that conclusion Leia was so desperate for him to avoid, he would know Leia was how Padme acquired that data on the Trade Federation. He would also set into motion various searches to probe into Leia’s identity. He was protective of Padme, and he was very protective of the throne Padme sat on. She had no idea what he would find, or if the Jedi council didn’t uncover it first. Leia had also set their hackles up as well today.

Leia looked down at their joined hands and gave them a light squeeze. “I’m sorry I frightened you,” she said, looking at Padme, “It won’t happen again.”

“You can’t promise that,” Panaka said.

Leia shook her head “I was just surprised,” she said “I wasn’t expecting….,” Her voice trailed off, and her eyes went distant. Padme rubbed her thumb over the back of Leia’s hand, trying to gently
bring her back to the here and now. Leia blinked, and then her gaze focused back in on Padme “But now that I know, I can prepare myself,” she said. She looked at Padme, “What matters is that you stopped me from killing the Senator, and spending the rest of my life in a prison,” she said.

The words were correct, but Leia’s face clearly said she was a little sorry she hadn’t killed Palpatine. Who had been this enemy of hers that she loathed this much after he was dead?

Sabe looked at her askance “You will never convince me you won’t break out of any prison they put you in within months,” she said.

Leia smiled at her “Probably,” she admitted. “But then I would be a convicted felon in the Republic, and that would hamper my ability to do what needs to be done.” She let Padme’s hand go and took a step back.

Worried, Padme offered “If this is all too much, you can stay here on the ship when we reach Naboo.”

Leia shook her head, “No,” she said, “believe me, the best thing to shake this ghost is to help you liberate Naboo.” She gave Padme a grim smile.

Panaka looked at Leia disapprovingly “Vengeance against the dead?” he asked, “It seems to be a poor way to live your life.”

“I use what works for me,” Leia said, “Just as you do, with how you cling to your rules.”

“Law and rules give order,” Panaka said stiffly, and Padme looked at him in astonishment. It never occurred to her to ask how Panaka had heard of this condition, these battle flashes. It should have.

Leia nodded “Yes, they can. But I’ve seen them bent and used as weapons against the powerless too often to find the comfort you do in them.” She gave a heavy sigh, “Maybe a little of this is my revenge against the dead. This situation with Naboo?” she waved her hand “It is something he would have done.”

She looked at Panaka “He wasn’t just my enemy. He was a monster,” she said flatly “He reveled in destruction and the loss of hope. He took delight in setting people against each other, all for the illusion of power.”

“Me, helping you like this,” Leia said gestured to the ship to encompass all of them, “simply because it is the right thing to do. That is something that he could never understand. And so, by doing it, I remain me,” she thumped her chest, “and spite him and help destroy his legacy, at the same time.”

Sabe stepped forward, peering into Leia’s face questioningly “And this man, this person the Senator sounded like, he would have hated that you’re helping us?”

Leia’s grim morphed from grim to very satisfied, “Oh, I can guarantee you, it would have driven him mad. Especially since in his eyes, who I am now, is a nobody. And those dredges never do anything of worth.”

Padme’s voice was clear “You are not a nobody,” she said firmly.

Leia looked at her, amusement dancing in her eyes “No,” she said “I am not. I am Leia Solo.”

There was something missing in those words, something Leia was not telling them. But Padme found she didn’t mind. Leia Solo, the woman who was standing before her now, was certainly enough for Padme.
Obi-Wan

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Note of caution, this chapter is around 51,700 words. You all know the drill. None of you are going to listen to me, but ya'll know the drill. If you recognize the dialog, it's from TPM.

Also a HUGE shout out to redrikki, for looking over that council scene, and helping me figure out where the hell it was going wrong.

As always, hope you enjoy!

Obi-Wan very carefully deposited the corpse into the cold metal floor using the Force. He could have done it physically, and Master Yoda was always reprimanding them for frivolous uses of the Force, but Obi-Wan didn't want to touch the body. The boy, Anakin, he was right. Even in death, the Force around this creature didn’t feel right.

The walk-in-fridge itself was a bit much, for a ship this size, even if it was a royal vessel. But Obi-Wan could only be thankful that whoever had commissioned this ship had made the freezer large enough to accommodate a body. He had been on ships that had a decomposing body left out in the open before, it was not an experience he was eager to repeat.

He looked at the blanket that was still covering those red and black features, wondering who this man was. What he was doing here, and why he had a lightsaber of all things. Mistress Solo had called him a Sith, which was patently ridiculous. But it was worrying that he had such a weapon, and according to Master Qui-Gon, knew how to use it.

Obi-Wan looked at the hilt that was in his hand. Mistress Solo had just handed it over to him when he asked for it. He hadn’t wanted a civilian, with little experience of lightsabers, handling the thing. She hadn’t objected or even put up a fight about it, just gave it to him, and walked away. She had to be the first bounty hunter who ever voluntarily surrendered a weapon to him, especially one as valuable as a lightsaber.

More out of a sense of curiosity than anything else, Obi-Wan ran a cursory feel of it in the Force and nearly gagged. Obi-Wan had been around lightsabers his entire life. His own, his master’s, the numerous Jedi in the Temple. But none of them had felt like this one.

The Kyber crystals in the thing were foul. They reeked of death, pain, and decay. What had happened to them? Was this a natural phenomenon, or one inflicted upon it? And if it wasn’t natural, who would do such a thing? And why?

Well, that settled it. Obi-Wan didn’t want to carry the thing, but he didn’t want to leave it around for some hapless civilian to find. Even the most sober-minded people always seemed to react like a child when encountering a lightsaber for the first time. They all wanted to ignite them, regardless of the fact that they were dangerous.

Obi-Wan looked at the corpse thoughtfully. He was Zabraki, and though they were tough, imitating death in order to escape was not a possibility in this situation. Obi-Wan had seen the sizeable hole
Mistress Solo’s blaster had left in his head. It wasn’t like he could suddenly get up, and use the lightsaber, the man was dead.

So he tossed the thing so that it landed on the body, and shut the door. Given the hysterics that everyone had over the corpse when he first tried to bring it aboard, he doubted that anyone would come down here to look at the body. Excepting Captain Panaka, he had reacted with remarkable restraint, even if his words had been laced with incivility and defensiveness to Obi-Wan and his Master. But since he been allowed to do his duty, as he had seen it, and had cleared the body of any booby traps, there was no reason for him to come back here. The lightsaber would be safe enough until they got back to the Temple.

Obi-Wan double checked to make sure that the latch to the fridge was firmly in place. Satisfied, he turned to head into the hallway that would take him to the elevator towards the galley. Apparently, whoever had commissioned this ship hadn’t wanted their dinner guests to see the servants scurrying about to and from the kitchen in plain sight loaded down with supplies. There was a refrigerator in the galley, but it was much smaller. The elevator here lead straight to the galley, and Obi-Wan’s stomach forcefully reminded him it had been a while since he ate.

As he contemplated the folly of wealthy people, and the strange things they deemed important, he almost ran smack into Leia Solo.

She stopped before he could fully run her over, and Obi-Wan blinked down at her in bemusement. What was she doing in the servants part of the ship? Shouldn’t she be upstairs eating? Or perhaps mingling among the crowd, looking for work? Not that any of the Naboo could afford to pay her, but they looked wealthy. What could possibly be down here that would interest her?

Then remembering the one thing she had shown interest in, his back stiffened. Obi-Wan was aware of how young he looked, but he wasn’t about to have some Outer Rim scavenger question his skills. “I know what I’m doing.”

She frowned, “Beg your pardon?”

He gestured to behind him, “This isn’t my first body. I know how to secure it. You don’t need to check on it.”

Leia looked at him, and then a small smile crossed her lips, “Good for you,” she said, “but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest, “And just what is down here, that you would find so interesting?”

She gestured behind her. “Fresher,” she said, and then an almost moan escaped her lips as she said, “with water.”

Now that he was paying attention, Obi-Wan could see that her hair, in a braid that fell halfway down her back, was wet. He looked to where she was pointing, and sure enough, there were several doors clumped closely together.

He looked at her puzzled, “Why not use one of the ones in the personal quarters?”

She gave him a grin. “Because there are a lot of people on this ship, and I wanted to take my time and not be rushed.” She closed her eyes, a fond pleasant look on her face. “I’ve been on that dust ball for a year, and sonics are just not the same.”

“No, they are not.” Obi-Wan agreed. Then, realizing how rude he had just been, bowed, “My
apologies Mistress Solo. This entire mission has put me on edge, and I’m afraid I jumped to the wrong conclusion about your motives for being down here.”

Leia opened her eyes and looked at him for a long moment. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure what was to make of the expression on her face. She said softly. “Leia.”

Obi-Wan’s head cocked. “Excuse me?”

“Please call me Leia,” she said, gesturing to herself.

“Leia,” he said obediently. “Do you need help finding your…” he trailed off as he realized he had no idea how this woman was connected to the boy and his mother. “people?” he finished lamely.

She arched an eyebrow, seemingly amused by his flustered tone. “No,” she said. “I know where they went. Padme was getting them something to eat.” She looked at the chrono on her wrist and frowned. “Although they are probably done by now,” she admitted.

“Padme?” he asked. With so many names, that sounded so alike, he was having trouble remembering which one the interchangeable handmaidens she was referring to. Maybe the blonde one?

She looked at him expectantly, “The one that accompanied your Master into Mos Espa?” she prodded.

Oh, the one that the Queen had ordered to be allowed to go. “Ah,” he said, “her.”

“Yes, her.” Leia’s lips twitched in amusement and fondness. “Old Man has taken quite the shine to her. I think I’ll leave them be for now.”


Leia’s eyes lost some of their soft look, and she focused in on him. “She isn’t a stranger,” she said easily, but there was something there in her voice that made the Force shiver along with her words.

“You met her yesterday,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

“I did, didn’t I?” Leia looked a little sad at that thought, then shook her head. “It will be alright,” she said, and Obi-Wan’s frown deepened. She was awful careless with a youngling.

Noticing his look, Leia scowled. “Shmi is there,” she said. “And I hardly think Padme would do anything in a crowded room with him. Besides, Anakin has a good feeling about her. So do I. It’s fine.”

“If you say so,” Obi-Wan muttered. It wasn’t any of his concern anyway. The only reason he was even pressing the matter at all, was Master Qui-Gon. He was fascinated with the child. So much so, he had delayed their departure to go back and pick him up. And he certainly wouldn’t let any harm come to him, no matter how negligent Leia was being.

Leia’s eyes narrowed. “And now, if you don’t mind, I would like to go to the kitchen and find my own food. Unless you have more pointed opinions about my decisions?”

Obi-Wan had been the one who had been rude, he acknowledged to himself. It was rare that anyone outside of the Jedi order was willing to call him on it, but he had started the impolite tone between them.
“No Mistr-Leia,” he corrected to her scowl. “And I am sorry for my foul words. It has been a rather set of trying days.”

Leia’s eyes fell to behind Obi-Wan, to the door of the fridge, and the corpse of the man she killed. “Yes,” she murmured, “it has.”

Obi-Wan watched her get into the elevator, heading toward the galley. He had been about to go there himself, but perhaps he should seek out his Master, and find out precisely who Leia Solo was and what she was doing here.

Obi-Wan found his master in the quarters that had been assigned to them to share on the ship. He had tried to politely refuse the room, he was aware of how cramped for space they were, but Queen Amidala had overruled him. She had insisted it was the least that she could do for her protector. Obi-Wan had the feeling it was more about keeping him away from the civilians, some of who were starting to resent his authority and attempts to keep them calm, then trying to show him and his Master respect. But either way, he had been too grateful for the modicum of privacy, and a place to meditate without interruption, to protest the gesture too much.

“Master?” he asked, as he entered the room, to find him sitting on the floor, lost in thought. There was a tray in front of him, and Obi-Wan noticed, to his relief, that there were two plates piled with food on it.

Master Qui-Gon blinked, and pulled his mind from wherever it had been. “Obi-Wan,” he said in greeting. “Did you store the body successfully?”

“Yes, Master,” Obi-Wan said, coming and sitting gracefully on the floor across from him.

Master Qui-Gon pushed the tray towards him, “I got some for you as well,” he said.

“Thank you,” Obi-Wan said heartily, and pick up the silverware to begin eating.

They ate in silence, while Obi-Wan tried to gather his thoughts, and the questions he wanted to ask. Master Qui-Gon was never one much for idle chit chat, but now he looked like he was a thousand miles away.

When Obi-Wan was done with his food, he cleared his throat. “Master,” he said cautiously, “On my way here, I ran into Leia Solo.”

Master Qui-Gon blinked, “Did you?” he asked. “And what did you think of her?”

Obi-Wan thought about the brief conversation she had with the woman. “She likes showers with water,” he said, and Master Qui-Gon’s lips twitched in amusement. Relieved that he had nudged his Master somewhat out of his strange mood, Obi-Wan gave his voice to his real thoughts on her. “And she is someone who values her privacy. So much so that she chose to go out of her way to use the servant’s freshers, even though the ones in the living quarters are much nicer.”

Master Qui-Gon hummed at that. “Yes,” he said, eyes thoughtful. “She is a woman with many secrets.”

The first and foremost being, where in the galaxy had a strong Force user like her come from? But that wasn’t the issue bothering Obi-Wan the most. The mission, that was always what was of most
importance when they were in the field.

“She is an unnecessary complication. Why did you allow her to come along?” Obi-Wan asked, puzzled. No need to get into the boy just yet. Master Qui-Gon had said that he was responsible for getting them the parts they needed. His Master had a soft spot for children in general, and he would see it as a way to repaying the boy for his help.

Master Qui-Gon snorted. “I did nothing of the sort. Leia bargained with the handmaiden, Padme, for passage for herself and Shmi to Coruscant. Anakin too, if I hadn’t already seen to arranging for him to come along with us.”

Obi-Wan found himself blinking in surprise. That seemed rather audacious of the young lady. He knew that Queen Amidala held her in high regard, both from what she had said about the girl and for the fact that she was the handmaiden chosen to be the Queen’s eyes and ears in Mos Espa. But inviting an unknown family to travel with them to Coruscant seemed a bit of a reach.

“And Queen Amidala was alright with this?” Obi-Wan asked.

Master Qui-Gon looked at him, and then there was a fond look on his face. Obi-Wan dreaded that look, it meant there was something that he had missed, and his Master thought it was hilarious.

“Yes,” he said, “she was.”

Obi-Wan frowned, trying to understand what he had missed, but no matter how he looked at it, the answer was alluding him. Perhaps he would come up with a solution in a few hours, but for now, there were other issues to address.

“Mistress Solo is…” he started to say, and his words died, as he remembered that voice, screaming in the Force, and blinding him to everything around him. He had run the midi-chlorian test himself, he had seen the numbers. But he hadn’t thought what it would be like to be close to someone that connected to the Force.

“Finish the thought Obi-Wan,” his Master said gently, bringing him back to the present he was in.

“She’s powerful in the Force,” Obi-Wan whispered, and a feeling of dread built in his stomach. That wasn’t even the start of it. A high midi-chlorian count was one thing. It was possible, if Leia was from the Outer Rim, she could have been overlooked by the Jedi. But she had spoken in the Force. Someone had taught her how to do that.

His Master’s looked as concerned as Obi-Wan felt. “Yes, she is.”

“And trained,” Obi-Wan pushed.

“Yes,” his Master agreed. “Enough to call up a small, focused tornado and blind my attacker with it.” Obi-Wan started, he hadn’t known that part. It did explain how a woman with a blaster had taken out someone with a lightsaber.

“By who?” Obi-Wan asked.

A look of frustration crossed his Master’s face. “I don’t know. And I haven’t asked her.”

Obi-Wan fought to keep his voice even, “Why not?” he demanded. “Master, if there is a new Force sect out there, the Jedi need to know.”

“I am aware Obi-Wan,” Master Qui-Gon growled. Obi-Wan fought to keep from flinching at the
unexpected anger in his voice.

But this was Master Qui-Gon, he noticed *everything*. He might not always say something, depending on the lesson he wanted Obi-Wan to learn, but he always noticed.

He let out a long sigh and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “My apologies Obi-Wan,” he said. “I’m afraid our mysterious bounty hunter has me on edge. I haven’t asked, because I *know* she wouldn’t tell me.”

Obi-Wan searched his face and saw nothing but frustration and annoyance there. Master Qui-Gon wasn’t exaggerating or trying to protect Obi-Wan from one of his ‘decisions’ that would land his master in trouble with the council. Leia really was that hostile to him.

That was unusual. Part of the reason he and Master Qui-Gon were sent on so many missions, was *because* his Master had a way with the locals. He was successful because of that. It was rare for him to meet someone he couldn’t charm. And in those few instances where that didn’t work, barrel his way to what he wanted.

“Really?” he asked. “How do you know?”

“Because she won’t even tell me where she is *from*,” Master Qui-Gon said, frustrated. “Or what she is doing on Tatooine. Or her interest in the Skywalker family.”

They were talking in circles. “Master, *who* is Leia Solo?”

Master Qui-Gon gave a huff of annoyance. “If I take only what she has *said*, she is a widowed bounty hunter, living on Tatooine, who happened to fall into a slave family about a year ago.”

Obi-Wan cocked his head. “And her actions?”

“I’m not sure what she is doing on this planet, but I don’t think she is a bounty hunter in any way shape or form. At least not how you and I understand the word. She has a core education, but makes her life out here. Her shields are some of the thickest I have ever encountered. And at one point in her life, she was a leader of some sort. She is far too used to being obeyed for me to think otherwise.”

“Military?” Obi-Wan asked. “Or perhaps she was part of the Judicial armed forces?”

“Maybe,” Qui-Gon shook his head. “She certainly is comfortable enough around violence. She didn’t hesitate to shoot my attacker. But she is also extremely careful with her words, and that is not a skill she would have much use for in traditional military vocation.”

“Careful how?”

“She is quite precise, except when she doesn’t want to be.” His Master shook his head. “She reminds me of Finis.”

It took Obi-Wan a moment. He would never get used to how his Master referred to the leader of the Republic Senate by his first name. “The *Chancellor*?”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “Yes, there are cadences there, phrases that are similar to what he uses. But only *sometimes.*” His voice grew troubled and perplexed. “And then there is her attachment to the Skywalker family.”

“What of it?”
His master put his hands out. “Why? Why would a woman, who is full grown, insert herself that firmly into a slave family? So much so she was going to buy them to set them free.” There was a puzzled frown line in Master Qui-Gon’s face. “That is a lot of time and effort to go to Obi-Wan, for two people she met a year ago.”

Obi-Wan chewed on his lip. “Perhaps she feels she owes them somehow?”

“Maybe,” his Master allowed. “But owe them for what? What could they possibly have given her that she would hold that dearly?” He shook his head. “No, I’m afraid it is for more nefarious purposes.”

Obi-Wan frowned. “They are, were, slaves. What could they possibly have that she wants?”

Master Qui-Gon looked at him, troubled. “Anakin,” he said softly.

Obi-Wan frowned, that didn’t make any sense. “What’s so special about him?” he asked. “I know he is a Force-sensitive,” the little proclamation about the body not having any booby traps on it, could leave no doubt about that, “but he has nothing compared to Mistress Solo.”

Master Qui-Gon looked at Obi-Wan blankly. “He has nothing on Leia?” Obi-Wan nodded, and his Master frowned at him, “Why would you think that?”

“The midi-chlorian test I ran,” Obi-Wan said. “She’s above twenty….” His voice trailed off at that look of fond amusement again.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. Oh, he could miss the obvious sometimes. He swallowed hard. “I made a rather erroneous assumption, didn’t I?” he asked as he opened his eyes up.

Master Qui-Gon nodded his head. “But an understandable one.” Master Qui-Gon gave a slightly mocking smile, “And you aren’t the only one who missed the depth of her strength. I knew Leia was strong, but until this afternoon, I didn’t know how strong.”

Obi-Wan felt his stomach drop, and he shuddered as he remembered being swallowed whole by that presence in the Force. There has been nothing but her in the Force.

Master Qui-Gon cleared his throat, bringing Obi-Wan's attention back to him, “Yes, the blood sample I sent you was Anakin’s, not Leia’s.”

“What is her count?” he whispered through bloodless lips.

Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “I don’t know. But she does know what it is.”

“Master,” Obi-Wan breathed. “How is that possible?” The ability to detect, and confirm, midi-chlorian counts was a deeply held secret of the Jedi Order. If the technology and technique fell into the wrong hands, it could be used by countless organizations to squirrel away Force Sensitive children for their own purposes.

Master Qui-Gon looked troubled. “I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Is she more powerful than Anakin?”

Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“But her presence…” Obi-Wan tried to contain his shiver at that remembered whirlwind unleashed in the Force. If that was Leia, what would Anakin feel like?
Master Qui-Gon folded his hands in his lap. “No, Obi-Wan. That was Leia and Anakin, together.”

“But there was only one presence Master,” he protested.

Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “No,” he said firmly, “It was both of them.”

That didn’t make Obi-Wan feel better in the slightest. It should have, to know that great power was split between two people, not one. But the amount of skill it took to merge that completely in the Force, was no small thing. And Leia had done so with a child.

“Are you telling me the Jedi Order missed two individuals with this amount of potential?” Yes, the Jedi were increasingly being consumed by missions and issues in the Core, and in consequence, had been pulled from the Outer Rim. It was understandable they would miss one, but two?

And Leia was older. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure how old, but the woman had to be at least in her forties. Force Sensitives, especially trained Force Sensitives, aged differently than those who weren’t. But Leia had spent at least a year on this desert planet, and who knows where before that. It would take a toll on any human skin, Force or no Force. But she was definitely older than the pullback from the Outer Rim by the Jedi. She, at least, should have been found.

Master Qui-Gon gave Obi-Wan a tight smile. “You can see why I’m so troubled by her.” Then a dark shadow entered his eyes. “And that is not taking into account the Queen’s attacker.”

And that brought up an entirely different dread with it. “Master,” Obi-Wan swallowed hard, “she called him a Sith.”

“Yes, she did,” and his blue eyes grew troubled.

“But that is impossible.”

Master Qui-Gon was silent for a long moment, then looked at Obi-Wan thoughtfully. “Why?” he asked.

“What do you mean, why?” Obi-Wan sputtered. “Because they are gone.”

“Yes, they are,” the words were correct, the tone was not.

“Master, do you believe her?” Obi-Wan whispered, scandalized.

“It’s not a matter of believing or disbelieving her Obi-Wan. It’s a matter of believing what I saw, and felt, in the Force.”

Obi-Wan thought of that lightsaber, and it’s foul Kyber crystal. And where exactly had that man gotten that? All known sources of the Kyber were patrolled and guarded by the Order.

“Well,” Obi-Wan said after a long pause, trying to find a way to lighten all of this somehow, and keep the dread from pooling into a tight knot in his stomach, “it’s nice to know our luck with difficult and strange mission continues apace.”

Master Qui-Gon gave him a wry grin. “And that my long streak of telling the council exactly what it doesn’t want to hear is also in fine shape.”

There was no arguing with that.
Master Qui-Gon had insisted that Obi-Wan rest first. He had tried to protest. He was fine, and Master Qui-Gon was the one who had been in battle today, not Obi-Wan. Master Qui-Gon had overruled him by informing him there were things that he still needed to see to, and no, they couldn’t wait. So, while he saw to the last few chores of the day, Obi-Wan should sleep. But he did bend enough to agree to come back in two hours. At which point, he promised he would wake Obi-Wan up, so that he could then rest.

Because Obi-Wan knew Master Qui-Gon, he did crawl into the bed, there was no point in trying to fight a battle on a front he had already lost. But he also set the alarm to wake him up. Just in case his Master “forgot” to wake him, based on the idea that Obi-Wan needed the sleep more than he did. Or to brood about what had happened today. But his Master needed sleep more than meditation. Although he hadn’t said so, Obi-Wan knew he was more thrown by what had happened on Tatooine then he was letting on.

So, when the soft chime went off, Obi-Wan was somewhat surprised to open his eyes and see Master Qui-Gon’s hand reaching out to shake him awake. His Master gave a rueful shake of his head. “My young Padawan, it’s almost like you don’t trust me,” he remarked.

Obi-Wan gave him a glare. “To see to my wellbeing, of course,” he sat up, and the blankets fell away. “To see to your own, not in the slightest.”

Master Qui-Gon gave him a guilty smile, but before he could say anything, there was a sharp rapping knock on the door.

“What do they want now?” Obi-Wan groaned, coming to his feet.

“I can-“ Master Qui-Gon said.

“I can handle it,” Obi-Wan said. “You need your rest,” he called over his shoulder as he made his way to the door. He palmed it open, ready to give some polite reassurance to whoever was on the other side of the door.

It was Leia.

It took Obi-Wan’s brain a moment to understand this. Her braid had come out in loose wisps everywhere, and she definitely had the look of someone who had been up too long. Gone was the practical gear and armor. In its place was a sleepwear outfit, with a top that was almost too large for her small frame. The most striking thing was the outfit was light blue and fuzzy. She looked like someone’s mother, not the deadly bounty hunter she was.

Without giving him a moment to process any of this, without preamble, she asked, “Can you testify in the Senate?”

Obi-Wan just stared at her. “Excuse me?”

“Can you testify in the Senate?” Leia repeated.

“I-“ he shook his head, trying to wipe away the cobwebs of sleep. What was she going on about? “Why?” he asked.

“Because the Queen needs witnesses to what happened on Naboo.” She explained this like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And the Senate is known for its rules about who can, and cannot speak, in its chambers.”
“Of course the Jedi can—” Obi-Wan started to say, but his Master’s voice came over his shoulder, cutting him off.

“No,” he said coming up behind Obi-Wan. “Not in this case.”

Obi-Wan turned his head to stare at him. What did that mean?

Leia also sounded suspicious. “Why?”

Master Qui-Gon gave a weighty sigh. “Because the Senate did not authorize us to go,” he admitted.

“What?” Obi-Wan squawked. His Master was well known for going his own way, but to go on a mission, without the sanction of the Senate, was far outside of bounds, even for him.

Leia joined in on Obi-Wan’s bafflement. “You just showed up on Naboo?” she asked disbelievingly.

“No, of course not,” his Master said and sent Obi-Wan an apologetic look. “We went as a personal request from Chancellor Valorum.”

Leia shook her head. “And why is the Chancellor so interested in a trade dispute?”

“He did not share that with me,” Master Qui-Gon said neutrally. And that was a fine line he was walking. More than likely, the two of them hadn’t discussed it openly. But it had been discussed, just in vague words and allusions, so that if either of them was called directly on it, they could both deny it.

Master Qui-Gon shrugged. “It is all a legal grey area anyway. The Chancellor has been given broad powers to assign the Jedi as mediators in any dispute.”

Leia arched an eyebrow. “Let me guess. It’s never been used against a perfectly legal blockade before?”

“No,” his Master admitted. “But Finis felt, and I agreed, that it is a dispute, in the broadest sense of the word. He hoped that by the Jedi just showing up, we could force a settlement.”

“I take it that was not what happened?” Leia asked dryly.

Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “I’m afraid our presence escalated things.”

Leia rubbed her forehead. “Great,” she muttered. “All this means is even if you did testify, and blow up the Chancellor’s career in the process—“

“Why?” Obi-Wan asked frowning. “It is a bit unorthodox, and is violating the spirit of the law, but not the law itself.”

Leia stared at him. “So, you are saying that when the news broke that the Chancellor was using the Jedi as his own personal armed ‘mediators’, the Senate would just let that go?”

Obi-Wan grimaced. She wasn’t wrong. The Jedi were not the armed wing of the Chancellor, and he didn’t believe that what Master Qui-Gon and the Chancellor had done to get involved in the situation on Naboo, fit that definition. But in order to bring down a rival, there were plenty of Senators who would paint what the Chancellor had done, just that way, to further their own advantage. Politicians were always looking for ways to tear each other down. And when they weren’t doing that, they were lying to their people, or seeking ways to enrich themselves. He bowed his head, acknowledging Leia’s point.
Leia waved her hand. “Pointless anyway. Because the Senate didn’t officially send you, any testimony you give would be thrown out as illegally gotten evidence.”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “Yes, it could perhaps be twisted that way and dismissed from the record.”

“Not can be, will,” Leia said. “The Trade Federation has a long reach, and by leaning so heavily into a ‘gray’ area, you made yourself vulnerable to this very line of attack.”

Master Qui-Gon quirked an eyebrow. “Would you rather have me do nothing?”

Leia scowled. “No,” she gritted out. “I’m just annoyed you played hard and fast with the rules, and you aren’t going to pay the consequences of it.”

Master Qui-Gon shrugged. “If it got out, the Jedi Order probably wouldn’t look any kinder on it. If what you are saying is true—”

“If?” she asked mockingly. “You aren’t stupid, the Trade Federation is ruthless. They saw nothing wrong with invading a populated planet. You think they are going to let a little thing like the truth and one Jedi Knight stop them from waging political war against the Chancellor? Especially if it increased the odds that someone who is more favorable to them, was put in his place?”

Master Qui-Gon sighed. “Yes,” he said. “They would. But if that whole stack of cards that were carefully built came tumbling down, it wouldn’t just be the Chancellor who would face the repercussions. It would expose the Order to even more oversight and control by the Senate, and the Jedi High Council would not look kindly on me for it.”

She looked at him critically. “You could always play dumb. He’s the Chancellor, he made a request. How were you supposed to know?”

Master Qui-Gon gave her a tight smile. “For starters, this conflict has been going on for months. It would look very bad on me, and the Jedi Order, that we weren’t aware of what the Senate has, and has not done, in regards to it. Second, no, I wouldn’t sell Finis out like that. He is my friend, and he didn’t ask me to do anything that I didn’t agree needed to be done.”

Leia shook her head. “If you felt that the Jedi should get involved before, why not advocate it on the floor of the Senate?”

“We are not allowed to,” Obi-Wan said promptly.

Leia looked at him startled. “You just said you can testify on the Senate floor.”

“As witnesses,” Obi-Wan said. “We are not allowed to advocate policy.”

“Why ever not?” Leia asked. “I would think you, and the other knights in the field, would have a broader understanding of what is going on in the Mid and Outer Rim.”

“It is seen as giving us too much power,” Master Qui-Gon said. “We enforce the laws, we do not write them.”

Leia frowned. “I wasn’t saying you should. But you most certainly should have a say. You offer a valuable point of view that should be taken into account.”

Master Qui-Gon said nothing, only looked at Leia, interest piqued.

Obi-Wan cleared his throat and answered her. “After the last Sith War, the Senate decided that the
Jedi were too powerful. All our armies were disbanded, and we were put under the direct control of the Senate and Supreme Chancellor.”

Leia nodded. “I knew that,” she said. “But since when does disbanding the military translate into, you will never have a voice in the Senate?”

Master Qui-Gon’s lips twitched. “It doesn’t.”

Obi-Wan let out a sigh. This was a very old argument between them. “You know why we don’t participate in politics, Master. The Jedi need to be perceived as neutral by all parties. We can’t do that if we are involved in the day to day power jockeying in the Senate.”

“Sometimes standing by neutrally is making a choice on whose side you are going to be on,” Leia observed mildly. “That choice just happens to be your side.”

Obi-Wan glared at her. “That is not true in this case,” he insisted. “It’s safer.”

“Safer for who?” Leia asked.

“Safer for the galaxy, safer for us,” Obi-Wan said firmly. His Master said nothing. He didn’t agree with that sentiment, but he was very much in the minority in the Order in that regard.

“So, you can’t say anything in the Senate, about your own fates.” Leia looked contemptuously at both of them.

“By tradition, yes,” Master Qui-Gon said mildly.

“Oh great,” Leia muttered, “tradition. Because blindly clinging to the old ways never backfires.”

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. “The current way does allow from some minor injustices,” he admitted. “But that is a small number when balanced against the whole of the galaxy being stable.”

“Such as a case when an entire planet has been invaded?” Leia looked at him archly. “That’s a minor injustice?”

“No, of course not,” Obi-Wan said. “But why do the Naboo need us to testify about the invasion of their world? What is wrong with their testimony?”

Leia looked at him, and disappointment flashed in her eyes. “Because the Trade Federation is going to deny it, and they need proof,” she said softly. “I thought, as members of the Jedi Order, that if you gave testimony, it would carry more weight, because you do not have a personal stake in this.”

Obi-Wan sighed. “And the Naboo do, because they could have numerous reasons to lie, the Trade Federation can use that to wriggle out of this, on the Senate floor.” He shook his head. “This is why I don’t like politicians.”

Leia shrugged. “Most of them mean well,” she said.

“They have a funny way of showing it,” Obi-Wan pointed out.

Leia gave him a conspiratorial wink. “The truth depends greatly upon your own point of view.”

Obi-Wan felt himself stiffen. “The truth is the truth,” he insisted.

Leia’s teasing manner slipped away. She looked at him oddly for one long moment. “You are very young,” she said, eyes troubled.
Obi-Wan barely kept his voice civil. This was not the first, or last time, someone had dismissed him because of his age. “For someone who started this conversation unsure if the Jedi could even testify in the Senate, you have a very good grasp on the politics of that body.”

Leia didn’t rise to the bait. She just flashed him a tired smile. “People are people,” she said. “And money always talks. It’s not that hard to make a guess,” and she looked at Master Qui-Gon slightly mockingly, “in the broadest sense.”

Obi-Wan was about to ask her what political experience she had, when a whiny voice from down the hall called out. “Mistress Leia!”

All three of them turned to look down the hallway, as that mish mash droid, the one that had come aboard the ship with the Skywalkers, came walking up to them.

When he reached Leia, he fretted. “I have been looking all over this ship for you.”

“And now you have found me,” Leia said, voice much more patient than Obi-Wan would have thought she was capable of. “What’s wrong, Threepio?”

“Mistress Shmi is wondering where you are.” The droid looked her up and down, and said in a lecturing tone. “And to see if you have gotten any sleep. Which by your physical state I can see you have not.”

“I was asleep,” and she turned to glare at Master Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan had the feeling that some of what Master Qui-Gon had wanted to do was things he didn’t want Obi-Wan interfering in again. “But someone woke me up.”

“I offered my apologies for that,” Master Qui-Gon said smoothly.

The droid’s voice was placating. “Since Master Qui-Gon has stated his apology, may I suggest you return to your bed for the night?”

Leia shook her head. “I have to talk to Captain Panaka.”

“Mistress Leia, can’t it wait?” the droid asked anxiously.

She gave him a smile, and gently patted him on the arm. “No, it cannot. But it will be short, and I promise, I will go back to sleep after that.”

"Alright,” the droid conceded. Then he informed her in a fussy tone, “But I have strict instructions to follow you until you do go to bed.”

She didn’t react badly to the mothering tone. “I would expect nothing less, Threepio,” she told the droid fondly. She gave a nod of her head to both of them. “Thank you for your time,” she said, and with a very pointed look at Master Qui-Gon. “I’m sorry if I kept you from your rest.”

Master Qui-Gon grimaced at the reminder that if he had not woken her up, she would not now be keeping him from his own sleep. “Think nothing of it,” he said.

Leia smirked, and then turned around to head down the hallway, the droid trailing in her wake.

Obi-Wan watched her go and waited until he was sure she was out of earshot. He turned to look at his Master, “I can see where you and she got off to a rough start,” Obi-Wan observed. She had only been half awake, and he felt like he had just gone several rounds with one of his more demanding teachers from his youngling days. “But at least she will be gone soon.”
“Will she?” his Master said, looking down at Obi-Wan.

“She only wanted a ride to Coruscant, Master,” he reminded him.

“Yes,” Master Qui-Gon’s face grew thoughtful. “But did it occur to you to ask why she wanted to know if we could testify on the Senate floor?”

“To know if we could help the Naboo—“ Obi-Wan’s voice trailed off. Between Leia’s bossy manner and the fact that he was still half awake, it didn’t occur to him to wonder why she was involving herself in affairs that by all rights shouldn’t concern her.

“You think the Queen hired her?” Obi-Wan asked.

“No,” Master Qui-Gon said thoughtfully. “I think she has decided to involve herself.”

“Why?” Taking advantage of a situation to get a free ride was one thing. Even if it was on a ship that was currently being hunted by one of the most powerful organizations in the Republic. Actively involving yourself in thwarting said organizations plans, for no money or profit that Obi-Wan could see, was quite another.

“I don’t know,” Master Qui-Gon’s lips twitched in amusement. “Let’s add it to the list of mysteries surrounding her, shall we?”

Obi-Wan shook his head. “One you can contemplate after you’ve gotten some sleep.”

“Indeed,” Master Qui-Gon said. He turned around to head back to bed. Obi-Wan rubbed his face and went to look for an open fresher. Leia Solo, and all the mysteries she represented, would soon, no longer be his problem, if the Force was kind.

Obi-Wan watched in amusement as the Naboo, and Skywalker family, crowded the ships viewing screens to peer down at the planet below them. It was a common enough reaction to first-time visitors to Coruscant.

Anakin let out a long breath. “Whoa,” he whispered as he took everything in. He sounded excited, but his hand was firmly clasped in his mother’s. Obi-Wan wondered if he could feel the pulse of life below him. If he could, it must be overwhelming for him to filter out that many voices after growing up on the sparsely populated Tatooine. Obi-Wan he really couldn’t blame the boy for clinging to one of the only constants in his life.

Anakin turned to Leia. “Is it how you remembered?” he asked her excitedly.

Master Qui-Gon’s face was curious as he took Leia in. Obi-Wan couldn’t blame him. Leia had been on Coruscant before? When? And how did no one feel her when she had?

“Old Man,” Leia said, fond exasperation in her voice, “this far out, there isn’t much difference to see.”

True enough, but his Master couldn’t leave well enough alone. “You’ve been to Coruscant before?” he asked, pressing the small opening her words had left open.

Leia’s face immediately tightened, and Obi-Wan could see her shoulders square up as she stiffened.
"Yes," she told Master Qui-Gon, no room in her voice for any follow-up questions.

The handmaiden, Padme, at least Obi-Wan was assuming it was Padme because he didn’t recognize her face, sensing the tension in the room, teasingly asked Leia. “Coruscant and Naboo? How many planets have you been too?”

Apparently, Padme was one of the few on this ship that Leia liked, because her voice instantly softened as she answered the girl. “Too many to remember,” and there was wistfulness in her voice.

Interjecting himself, again, Master Qui-Gon tried to casually ask. “Always on the move?”

Leia gave him a cold look. “Not by choice,” she said. She very deliberately turned her back to him, to return to staring outside the viewscreen.

Padme gave Master Qui-Gon a distinctly disapproving look. Obi-Wan wanted to roll his eyes. His Master had many good qualities. But patience, when presented with a mystery, was not one of them. He tended to dig until he got to the bottom of them. Leia Solo was the very definition of something that would drive his master to distraction, and bring out all of his worst qualities. No wonder all his charm and manners had deserted him.

There was nothing Obi-Wan could do about it now. Master Qui-Gon was normally receptive to questions and gentle prodding, but not in public. And especially not in front of the civilians whose safety they were responsible for. So, Obi-Wan settled for what he could do.

He moved forward towards the control panel of the ship. “I’ll com the Temple to let them know we are here,” he told his master softly, “and find out which hanger bay they want us to land in.” He could also use this time to give the Temple the briefest overview of what happened. Even on route to Coruscant, in hyperspace, his Master hadn’t wanted to chance the Trade Federation intercepting them, so they had maintained their radio silence.

The pilot gave him the briefest look of gratitude, when Obi-Wan came up to the com and spoke to the control tower that was in charge of this section of Coruscant’s airspace traffic. After giving the man on the other side of the line the Jedi access codes, Obi-Wan was transferred to the Temple.

The Jedi he talked to in the communications bay was brisk and efficient, they always were. After the briefest explanation why he and his Master were not on the ship they left on, and the fate of the crew of that ship, Obi-Wan was told that everything he said would be relayed to the council.

There was the briefest pause when Obi-Wan requested a medical cart to carry a body from the ship, but there was an acknowledgment of the request. Obi-Wan supposed that by this point the people in the communication hub were used to all kinds of manner of trouble when he and his Master returned from their missions.

Within moments, the flight path was loaded into the ships navicomputer, along with the correct corresponding emitting codes so they could enter the air space above the Temple, and the Senate dome.

While this was happening, Obi-Wan tried to ignore the whispers between the handmaidens. More than likely, they were discussing their poor opinion of his Master.

When he was finished, and confident that the pilot understood where they were going, he straightened and took a measure of everyone in the cockpit. Padme had her back to his Master and was staring out the window. Hoping to undo some of the damage his master had done to their relations with these people, Obi-Wan sidled up to her.
Padme had a look of wonder, and also the slightest hints of being overwhelmed. “I’m told that sight is a bit disorienting for people to see the first time they come to this world,” he said quietly. Not that he would know, he couldn’t remember his parents or his planet of birth. This had always been his home.

She started. Obi-Wan felt a flicker of guilt, he hadn’t thought she was so lost in her thoughts that she hadn’t heard him come up on her. This girl had just escaped from a precarious situation not even two days ago on her homeworld. The last thing she needed was to be scared out of her mind.

She did relax as she recognized him. “It is,” she said. Then her hand gestured to the high skyscrapers. “How?” she asked, wonder and awe, all over her voice.

“I’m not a structural engineer,” Obi-Wan warned her. He leaned against the view screen, hoping that by relaxing his guard, she would relax hers. It was a tactic he had used with great success in the past.

Obi-Wan started giving the speech that he gave to everyone when they first came to this planet. He was long used to it. It was almost always the first question any of them asked. “But there has been building on this planet for so long, buildings placed on top of other buildings, that eventually the ground was covered in what is essentially a sediment layer made of durasteel and titanium. For the megastructures, they are anchored to the ground, and repulsor lifts are used at the top to help support the weight.”

Padme looked fascinated, instead of the polite bored air he was expecting from his canned speech. “Oh?” she asked.

He nodded, few people ever got this part. Few people cared. “When a developer wants to put up a new building, what they do, is tear away the external casing, and interior walls, leaving the old support beams in place, so they don’t have to re-dig to place new struts.”

Obi-Wan thought about it for a second. “I don’t think a new foundation has been laid for one of those buildings in about, ohhh, a hundred years or so, in the Senatorial district.”

She digested this, then peered out the window. “So, it’s a really long way to the ground?” she asked.

Well, wasn’t she a practical little thing? He could see how the Queen would value her advice. He laughed and gave her an amused. “Yes.”

She looked delighted, then something in the viewscreen caught her eye. She leaned forward, and Obi-Wan craned his head to see what had her so entranced.

A small smile played on his lips as he caught sight of the northern edge of the Temple. No matter how foul his mood, no matter how tired or weary he was, he never got tired of this sight. Of the knowledge that he was coming home, to where he belonged.

Anakin asked in an awed voice. “Is that the Jedi Temple?”

Master Qui-Gon chuckled. “Yes, it is,” and there was the same feeling in his voice that Obi-Wan had. It was a splendid sight, true, but for the two of them, it was the place in the galaxy that was the calmest place to be. Where the Jedi were allowed to rest, instead of constantly battling an ever-changing and increasingly hostile galaxy. Here, in the Temple, they weren’t subjects of awe or fear, but were allowed to be people.

Padme was still peering at the temple, but now there was a small frown on her face, as she caught sight of the extensive grounds.
“It’s a buffer,” he told her.

She turned a slightly worried and quizzical look at him. It was a look he was used to seeing. There were so many myths and legends concerning what the Jedi could, and could not do, mind reading being one of the more popular rumors. But in this case, it had more to do with experience, then anything else. This wasn’t the first time this question had come up when a visitor had seen the Temple.

“When people see the temple for the first time, that is always the question on their minds,” he explained. “If the Jedi live a life of no wealth, why this huge building?”

The other handmaiden, Rabe, her voice was filled with awe as she remarked. “That amount of real estate on Coruscant. It has to be priceless.”

Obi-Wan nodded, “Yes.” It was something all the Jedi were aware of, if only for the fact that it was constantly brought up to them by jealous politicians and envious businessmen. He felt it was fair to add. “Although, when it was built a thousand years ago, it was not as valuable as it is now.”

Both women looked at him, and not wanting them to think this was a luxury, as opposed to a necessity, he explained. “We need to be apart, at least a little.” Obi-Wan thought of what it would be like, to live on a world this populated, to constantly be on guard against that many small eddies pushing into the currents of the Force, to not have even this small oasis. “To be on a world with this many living creatures, the more sensitive of us to emotions would be quickly overwhelmed.”

Master Qui-Gon added. “To visit the Temple proper requires passes, but the lands around the Temple are open to anyone.”

Padme’s eyes grew interested, and Obi-Wan wondered if she would be one of the many visitors that availed themselves to the serenity of the grounds around the Temple.

“There are quite a few parks, and libraries, that we maintain that are open to all,” Master Jinn said. “We need to have a bit of space, but we are well aware we need to be gracious neighbors.”

His Master turned to Leia, and his voice became curious. “Did you see the Jedi Temple the last time you were on Coruscant?”

Obi-Wan stiffened, waiting for the explosion to come. But Leia didn’t turn away from staring at the Jedi Temple with an unreadable expression on her face. It didn’t look like the expression so many visiting dignitaries had when viewing the temple. The one that said they were deliberately trying not to be impressed, while being impressed.

Leia didn’t turn to face his Master. “No,” she said, her voice holding notes of grief and loss. For all her face and her presence in the Force was blank, she couldn’t seem to hide the emotion in her voice. “I never had the chance.”

Master Qui-Gon, never content to just take a win, pushed for just a little bit more. “A pity, the grounds are quite lovely.”

Leia’s fingers came up and pressed against the viewport. “So, I had been told,” she said. “The reality….” Her voice trailed off. Obi-Wan felt those solid shields of hers ripple. He caught the faintest hint of wonder, mixed in with grief, fury, and anger.

And just what was she sensing in the temple that would produce that strong mix of emotion? Even more importantly, how could she have been on Coruscant before, and not have felt anything? That many Jedi in one place had a profound impact on the Force, one that could be sensed on the other
side of the planet. Especially for someone of her strength.

Those walls of hers wobbled, there were no other words for it. Both Obi-Wan and Master Qui-Gon stiffened. It never occurred to Obi-Wan that being near the temple would in any way overwhelm Leia. That it could cause her to lose that control of hers. This close to the temple, and with so many younglings about, it was highly possible some of them could lose their minds if she cried out like she did on Tatooine.

Then that moment of weakness was gone, and her walls reinforced themselves. Leia’s fingers slid down the pane, “I wasn’t prepared,” she confessed. Obi-Wan relaxed slightly, the grief was only in her voice, not the Force.

Padme’s voice cut through all the tension, demanding and concerned. “Shmi?” she asked.

Obi-Wan’s gaze slid to the woman and saw that Padme was right to be worried. Mistress Skywalker was starting to look a little green, and even from this distance, he could see the whites of her eyes.

Both Leia and Anakin immediately switched their attention from the Temple to the woman beside them.

“I’m fine,” Mistress Skywalker protested. “I just need to give myself some time to adjust.”

Neither Leia nor Anakin looked like they believed her. Leia grabbed the woman’s elbow. “Grandmother,” she said. “It’s okay.”

Grandmother? Why did this woman insist on giving people odd nicknames? If she tried it with Obi-Wan, rude or not, he was going to insist she refrain.

Mistress Skywalker looked at Leia, a little desperately. “So many people, so many ships. How does anyone deal with this?”

The woman had spent her entire life living on the Outer Rim. Of course, this would be terribly disorienting for her. If Obi-Wan had been thinking, and not distracted by the puzzle Leia presented, he would have thought of that and suggested she take a spot where the view wasn’t quite as overwhelming.

Leia’s voice was rueful. “Time. It takes time.” Then her voice became commanding. “I want you to look at me, not out the viewport, okay?”

It was not a bad suggestion. With someone familiar to focus on, Mistress Skywalker’s mind would not be so overwhelmed with input.

The woman did as she was told, and the minute she met Leia’s eyes, her breathing started to slow down to a normal pace. She kept her gaze firmly fixed on Leia’s face. “How could you have lived here?”

She was trying to keep her voice even, but it faltered several times. And what did she mean Leia lived here? On Coruscant? Not just a visit, but actually lived here? How was it possible no one in the Order felt her?

Leia kept her voice light and breezy. “It wasn’t my first choice. But you will adjust, I promise.”

Mistress Skywalker’s voice was still shaking. “Too old. I am too old for this.”

“Mom?” Anakin asked, fear strong in his voice as he reached for her hand.
Mistress Skywalker’s gaze fell to her son. “Ani,” she said. Obi-Wan could see the resolve in those still slightly widened eyes, as she attempted to gain some control over herself. “Sorry, I was just—”

Leia cut her off. “Overwhelmed?” There was no pity or scorn in those brown eyes. “You aren’t the first, or the last, to have that reaction.”

Obi-Wan plastered on an encouraging smile. “Lady Solo is right,” and he didn’t miss the flare of irritation from Leia in the Force at the use of a title, instead of her name. “Your reaction isn’t uncommon.”

Mistress Skywalker gave him a very wobbly smile, gratitude in her voice. “Thank you. You are very kind.”

Her tone was much warmer than his simple words deserved. If he had been thinking about her welfare, then this wouldn’t have happened at all. He felt the blush creep up his face, and he ducked his head for a moment to compose himself. “It will be easier when we are on the ground,” he promised her when he had finished composing himself. He could see the walls of the hanger bay now visible from the viewports.

He looked at his Master, who was looking at Leia like if he just stared at her hard enough, all of her secrets would come pouring out of her. “Master?” he asked. “We are here.”

Master Qui-Gon’s wandering mind came back, and his eyes took in the sight of the hanger walls. “Of course,” he said. Then he looked at Anakin and Leia, who were still huddled around Shmi, lending her their strength. “I suppose this is where we leave you?”

Leia’s eyes had a desperate look in them. “Once again you would be incorrect.” She looked down at Anakin, who had a worried look on his face, “I have some errands to run,” she explained, “and I was wondering if they could go to the temple with you.”

Errand? When had she picked up a job?

That also meant Master Qui-Gon had been right. Leia was a complication that was going to be in their life a little bit longer. Perhaps it was for the best, Obi-Wan tried to reason with himself. The Jedi Council was going to want to hear from everyone about the circumstances that led to a corpse being brought to the Temple.

His master could barely contain his eagerness. “Oh?”

Leia looked like she wanted to snatch her words back. “Yes, oh,” she gritted out.

Padme looked between the two and offered. “They could come with us. I’m sure Senator Palpatine wouldn’t mind housing two more.”

For the second time in less than ten minutes, Leia’s control wobbled. But instead of a confusing riot of emotions, Obi-Wan felt a lick of icy fire glance across his shields, causing him for a moment to lose his breath.

“No,” Leia said. That savagely spoken word pulsed in time with the Force.

Padme took a step back from the woman, and Obi-Wan didn’t blame her in the least. The motion caught Leia’s attention, and she quickly focused in on the girl.

That icy fire was gone, chased by shame, and then all of those feelings were cut off. Not that they had gone away. Obi-Wan could tell that, just by looking at Leia’s face, but she was no longer
leaking them everywhere.

“Thank you, Padme,” Leia said, trying to regain her control. “But I don’t think that is a good idea.”

Padme looked shocked and hurt. “Why?” she asked, bewildered that her innocent suggestion provoked such a response. Obi-Wan shivered, it wasn’t an unreasonable question.

Leia looked startled, like she thought Padme should already know the reason why, then a smooth, easy mask fell over her features. “Because neither Shmi or Ani have any vaccinations,” she said. “And I would rather expose them to as few people as possible until that is resolved. Especially on this world.”

Obi-Wan stiffened. She was lying. Not about the vaccinations part, that rang true and fell in line of what he knew about people who owned slaves as a whole. No, where the lie was, was why Leia didn’t want Anakin and Shmi to go with Padme. Obi-Wan had seen no evidence that Leia hesitated in the slightest to inform someone when she didn’t care for them. What he had seen of the two of them together, it seemed Leia liked Padme. So, what was it about Padme’s offer that set her off?

Leia turned to Master Qui-Gon, who looked like he didn’t have a care in the world, instead of being exposed to the whiplash emotions of a rather rude Force user.

“I can pay for it of course,” she said. She could? Since when? “But I assume you have a medical wing or facility here?”

Obi-Wan expected his Master to question Leia about what was so threatening that she hadn’t wanted Anakin and Shmi around it. But no, his Master seemed much more focused on getting Anakin to the temple, and was willing to ignore her breach of manners and control.

“No need,” he said. “We, of course, will see to it.” He looked at Mistress Skywalker and bowed. “Mistress Skywalker,” he said, “if you will follow me?”

Mistress Skywalker looked worriedly at Leia, clearly uncomfortable at being thrust into a world where she had no trusted guide.

Leia gave her a smile. “Go. I promise, I won’t be long.”

Mistress Skywalker’s voice wasn’t reassured. “Whenever you say that, things end up exploding.”

Leia didn’t deny the charge, just rolled her eyes. “One time, that happened one time.” Just who was he and his master setting lose on Coruscant? Leia came forward and gave the woman a hug, “I promise, it’s just an errand. I will be back before you know it.”

Leia withdrew from the embrace and looked down at Anakin. The boy had gone back to looking out the viewscreen. “You have choices,” she told him. “Please promise me you’ll keep that in mind.”

“I promise,” he said absently.

“Old Man!” she snapped.

His attention immediately came back to her. Whatever he saw in her face, made him say in a firm, clear voice. “I promise, Leia.”

She didn’t look like she believed him. But rather than yell at the boy again, she chose to glare at Master Qui-Gon.
“What harm do you think will come to them here?” he asked her, clearly aggrieved, and coming to the end of his patience.

There was a wealth of bitterness in her tone as she laughed. “Oh, you have no idea what haunts my nightmares. And pray that you never do.”

There was something there. Something true, elusive and dangerous. But his Master was too annoyed to pay attention to such things. It was time to separate the two of them, before things really got out of hand. They were already bringing a body back to the Temple, Obi-Wan really didn’t want to be the one explaining why a brawl had broken out on the tarmac of the Jedi Temple. In a flash of insight, he came up with something that would distract Leia.

Obi-Wan kept his voice calm and soothing as he stepped forward. “Do you need transportation Lady Solo?”

It said how annoyed she was, that she didn’t react negatively to the use of a title. “Yes,” she said.

He kept his tone even. “Then may I offer you the use of one of the Jedi open aired vehicles? To better assist you.” He bowed and didn’t say, and get you away from here, so cooler heads could prevail, although he very much wished he could. “It’s the least we can do after you so graciously helped us escape from Tatooine.”

Leia was silent for a moment, and Obi-Wan kept himself mid-bow, face down, so that she couldn’t see the expression there. She let out a small huff of amusement and said. “Not bad. But next time, tone down the innocent act just a little bit.”

Blinking, he came up out of his bow. “Lady Solo?” he asked, keeping his voice deliberately confused.

“Oh,” she said reassuringly, if condescendingly, “don’t get me wrong, you are very charming. And I’m sure that youthful face has gotten you out of many a tight spot. But you are offering me the ship to get me away from your Master before I really lose my temper, we all fight, and everyone is delayed.”

This was unexpected. Up until this point she hadn’t treated him as anything but a young, and naive, student. “How did you know?” he asked.

She shrugged like it was nothing. Obi-Wan could feel Master Qui-Gon reevaluating Leia again. There was many a person who had fallen for that act, which his Master found amusing and useful.

Leia gave him a smirk. “The offer of a ship was a bit over the top,” she confessed. “But it was the eyes. Just a smidge too wide.” Sensing Obi-Wan’s bruised pride, she said in what he assumed was supposed to be a helpful tone. “I’m still taking the offer you understand. But it was well done. I think you have a great future as a negotiator.”

Obi-Wan stiffened and said defensively. “I’m already good at it.”

Leia didn’t back down. “I’m better,” she said confidently. And what, exactly, did a bounty hunter need to know about negotiation and the art of compromise? Leia probably solved all her problems with her blaster.

Before Obi-Wan could respond, she turned to Padme. “I will see you later. And I promise, I’ll have what you need.”

So, the job she had gotten was from Padme. But that still didn’t answer the question of what? And
how could Padme even afford to begin to pay her?

Padme didn’t look all that reassured. “Do you have a com that I can contact you on?”

“Don’t worry,” Leia said, waving away the girl’s concern. “I’ll find you.” Obi-Wan translated that, to Leia didn’t want to give out the frequency, so that anyone who heard it in this ship, wouldn’t be able to use it to trace her movements. It was the only reason he could think of denying Padme’s reasonable request.

Padme let her gaze fall out the open door, and the hustle and bustle she could see. “How?” she asked.

“I’m a bounty hunter, I find people for a living.”

True, if a bit boastful. Coruscant was built upon centuries of design preferences, wants, and needs. It was, at best, organized chaos that to an outsider made no sense. But then again, Leia had said she had lived here before. It was possible she might not get lost.

Leia looked at him and gestured to the door. “If you don’t mind?”

He did actually. Quite a lot, especially to being ordered around like he was a common soldier. He looked to his Master for guidance, but the infuriating man only shook his head. “You are the one who made the offer,” he said. “You are the one who has to convince the deck officer to release the ship to her.”

“Thanks for the wisdom my Master,” he mumbled. But he bowed and proceeded out the door.

For such a short woman, Leia moved incredibly fast as she stormed across the Temple’s tarmac. Obi-Wan found he almost had to run to keep up with her, despite the fact that his legs were several inches longer than hers.

“Lady Solo-” he started to say.

“Told you Padawan Kenobi, it’s Leia,” she said, without turning around or even slowing down.

“Leia,” he said, using the Force to fill his air with lungs, so he didn’t sound like he was panting. “I thought you said you have never been to the Jedi Temple.”

She snapped. “I haven’t.”

“Then how do you know where you are going?”

She came to an abrupt halt, and Obi-Wan almost ran into her back. He stopped just in time and felt something under those incredibly thick shields. She turned around to look at him, face curiously blank.

Her reaction made him uneasy. He hadn’t meant anything by his question. It had only been a gentle poke at her to let him lead and to break her out of the foul mood his Master had put her in. Such a simple question shouldn’t provoke such a response. But from her careful neutral face, he had unsettled something in her.

She stared at him for one long moment, and in an odd, detached voice she told him. “You are quite
right. I have never been to the Jedi Temple.” She gestured for him to get in front of her. “Please lead
the way.”

Obi-Wan bowed, but as he did so, he wondered on how her words could ring with the truth in the
Force, but her body was screaming that she knew where she was going. He walked past her and felt
that clear presence at his back. Even if he were deaf and blind, he would know that Leia was
following him. He tried to keep his thoughts and feelings in the Force to himself, as his mind
whirled.

Perhaps he was jumping at shadows, or his master’s clear bafflement of her. Leia had made a guess.
There were only so many ways that a tarmac could be constructed after all. One tarmac was very
much like another.

Or perhaps the Force was guiding her? She was definitely strong enough to catch its subtler rhythms
without much effort. Or perhaps in a former job she had gotten a hold of a schematic of the Temple?
It could be even as simple as that was just who she was, storming every which way like she knew
where she was going. There were a hundred reasonable explanations for how she walked this tarmac
like she had been here before.

Obi-Wan could feel something in the Force twist at his internal explanations. But it made no sense.
The Force said she wasn’t lying when she said she had never been to the Jedi Temple. Obi-Wan had
spent years using the Force to interpret body language. He wasn’t, as of yet, good at working with
that information in a timely manner, but in this case, he knew what he had seen. Leia had looked like
she knew where she was going because she had been here before. Which one was it? Master Yoda
said that the path to enlightenment, to understanding, was rarely a straight line, but this was a circle
that was eating itself.

Lost in thought, Obi-Wan continued along the path she had correctly started on. He didn’t need to
think about where he was going. Since he became Master Qui-Gon’s padawan, the Jedi hangar bays,
and the landing tarmacs, had become very familiar places to him as the two of them went on mission
after mission. His pace must have been too meandering because he slowly became aware of the
irritation permeating the Force, and the increasingly heavy, and pointed, sighs.

He stopped and turned around to ask her. “Do you have somewhere to be?”

“Yes,” she said, impatience all around her. “And not a lot of time to see to what must be done.” She
had been on this planet not even ten minutes, how did this “errand” she was running for Padme have
a pressing deadline?

For a moment, Obi-Wan was tempted to start walking again, but this time, even slower, just to annoy
her. But he prided himself on his manners, so when he turned back around, he obligingly sped up.
Not so that they were running, but at a much brisker pace. It was the easier approach then his Master
took, whose every word out of his mouth seemed to irritate her and cause her to shut down on all of
his questions. Not that Obi-Wan had done much better, getting answers out of her. But at least she
wasn’t angry with him. She was amused by him, dismissive of him, but she wasn’t mad.

It was better that way, Obi-Wan tried to tell himself. If she underestimated him, she would be more
likely to slip up, and reveal something. Not that it was necessarily going to happen. In fact, it
probably wasn’t. If what his Master said was correct, and nothing Obi-Wan had seen yet said
otherwise, Leia took secrecy to a degree that neared paranoia. But not upsetting her did improve the
chance she might let something slip.

He didn’t like any of this. The mission, the boy, the Dark Sider, whose corpse was even now being
pulled into the Jedi Temple. Leia was just the tipping point in a series of events that set Obi-Wan on
He really didn’t like the fact that Leia was so insistent that it was a Sith. He would dismiss this as a facet of her paranoia, but she sounded so tired by it. Not exultant or impassioned, but like this was something that was irritating. It was no more remarkable then foul weather happening on the day of a planned event. It was a curious attitude to have about something that had been extinct for a thousand years.

Obi-Wan especially didn’t like how they, or rather he, had gotten roped into all of this. The underhanded way the Chancellor had sent them to Naboo grated on his nerves. Yes, the Naboo had needed help, but his and Master Qui-Gon’s presence had only escalated the issue. The Trade Federation would not have invaded if they hadn’t gone there. If the Chancellor had gone about this in the proper order, things would have been better. For starters, those poor pilots that had flown them to Naboo would still be alive.

And because of that, he and Master Qui-Gon had no way to help the Queen on her testimony on the Senate floor. His master might overlook such trivialities, but Obi-Wan could not.

They approached the small building that Obi-Wan knew from long experience that whoever the deck officer was at the moment, would be, or around there. As they got closer, it suddenly occurred to Obi-Wan that in his haste to get Leia away from his master a rather important question had been overlooked by him. He stopped and turned to her.

“Now what?” she demanded.

“Do you know how to fly on Coruscant?”

She looked at him, and then there was a roll of amusement from her. “I would be a very poor bounty hunter if I didn’t know how to fly a ship, Padawan Kenobi,” she said.

“Please call me Obi-Wan, Lady Solo,” he offered, trying to put her at ease around him.

“Obi-Wan,” she repeated. “And it’s Leia.”

“Leia,” he repeated. “That wasn’t what I asked. I want to make sure that you know how to fly in Coruscant’s traffic.”

Leia’s amusement burst forth from her in a laugh. “Shouldn’t you have asked that before you offered me a ship?”

Obi-Wan could feel the blush start on the back of his neck. Leia was absolutely correct in the flaw in his thinking. “Yes,” he said, aware of how much he looked like an overeager padawan right now. “I am aware that perhaps I didn’t think this-“

Leia’s voice was rueful as she cut him off. “Don’t hurt yourself,” she said, “It was an honest mistake.” She grimaced. “And I can’t say I blame you for wanting to get me away from your Master.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “He irritates me,” she confessed.

Obi-Wan blinked. “That is rather surprising,” he said. “My Master is well known for his persuasive skills and charm.”

Leia snorted. “I distrust charming people.”

“Clearly,” Obi-Wan observed. “But I think there is a bit more than what you are telling me.”
“I also don’t like surprises,” Leia said. “When I came home two days ago, I was only looking for a
good meal and some quiet time with my family. I wasn’t expecting a pushy Jedi to be there.”

“Because of Anakin?” Obi-Wan asked blandly. He didn’t voice “Or yourself?” which he felt
deserved to be mentioned, if only to himself.

She scowled at him, but only said, “Qui-Gon wasn’t who I was expecting.”

Obi-Wan cocked his head, wondering about this woman’s abilities. Could she see into the future? It
was a rare gift, even among the strongest of them. “Who were you expecting then?”

She looked at him for a long moment, then shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. But he didn’t help
matters.”

Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. “Really? How odd. He is known as being much better at integrating
himself with-”

“Riff-raff?” Leia asked arching her own eyebrow in return.

“The locals,” Obi-Wan smoothly corrected. “In fact, it is why he sent on so many missions.”

Leia looked horrified. “If he is the best you have, that does not inspire me with confidence about the
rest of the Jedi.”

“I only meant-” Obi-Wan started to say.

Leia cut him off. “Please don’t, you are only worrying me more.”

The diplomats of the Jedi were some of the best in the galaxy. But they had a hard time relating to
the ordinary citizens of the Republic. The common person, or riffraff, as Obi-Wan was sure some of
the more arrogant members thought of them, tended to be very wary, or downright frightened of the
Jedi. The most ridiculous rumors circulated about them. About how they had bones made of
durasteel. That the Force allowed them to age backwards. Master Qui-Gon was one of the best the
Order had at soothing those fears.

Obi-Wan nodded his head, but wasn’t quite able to leave it at that. “If it makes you feel any better,
you frustrate him too. More so than any individual I have ever seen.” Perhaps save Master Dooku,
but there was a long history there, and an understanding that smoothed some of those rough edges.

Leia looked satisfied. “Good.”

“Good?” Obi-Wan looked at her puzzled. “Why such animosity towards him?”

Leia sighed and rubbed her forehead. “Because I could see how things would have gone if I hadn’t
been there, and it pisses me off.”

“Perhaps it would have been better for all of us if you hadn’t been there?” Obi-Wan asked aloud,
wondering if Leia had the even rarer ability to see what might have been.

Leia’s face paled. “No,” she said, the word was spoken softly, but there was no doubting the
vehemence in it. “Maybe in the short term, it might have been better for your Master. But for the
future…” Her mouth twisted into unhappy lines, and she looked haunted. Whatever the Force had
shown her, it had not been kind. “No, it wouldn’t have been better at all.”

While Leia used clear definitive words, her answers left Obi-Wan feeling even more confused.
“Perhaps we should table this discussion for another time,” he offered, more wanting to think on what Leia had, and more importantly, had not said, then any awareness of her deadline. “You said you were in a hurry, and I would hate to make you late.” He cleared his throat. “You were going to tell me if you knew how to fly in this planet’s airspace.”

Leia looked down at the chrono on her wrist, and scowled at the time it showed her.

“Leia?” he asked. “About your ability to fly?”

“Yes,” she said briskly, looking back up at him. “I know how to fly in Coruscant traffic. It’s been awhile, but I’ve had plenty of practice.”

And just how had this woman been on Coruscant, and by the sound of it for a good amount of time, and no one in the temple felt her? Even now, with those walls of hers, firmly in place, she felt like a small sun. And that was nothing to what she felt like on Tatooine.

Perhaps that wasn’t the best way to look at it. Because Obi-Wan hadn’t felt her on that planet when they landed. The entire day and night he had been stuck on that ship, he had meditated several times in the Force. Between worry over his Master, and annoyance at the frightened civilians he kept having to reassure, and wondering if they were about to be stranded on this planet for a long time, he had needed it to calm his frayed nerves. He had gone deep into the Force and had done so several times. Not once during any of those sessions had there been a whisper of her, or the boy.

That also didn’t make sense. On Coruscant at least, Leia would be able to hide among the overwhelming amount of life on this planet. Tatooine, with its sparse population, gave her no such cover. She should have stood out more. It wasn’t until their attacker approached the ship that he even had a hint.

“Obi-Wan?” Leia’s voice caught in his meandering thoughts. “Do you need me to take a driving test or something?”

Obi-Wan shook his head, clearing it. “No,” he said. “No, that won’t be necessary.” He gave her another bow. “If you would let me do the asking, please?”

“Sure,” she agreed lightly. “But only if you stop bowing every five seconds. I feel like I should be wearing a crown, and having a crowd of fawning attendants behind me.”

Obi-Wan felt himself stiffen. “Of course, as you wish.”

She sighed. “I meant no disrespect Padawan Kenobi,” she said formally. Her hands fell behind her back, and her spine straightened as she stood to her full height. “It’s just something that I am not comfortable with.” She flashed him a tired smile. “It’s my personal preference. I understand it is your way of showing respect, but it makes me uncomfortable.”

Obi-Wan would give her this, Leia Solo was quite direct when she let herself be, and strangely formal as well. Perhaps he should reassess her skills as a negotiator. That speech was pitch perfect for asserting her own preferences, without giving offense.

He nodded his head, and they continued to make their way to the edge of the tarmac. For the first time today, the Force was on his side. The man who was wearing the bright orange uniform to distinguish him from the other techs and pilots running around was Lammic. He was the most reasonable of all the officers that Obi-Wan knew.

It still took some convincing. Lammic was less than pleased that Obi-Wan wanted to loan a day ship to an unknown civilian, for purposes unknown, and to go who knew where.
Leia was of no help. She just watched the interlude between him and Lammic, eyes bright with interest. It wasn’t until Obi-Wan’s third assurance that no, she wouldn’t make off with it, and if she did, Lammic could hold Obi-Wan personally responsible for whatever damage she did to the ship, or with it, did the man relent.

Lammic grunted and looked Leia up and down. “You good with the T-13 Airspeeder?”

Leia nodded her head. “That will be fine,” she said.

Lammic pointed a finger at Obi-Wan. “She better bring it back,” he huffed and took a few steps to go talk to one of the techs milling about.

Obi-Wan looked at Leia. “You didn’t bite his head off for his lack of manners,” he observed.

She gave him an amused smile. “I know better than to get between a man and his true love.”

Obi-Wan was taken aback. “You can’t possibly mean Lammic harbors romantic feelings towards me?”

Leia looked at him and then burst out laughing. “The ships,” she said, in between giggles, “his love is the ships.” She gave him an amused side-eye glance. “Although if he was interested in you, I wouldn’t blame him.”

Obi-Wan found himself blushing bright red. “I-” he stammered.

She waved a hand. “And now I’ve embarrassed you,” she said. “My apologies. I was only pointing out that you are very easy on the eyes. I wasn’t trying to do anything more.”

“Padawan Kenobi!” Lammic bellowed, and Obi-Wan had never been so grateful for an interruption in his life. “Your ship is ready.”

“That’s my cue,” Leia said. Then her face became somber and serious. “Thank you, Obi-Wan. I really do appreciate the ride.”

He started to bow, stopped himself, and gave a nod of his head instead. “May the Force be with you in your endeavor, Leia Solo.”

She looked at him thoughtfully for a second. “I certainly hope so,” she said, and then walked quickly away. On her way there, she gave a nod of thanks to Lammic, and climbed into the cockpit, and took off. She didn’t even hesitate, just flew off west, toward the industrial sector. Once again, she looked like she knew where she was going.

Obi-Wan turned to leave, but Lammic called out. “Padawan Kenobi, there has been no report filed for the mission.”

Obi-Wan turned around startled. Why would the man care about a report? “No one has done what?” he asked.

“Filed a report,” Lammic was looking at him, nothing on his face. But Obi-Wan could see the dread build up in the man shoulders. “I couldn’t help but notice you are here, and the ship, along with my pilots, are not.”

Obi-Wan cursed the slowness of bureaucracy and the Council’s irritation at Qui-Gon. Because of those two factors, this had not been taken care of. Instead of being told in a gentle manner, Lammic was going to learn about this in a crowded, and busy tarmac.
Obi-Wan gave the man a low bow. “My apologies Deck Officer Lammic,” he started to say, but the man cut him off.

“They’re dead, aren’t they?” There was a sharp sense of finality in those words. He had known something was amiss, but he was hoping the losses were confined only to the ship.

“Yes, I am afraid they are.”

The man’s eyes closed briefly. “Damn,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry you were left in suspense about what happened to them,” Obi-Wan offered lamely. “We docked on the Trade Federation ship. While my Master and I were waiting for negotiations to begin, they destroyed the ship, and the crew along with it.”


Obi-Wan felt his shoulders straighten at the implied insult. “Of course, they will get justice.”

Lammic didn’t look convinced. “The Trade Federation has a long reach, Padawan Kenobi.”

“The Jedi are not without their resources,” Obi-Wan said, offended that the man thought that the Jedi would just let this go. Then his indignation dripped away as he noted the tightness around Lammic’s eyes. He was a man who took his responsibilities seriously. And the crew that had died, they had been his men, part of what he was tasked to look after. What he was saying now, out of grief and anger, shouldn’t be held against him.

Obi-Wan shifted from foot to foot, trying to think of some way to offer help. “If you want, I can inform the pilot’s families?”

The Deck Officer shook his head. “No, I’ll do it.”

“But they were lost on my mission-” Obi-Wan protested.

The man gave him a long look. “Begging your pardon Padawan, the Jedi are good people. But you all don’t quite handle grief the same way we do. I’ve had Knights and Padawans handle this before, and it did not go well. I’ll take care of it.”

Obi-Wan wanted to protest. It wasn’t that the Jedi didn’t feel grief. They did, but they had learned to detach themselves from it, or better yet, give it to the Force. But he didn’t want to cause any more pain. In all likelihood, this news would be received better from a known entity, rather than a complete stranger, no matter how well-intentioned that stranger was.

“If you change your mind, please don’t hesitate to call me,” he offered.

Lammic waved him away, and Obi-Wan turned to leave, so that he could find his master and they could give their report to the council. As if his day hadn’t been hard enough already.

After Obi-Wan entered the Temple, and called his master on his com to learn where he was, he wasn’t surprised to learn that his Master hadn’t done the smart thing and dropped the Skywalkers off at the infirmary. Disappointed, but not surprised. No, his stubborn Master was being his usual irritating self. He was still there, in the infirmary, with them. Where his priorities had gone, Obi-Wan
Obi-Wan sighed and headed to the infirmary that Master Qui-Gon told him he was in. When the door opened, he was treated to the sight of Mistress Skywalker, and Anakin, sitting on the same biobed. Doctor Nema was standing in front of them, patiently explaining to Mistress Skywalker the list of vaccinations she wanted to start off with and their possible side effects. Mistress Skywalker was looking a little pale. If it was because of the strangeness of her surroundings, or the amount of information that was being dropped on her head, Obi-Wan wasn’t sure.

And there, watching Anakin intently, was Master Qui-Gon.

“Master,” Obi-Wan said, as he came up to him. “The council isn’t going to be happy that you made them wait,” he said softly so the two on the bed couldn’t overhear him.

“The Council is never happy with me,” Master Qui-Gon pointed out. And then his eyes flicked to the back of the infirmary, and to the heavy metal door that was firmly shut. It was where the Jedi stored their dead, until a funeral could be held. Obi-Wan swallowed hard, perhaps he had been a bit hasty in his judgment. There were other reasons, besides the Skywalkers, that his Master would need to be in the infirmary.

Noting where he was looking, Master Qui-Gon leaned closer to Obi-Wan and whispered. “They took the body and have started the investigation process. I was assured it should only take a few hours before we start getting preliminary results.”

Obi-Wan nodded his head. “Good,” he said.

Then in a louder voice, one the Skywalkers could overhear, Master Qui-Gon asked. “Did Leia get off alright?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said. Neither Skywalker seemed to be paying attention. Mistress Skywalker was still listening to Doctor Nema, and Anakin was looking behind the doctor, to the medical droid, with keen interest.

“I would also like to draw some blood, if that is alright with you, Mistress Skywalker,” Doctor Nema said.

Mistress Skywalker shook her head. “It’s Shmi,” she said in a soft voice. “I’m mistress of nothing.”

Master Qui-Gon’s voice was gentle. “That is not true Shmi,” he said kindly, walking up to the pair. “You are most definitely the mistress of yourself now.”

Mistress Skywalker turned that overwhelmed face to him, and then she gave a long slow blink. “Yes,” she said slowly, “I am, aren’t I?” Her eyes fell over his shoulder, and she spotted Obi-Wan. “Padawan Kenobi,” she said startled, “I didn’t see you come in.”

She started to get up, to greet him, Obi-Wan realized, and he quickly shook his head. “Please stay seated, Lady Skywalker,” he said, following up behind his Master. “I was just checking in with Master Qui-Gon.”

She gave him a wan smile “Of course,” she said. “I should have realized.” Then her smile wobbled a bit. “And please, it’s Shmi. Not Lady, or Mistress, just Shmi.”

Obi-Wan bowed. “Of course, Shmi,” he said, “but only if I can be Obi-Wan, not Padawan Kenobi.”

That smile strengthened in sincerity. “That would be nice, thank you,” she said.
Beside her, Anakin frowned up at her. “Why not?” he asked his mother. “Why can’t you be those things?”

That smile became sad. “Because I would like to cling to some things that are familiar. Everything is moving very fast around me Ani, I need some guideposts.”

He looked thoughtfully at her and then nodded his head. “Okay, that makes sense.” Then he looked at Doctor Nema. “If you want our blood, are you going to use the same thingy Mister Qui-Gon did?”

Doctor Nema blinked, and her yellow skin deepened in color. Obi-Wan wasn’t too alarmed, with his long familiarity with her he knew it was just a sign she was curious, not angry or embarrassed, like if she had been a human, “Why yes, of course,” she said. “How else would I get samples of your blood?”

“You cut us,” Anakin said matter a factly.

Even Master Qui-Gon blanched at that easy tone to something that should never be condoned.

Doctor Nema took in one long breath, and she looked at both Master Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan with questions in her eyes.

“Shmi and Anakin are former slaves from the Outer Rim,” Master Qui-Gon explained. He didn’t even bother naming the planet. There was no point, Doctor Nema probably had never even heard of it. The only reason Obi-Wan was aware of Tatooine before this disastrous mission, was because he knew that Jabba, one of the more powerful players in the Hutt syndicate, lived there.

Doctor Nema closed her eyes, and Obi-Wan could feel the faintest flicker in the Force as she pushed her anger out of her. She opened them back up and looked Anakin square in the face. “No one here, in this infirmary, will ever do anything to you without your consent and knowledge, young one. And if you are unable to give that consent, your mother will be asked.”

Anakin stared at her and then nodded his head.

“Now that we have that understanding, the reason I wish to draw your blood is to check for any possible infections. I would also like to get a baseline of your physiology, and check to make sure all your organs are doing what they are supposed to be doing.” She looked at Shmi. “Do you have any questions?”

“Are you going to keep the blood?” Shmi asked. “Mine and Ani’s?”

Doctor Nema blinked rapidly. “I can, if that is your preference,” she said. “But it is not standard procedure, no. I do however store the results from the tests I run, so I can compare to them later, if I need to.”

Shmi shook her head. “No,” she said softly. “Please destroy mine.”

“And mine,” Anakin said.

Obi-Wan supposed that it could be a local custom. There were a lot of cultures that had issues with bodily fluids and the proper disposal of them. But, given every other hidden complication that had appeared over the last few days, he doubted it was going to be something as simple as that. There was something that the two of them, more than likely Shmi, with Anakin following her lead, that they didn’t want the Jedi to know.

Doctor Nema pulled out her hypospray. “This is what I will use,” she said, handing it over to Shmi so she could inspect it. The woman brought it up and looked at it from several angles. She nodded
her head and handed it to her son, who also looked at it.

“Do I have your permission to draw blood, and run these tests?” she asked as she took the hypospray back. Both Shmi and Ani nodded. She gave them a beatific smile, “Good, roll up one sleeve please.”

They both did as she asked, and the medical droid came forward, applying an antiseptic to where Doctor Nema would apply the device. Shmi watched the droid with fearful eyes, but she didn’t say anything.

Doctor Nema waited until he was done, and back behind her. “I’m afraid this will sting a bit,” she said, as she took a step towards Shmi. Shmi nodded her head in permission, and Doctor Nema applied the spray. Shmi braced herself, and then her eyes were following Doctor Nema as she pulled back, disbelief on her face.

“All done,” the doctor told her cheerfully, and she turned to Anakin, who was watching the procedure with wide eyes. He too, said nothing when the doctor applied the hypospray, but his face did scrunch up when she activated it.

“There we go,” Doctor Nema said, turning around to load the samples into the droid to analyze. She grabbed some bandages from the nearby table and went back over to the pair to apply them to the small wounds.

Master Qui-Gon cleared his throat. “Shmi?” he asked.

“Yes?” The woman’s voice was faint, and she was paying close attention to Doctor Nema as she applied a bandage to Anakin.

“Would it be alright if we ran another test on Anakin?” he asked.

The woman blinked and turned a worried face to Master Qui-Gon. “What kind of test?”

“We just want to see what his midi-chlorian count is,” Master Qui-Gon assured her.

“I can do it with the blood I’ve already drawn,” Doctor Nema assured Anakin, who didn’t look thrilled about being poked again.

“Why do you want to know such a thing?” Shmi asked. “Is Ani in some kind of danger?”

“No, no.” Master Qui-Gon assured her. “It’s a blood test we perform to see how much potential someone has in the Force.”


“I want to take the test,” he said firmly.

Shmi’s lips flattened. “Leia said to think about it,” she reminded the boy.

“And I am,” he said. “But this isn’t a promise. Just a test.”

She studied him for a moment, then nodded her head, “Alright, Ani.”

“It won’t take but a moment,” Doctor Nema said with a smile. She went to the droid, and obligingly, Anakin’s sample of blood popped out. Taking it with her, Doctor Nema went into the back of the room to enter the vial in an analyzer. For security purposes, the droids in the temple didn’t have the programming to do this test. It was too easy to crack their software and steal the program. They were safe in the Temple, of course. But so many of them ran errands and left the grounds, it was just easier
to make sure they couldn’t do it, then erase the program every time they left.

There was a wave of shock permeating in the Force, and Obi-Wan heard a faint. “Oh,” come from the doctor.

Anakin’s head popped up, and he looked curiously at Doctor Nema’s back. Shmi followed her son’s gaze. “Is everything alright?” she asked.

“I-,” Doctor Nema said as she turned around, and gave Shmi a bright smile. “No, there is nothing wrong. Your son just has a lot of potential.” Then her gaze fell on Master Qui-Gon. She cleared her throat and asked. “This is confirmation for you, isn’t it?”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Can I have a copy of that please?” he asked, holding his hand out.

Doctor Nema looked at him. “Of cou-“ she cut herself off. She turned to Shmi and Anakin. “Is it alright if I share these results with Master Qui-Gon?”

Strictly speaking, she didn’t need permission to share midi-chlorian counts with a Jedi Master. The Republic’s medical privacy laws did not apply to the results of those tests. But Obi-Wan could appreciate that she was keeping her word to Anakin and Shmi about being in control of who had access to that information.

Shmi looked at Anakin, who nodded his head.

Doctor Nema turned around, and very quickly had the data crystal in her hand. Handing it off to Master Qui-Gon she looked at him. “You are going to have a fight on your hands if you want him trained as a Jedi,” she said quietly, so that her patients couldn’t overhear her.

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “I am aware,” his hand tightened over the data crystal. “Which is why I would like to be as armed as possible.” Raising his voice, he addressed the Skywalkers. “I’m afraid I have to leave you for a bit.”

Shmi looked nervously around her. “Where?” she asked.

Master Qui-Gon gave her a reassuring smile. “I’m not leaving the Temple,” he assured Shmi. “I just need to give my report to the Jedi Council about the man who attacked us on Tatooine.”

Anakin shivered at the reminder of the man, and Shmi put her arm around him. “Of course,” she said, giving a kiss to the top of her son’s head. “Thank you for seeing me this far.”

Master Qui-Gon gave her a bow. “It was my pleasure,” he told her. “And I will be back soon, I promise.”

Doctor Nema cleared her throat. “I still need to give you your vaccines,” she reminded the pair. Anakin made a face at that. “It would not be wise for you to start wandering the Temple without them.”

Master Qui-Gon turned to Doctor Nema. “Can I trust them in your care?”

“So of course,” Doctor Nema said. “I’m sure I can find some food for them after I give them their shots.”

“Thank you,” Master Qui-Gon said and bowed to her. But before they could leave, Anakin spoke up.
“Mister Qui-Gon, sir?”

Master Qui-Gon turned. “Yes, Anakin?”

Obi-Wan barely managed to keep back the groan. At this rate, they were never going to get to the Council meeting.

“Do you know where Padme is?” Anakin asked.

“I-“ Master Qui-Gon frowned. “No, I do not. Is there some message you would like me to pass along to her, when I do see her?”

“Oh,” the boy looked downcast. “No, I just wanted to talk to her.”

“Well-“ Master Qui-Gon started to pacify the boy, but in the interest of time, Obi-Wan consulted his com unit. He used it to pull up the floor schedule of the Senate today. A special session had been called for the Naboo after all. He might not be able to tell the boy where Padme was, but he could find out where Queen Amidala was.

“Chancellor Valorum has invited Queen Amidala to speak to the Senate in an hour,” he told Anakin briskly. “I’m sure that Padme is currently helping her get ready, but after that, she might be free.”

Anakin brightened considerably. “Oh!” he said. “Thank you, Obi-Wan!”

“Your welcome,” and then he turned to his Master, and with his face, expressed as clearly as he could without saying a word, ‘Can we go now?’.

His Master seemed amused, but he bowed his head, and together they finally left the medical bay to give their report to the Council.

The waiting room outside of the Jedi High Council was a serene a place as it ever was. The aggravated Master who was waiting for them, was not.

“What the hell did you do Qui-Gon?” Master Windu demanded, arms crossed across his chest.

His Master only blinked, “Do?” he asked innocently. “Only what I was asked to.”

Master Windu’s lip curled, “Do not even start-“

But he was cut off by the wispy voice of Master Yaddle. “Returned you have,” she said voice amused as she peered up at both of them,

“Yes, Master Yaddle,” Qui-Gon said bowing towards her.

“An interesting trip, it was?”

“Interesting!” Master Windu’s voice was higher than it should have been. “Is that what we are calling it?”

Master Qui-Gon only looked mildly amused. Obi-Wan supposed it was long practice. Or perhaps it was because his Master had one of those personalities that relished confrontation. Obi-Wan wasn’t even the one in trouble, and he could feel his stomach twisting into knots. He didn’t like directly
challenging the council, especially when there were better ways to get what you wanted.

“This mission was fully sanctioned-” Master Qui-Gon began to say, but he was cut off by Master Gallia’s firm voice floating from the depths of the council room

“Perhaps we should all remember decorum?” she asked, voice withering with scorn. “And not scream at each other in the hallways like rambunctious younglings?”

A muscle in Master Windu’s jaw clenched, and he swirled around and stalked back into the Council room. Master Yaddle only looked them up and down.

“Injured, are either of you?” she asked.

“We are fine, Master Yaddle,” Obi-Wan assured her, glad someone remembered to ask. Master Yaddle nodded and made her way into the council room.

“This is going to be fun,” Obi-Wan muttered under his breath.

“Quite,” Master Qui-Gon agreed. But his master had that anticipatory look on his face that said he knew he was about to battle with the Council and enjoy every second of it.

They both came into the room and made their bows to the semi-circle of all the masters. Master Yoda looked at them, his cane making circles in front of his seat, but he didn’t start the questioning, it was Master Ki-Adi-Mundi who opened his mouth first.

“You go too far, Qui-Gon,” he admonished, as the council doors came to a soft close behind them.

“In what way?” Master Qui-Gon asked, nothing in his voice betraying that he had the slightest idea why any of them would be upset with him.

“First you get involved in a trade dispute, without the Senate’s approval-“ Master Windu started to say.

“At the Chancellor’s request,” Qui-Gon interrupted smoothly. “I thought it best not to refuse him. You all agreed.”

“Before we knew that Valorum was circumventing the proper channels,” Master Billaba’s voice was openly chiding.

“I do not follow the intricacies of political power plays in the Senate,” his Master’s voice was smooth as milk. “It wasn’t an improper thing. He wasn’t asking me to overthrow a government, or spy on a fractious rival, or even coordinate a mass relief effort which would require the cooperation and coordination of dozens of other officials. All he wanted, was my help in mediating a dispute. Is that not the purpose of the Jedi?”

“Yes, it is, and you know it.” Master Windu was practically growling. “But how does mediating a dispute involve removing a sitting monarch from her planet?”

“The Trade Federation had just invaded her world,” Master Qui-Gon’s arms clasped behind his back. “It was for her own safety that she be removed from the planet.” His Master was neatly sidestepping the issue that it had been his suggestion that she leave.

“And how did that lead to you being on a planet controlled by the Hutts?” Master Piell asked, voice scathing, his one eye glittering in annoyance.
“The hyperspace engine on Her Majesty’s ship was damaged when we got through the blockade,” Master Qui-Gon’s voice didn’t lose its calm, soothing manner. Obi-Wan would be more impressed with his Master’s restraint if he didn’t know he did it to irritate the council members more. “Tatooine was the closest planet we could find that didn’t have a Trade Federation presence.”

“Then why didn’t you contact us?” Master Plo Koon asked mildly, his voice raspy through his breathing mask.

“Because the ship we escaped on is a pleasure vessel. There was no way to ensure that any communication I sent out wouldn’t be intercepted,” his Master started to look amused with the various council members, who were even now starting to grind their teeth. “And with no hyperspace engine, we could very quickly be discovered and caught. I thought silence was our best option.”

Master Yaddle let out a cackle. “A reasonable answer, Master Qui-Gon has, always,” she told Master Koon approvingly.

“Yes,” Master Mundi agreed sourly. “When it is all broken down, he does.” He glared at Master Qui-Gon. “No matter how ludicrous the situation that all those little ‘reasonable’ events add up to.”

Master Qui-Gon gave a bow. “As you say, Masters,” he said.

Master Piell snorted. “I don’t care how smooth your tongue Qui-Gon,” he said. “I would love to hear your ‘reasonable excuse’ for coming back to the Temple, with a body.”

“I did not kill him,” Master Qui-Gon said.

“Well, if you didn’t kill him, who did?” Master Windu’s voice was full of exasperation. “And why did you bring him back here?”

“A bounty hunter by the name of Leia Solo.” Master Qui-Gon looked like he was taking a walk through the Room of the Thousand Fountains, not facing down a council of some of the most respected members in the galaxy, most of who were in various degrees of annoyed with him. “And I brought him back here because he was after Her Majesty. I felt that we would be able to do a better job of investigating whatever clues his clothes and body would offer up here at the Temple.”

Master Windu started rubbing his forehead. “And would this bounty hunter be the same woman your padawan authorized the loan of one of the Jedi’s day transports to?”

Master Qui-Gon didn’t look all that surprised that they knew that. “Yes.”

Master Rancisis’ beard shook as he hissed. “We know nothing of her. She could be even now selling it-”

Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “No,” and that condescending air vanished as he looked the Thisspiasian in the face. “Her charges are here in the Temple, and she won’t abandon them.”

Master Gallia’s face became concerned. “Are you speaking of the two you brought to our infirmary?”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “Yes. Anakin and Shmi Skywalker. Anakin was instrumental in our ability to secure the parts we needed for her Majesty’s ship.”

“And how is this Leia connected to them?” she asked, brown eyes serious. “Are they part of a job for her?”
“No,” Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “They are both former slaves. No one would pay her to protect them.”

Master Gallia’s brow furrowed, and the white tendrils on her head quivered in her confusion. “Are they family?”

“I don’t know,” Master Qui-Gon admitted.

Master Piell leaned forward. “If you don’t know that, then do you know why Solo needed a transport?”

Master Qui-Gon was starting to look embarrassed. “I don’t actually know that either.”

Master Piell sank back into his seat. “Well, what do you know?”

Master Qui-Gon shrugged. “Not much.” Then he gave the council a wide grin. “But acknowledging that, as Master Yoda is fond of saying, is the path to enlightenment.”

Master Rancisis’ face twisted in disappointment. “You are too glib,” he warned, his forked tongue making his words sibilant. “This is neither the place nor the time. If you had followed proper procedure, we would not once again, be cleaning up your mess.”

“I did follow proper procedure, right up until the Trade Federation blew up my transport,” Master Qui-Gon said quietly.

The council had nothing to say to that quiet truth.

Obi-Wan stepped forward. “Not all of this is Master Qui-Gon’s doing.” All eyes swiveled to him, and Obi-Wan by long habit shoved all his nervousness and anxiety aside. He needed to appear calm and collected, even though he was breaking protocol by speaking like this. “I was the one who offered Leia the ship, Masters. She said that she needed to run an errand. I’m assuming it is on behalf of the Queen, since she told one of the handmaidens that she would find her when she got what she needed.”

“Oh, so now we are getting involved in politics?” Master Rancisis’ voice was scathing. There murmurs among the other council members as they too conveyed their displeasure. Master Koth and Master Koon, weren’t in that group, Obi-Wan was interested to note, they looked quietly pleased.

Master Yoda rapped his stick on the floor, and all conversation died down. “Concerning this all is,” he acknowledged, eyes intent on Master Qui-Gon. “But outside the lines, Master Qui-Gon has always been.” All the council members focused on the Grand Master of the Jedi Order as he proclaimed. “But our main concern, these trifles are not.”

Master Qui-Gon’s face lost its amused, detached air. “No,” he said, “I didn’t think it was.” He took a deep breath in. “With your permission My Master, I have encountered a vergence in the Force.”

Master Yoda leaned forward. “A vergence, you say?”

Master Qui-Gon nodded.

“Located around a person?” Master Windu’s voice was disbelieving. Obi-Wan could understand why. Such events in the Force were rare. Obi-Wan had never heard of it centering around a person, never mind two. But there was no denying the swirl of power around Leia Solo and Anakin Skywalker.
“Yes,” Master Qui-Gon said. “Or perhaps I should say, persons.” The rest of the council looked disbelieving, but Master Yoda only looked like he had something confirmed that he suspected.

Master Billaba’s voice was sharp and openly challenging. “So, you know what caused us to receive dozens of panicked calls regarding someone screaming in the Force.”

Only dozens? Obi-Wan was surprised it wasn’t more.

“Hear her I did,” Master Yoda said, and everyone in the council looked at him. This was something the other council members didn’t know, if the shocked looks on their faces were anything to go by.

Master Yoda only had eyes for Master Qui-Gon though. “In clear words, she shouted.” Then a look of mischievousness crossed over his face. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if he really wanted to pull everyone’s tail or was trying to cover his own unease. It was very hard to tell with Master Yoda. “Old Man, who is that? As old as I, hmm?”

Obi-Wan felt the floor tilt slightly under his feet. Coruscant was on the other side of the galaxy from Tatooine, and he had heard what Leia has said, not just the emotion?

Master Qui-Gon looked Master Yoda directly in the eyes. “She was talking to Anakin,” he said. “She refers to him as Old Man.”

“The boy?” Master Yoda asked, and Master Qui-Gon nodded.

“Hmm,” Master Yoda looked thoughtful. “Powerful she is.”

“Yes,” Master Qui-Gon agreed. “She is. But I don’t think Leia is aware of just how powerful.”

“How could she have missed that?” Master Gallia’s smooth voice was just this side of scandalized. “She must have had some training. No matter how powerful, no Force Sensitive is capable of talking in the Force without someone to guide them.”

Master Qui-Gon scowled, “I don’t know,” he said. “But that isn’t the only thing about her that doesn’t fit. She is an….oddity.”

Master Windu looked intrigued, “How so?” he asked.

“She is a bounty hunter on the Outer Rim who has clearly had a classically trained education. She is capable of the most incredible feats in the Force, yet claims she has little training.” Master Qui-Gon looked at them. “And she refuses to answer even the most basic questions about any of it.”

Master Yoda looked troubled, “Not possible, to speak so clearly, from so far away.”

“Yet she did it,” Qui-Gon said. “And then there is the boy.”

“What about him?” Master Windu asked, annoyance all gone at the mystery that Master Qui-Gon had brought them all.

Master Qui-Gon bowed, “Perhaps I should start from the beginning?”

The council wasn’t happy with Master Qui-Gon’s report. That wasn’t new, they generally were never happy with Master Qui-Gon’s reports. He and Obi-Wan were one of the most effective teams
the Jedi currently had in the field, there was no way anyone could deny that. But Obi-Wan wondered why the council never thought to pair that effectiveness with the fact that Master Qui-Gon was willing to flout the rules of decorum.

None of their previous lectures by the council came close to this one though. When Master Qui-Gon explained their need for funds, and the fact that the locals wouldn’t accept Republic dataries, they had all been aghast. It was no secret that the Outer Rim was falling further and further away from Republic control, but none of them had known it was so bad that Republic currency was no longer accepted. That the Hutts now had full and complete control of the Outer Rim’s economy was troubling. And that the Senate, would probably once again, deny the Jedi’s request to truly crack down on the illegal operations that allowed this situation to flourish.

Then Master Qui-Gon explained how he had met Anakin Skywalker, who had offered them shelter against an incoming sandstorm in his family home. The council was fairly neutral about that fact, until he described meeting Leia. Master Qui-Gon recounted reaching out into the Force, to verify if Leia was telling the truth about why she was in the Skywalker’s home, and encountering some of the strongest mental shields he had ever felt. At learning that, several of the council members lost that studied neutral expression they usually wore.

And even those who were trying to remain neutral became visibly upset when Master Qui-Gon told them that Anakin had proudly informed him, that he, a nine-year-old human child, participated in pod races. Humans didn’t, on the whole, have the reflexes to navigate such races. They were also not very happy that Master Qui-Gon had accepted Anakin’s offer to race in the Boonta Eve classic to win them the parts they needed, but even Master Mundi could acknowledge that Master Qui-Gon had little choice but to accept the offer of help.

Master Qui-Gon related the experience of watching Leia’s emotions synch up with Anakin’s in the Force on the street. How they had almost hidden it from him. And most puzzling of all, how that had even happened in the first place. Close blood family members, who were both Force-sensitive, could do that. But Shmi had denied Master Qui-Gon’s suggestion that Leia was her sister, and Leia herself had admitted that she had only met the family last year. So how was what Master Qui-Gon saw possible?

So, when Master Qui-Gon relayed the confrontation he had with Leia about testing Anakin’s midi-chlorian count, they couldn’t say they weren’t warned about the fact that it was clear Leia knew more about midi-chlorians than any of them were comfortable with an outsider possessing.

They were shocked when Obi-Wan recounted the number he had found when he ran his test. Even Master Yoda blinked, when Master Qui-Gon handed him the data chip that contained the same number that Doctor Nema had found in her results.

But all of their unease and squirming was nothing, nothing, on the reaction to learning that Master Qui-Gon had bet on said pod race to win Anakin. That little fact had produced a lot of yelling. Even Master Yaddle, who normally was more lenient with them, looked disappointed.

Obi-Wan had a feeling that after all of this was over, and they were done with their duty of protecting the Queen, Master Qui-Gon was going to be the subject of a very long investigation into his actions. The Senate had severely curtailed the Jedi’s ability to confront the problem of slavery on the Outer Rim, and there were strict rules in place to make sure that the Jedi didn’t subvert the system in this very way.

No matter how strong the boy was in the Force, to have a Jedi procuring a slave, was a major risk that would expose them to more oversight by the Senate. Either the Jedi did something now, about what Master Qui-Gon had done, or the Senate would, when it came out. And it would come out, it
was amazing how quickly things that had gone wrong on missions became fodder for the Senate.

But when Master Qui-Gon got to the attack he experienced outside the ship, that was when things
got really tense. They were even less happy when Master Qui-Gon explained who he thought the
body that was even now being dissected for information was.

“He was trained in the Jedi arts, my only conclusion can be that he was a Sith Lord.”

“Impossible,” Master Mundi breathed, both disbelief and horror in his voice. “The Sith have been
extinct for a millennium.”

Mace’s voice was also doubting. “I do not believe the Sith could have returned without us knowing.”

Troubled Master Yoda pointed out. “Ahh, hard to see the Dark Side is.”

Master Qui-Gon nodded his head in agreement.

“And you Padawan Kenobi?” Master Koon asked. “What is your assessment?”

“I didn’t see the fight between Master Qui-Gon and his attacker,” Obi-Wan confessed, looking at the
Master. “But I did feel it.”

Master Windu’s voice was curt. ‘Explain.”

“The Force became….cold, volatile, before he showed up.” He swallowed hard and fought back a
shiver. “It’s like nothing I have ever felt.”


Master Poof’s long neck wobbled. “There are other Dark Side user sects in the galaxy. They are
rare,” he admitted, “but they do exist.” He peered into Master Qui-Gon’s eyes. “What made you
think he was a Sith in the first place, and not one of them?”

Master Qui-Gon’s mouth twitched. “Leia.”

Master Poof’s head reared back slightly. “I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“After she killed him, Leia called him a Sith,” Master Qui-Gon said.

“She is mistaken,” Master Mundi said.

“She doesn’t believe she is,” Master Qui-Gon said simply,

“So, you are taking the word of a bounty hunter,” Master Rancisis’ voice was full of suspicion.

“I do when she is right,” Master Qui-Gon said evenly.

“And why,” Master Piell asked gruffly, “are you so willing to believe someone operating under such
an obvious alias?”

Master Qui-Gon actually looked amused. “If it’s an alias, it’s not hers. She told me the name
belonged to her husband.”

“And where is he in all of this?” Master Windu asked. “Or did you bring him along too?”

The amusement faded. “Dead,” Master Qui-Gon said softly, “although I don’t know how or when.”
“And where is she now?” Master Billaba wanted to know.

“I do not know,” Master Qui-Gon admitted. “But she will be back.”

“You are showing more confidence then I would,” Master Piell grumbled.

Master Qui-Gon looked at the short Master. “Anakin and Shmi are here, in the Temple. She won’t abandon them.”

Obi-Wan stepped forward. “I agree with Master Qui-Gon. Even in the short time I’ve known her, it is obvious she is attached to those two.”

“You’re worried about her motives,” Master Koon observed.

“Yes,” Master Qui-Gon straightened his shoulders. “And by her refusal to answer questions, and her abilities, and her skills. Nothing about her makes sense.”

“But believe you do,” Master Yoda said, and there was a hint of understanding in his voice. “Even with all your doubts, believe her, you do.”

“Yes, my Master, I do.”

“Why?” Master Windu looked frustrated. “What do you really know about this woman?”

“That she has been on Tatooine for about a year. That she quotes pre-sith war philosophers to win an argument. That she doesn’t like the Trade Federation. That she is quite handy with a blaster.” Master Qui-Gon crossed his arms over his chest. “And she is very fond of long showers.”

“Why do you know that?” Master Poof sounded scandalized.

Obi-Wan, once again, was forced to defend his master, “I told him, Masters,” he said. “I encountered Leia in the Queen’s ship just as she was exiting the fresher.”

Master Poof looked slightly mollified. He could be quite the prude sometimes about the most basic of biological facts.

Master Rancisis’ tail flicked back and forth along the floor. “Why such faith in the word of someone you know so little about?”

Master Qui-Gon shook his head. “She exists, Masters. Leia is a powerful and trained Force user, and we have no idea where she came from. Is it so inconceivable she might know more than us?” He looked around them, and his voice became chiding. “Arrogance is not the Jedi way.”

Master Yoda let out a chuckle. “Speak of arrogance, you do?”

Master Qui-Gon’s face revealed nothing. “I do.”

“Hmph,” Master Yoda grumped. “Call out in others, what exists in yourself.” He tapped his fingers on his cane. “Revealed your opinion is Master Qui-Gon,” he said as he pointed his finger at the man in reprimand. The rest of the council members looked at him in confusion.

“As you say Master Yoda,” Master Qui-Gon said back evenly. “But I can only go by what proof is in front of me. Is it arrogance, or surety?”

“A legend it is,” Master Yoda said.
Then Master Windu’s face took on a look of comprehension. “This isn’t about Leia,” he said, looking at Master Qui-Gon incredulously. “It’s about the boy.”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “Yes,” he said. “It is.”

Master Gallia’s voice was confused. “What are you all talking about?”

Master Windu turned to her. “Qui-Gon thinks he’s has found the Chosen One.” He turned back to Master Qui-Gon. “You think he is the one who will bring balance to the Force.”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “I do,” he said.

Now the council looked concerned for Master Qui-Gon’s sanity. Not that Obi-Wan could blame them. He had never understood his Master’s preoccupation with that old legend.

“I request that Anakin be tested,” Master Qui-Gon said.

“Oh?” Master Yoda’s voice was openly mocking. “Trained as a Jedi, you request for him, hmm?”

“I don’t presume.” Master Qui-Gon said.


“Finding him was the will of the Force,” Master Qui-Gon said. “I have no doubt of that.”

“And where does Solo fit into all of this?” Master Gallia asked.

“I do not know,” Master Qui-Gon admitted, “but you cannot deny the strength that both of them have shown.” He gestured to the crystal now in Master Billba’s hands. “You’ve seen the numbers, Anakin’s cells have the highest concentration of midi-chlorians I’ve seen in a life form.”

Master Gallia looked intrigued and leaned forward. “And Solo? Did you run a count on her?”

“I did not ask if I could,” Master Qui-Gon said, and Obi-Wan barely kept his snort to himself. More like his Master knew if he had, Leia would automatically refuse, so there was no point in doing so. “But she led me to believe that she knows what it is.”

That produced more mutterings of concern from the council, but no one was yelling, so that was an improvement.

Master Windu sighed, probably well aware it was better to give in on this point, then to refuse a cursory glance at Anakin. “Bring him before us, then. And when Lady Solo returns for them, could you tell her we would also like to talk to her as well.”

Master Qui-Gon bowed. “Thank you, my Masters.”

Obi-Wan said nothing as they both descended into the Temple, to retrieve Anakin. He said nothing when Shmi asked to come along with them. He said nothing as they brought both Skywalkers into the antechamber of the Jedi Council chambers. And even when Anakin gave his mother an encouraging wave, and disappeared into the chambers, he maintained his silence.
But Master Qui-Gon, now that he had finally gotten the first step of what he wanted, and could focus on other things in the galaxy, did finally remember that Obi-Wan was here.

He looked at Obi-Wan for a long moment, and concern flashed across his face. He cleared his throat to get Shmi’s attention. “Shmi,” he told the woman, “if you have need of us, we will be on the balcony.”

“Of course,” Shmi said, but she didn’t turn to face them. Her eyes were firmly locked on the double doors that her son was standing on the other side of.

Master Qui-Gon waited until they were well out of earshot, and on the balcony. “Speak your mind, Obi-Wan,” he said as they crossed the threshold into the open air of Coruscant.

If there was one thing that Obi-Wan appreciated about having Qui-Gon Jinn as his Master, was that when he chose to be, he could be quite clear. “The boy will not pass the council’s tests, Master. He’s too old.”

“If he had no training, perhaps,” Master Qui-Gon said. And there was the other complication. His master was right in one regard, Anakin’s connection to the Force was astounding. And he had phenomenal control in hiding what he was. There was only one person around him that was even capable of teaching him such a thing.

“And we have no idea what that training looked like,” Obi-Wan countered.

“Then perhaps we should ask Leia when she returns.”

Obi-Wan gave him a flat look. “You think she will tell you the truth?” he asked dubiously.

“Leia doesn’t lie, Obi-Wan,” Master Qui-Gon said, and Obi-Wan just stared at him. “She evades, she counters, or she just plain refuses to answer, but she doesn’t lie.”

That wasn’t, strictly speaking, true, but it was interesting his Master hadn’t caught that. “You really think she would tell us?” Obi-Wan asked.

“I live in hope,” his Master answered serenely, looking out over the balcony. “Anakin will become a Jedi. I promise you.”

And here was his belligerent Master, who was on his own path, convinced that he was right. “Do not defy the council, Master,” Obi-Wan begged, “not again.”

Master Qui-Gon didn’t look repentant. “I shall do what I must.”

Yes, Obi-Wan did understand why his Master thought that way. But there were better ways to get what needed to be done, then flagrantly flouting the rules at every turn, and deliberately upsetting people. Master Qui-Gon had gotten none of the reforms, or changes he thought the Jedi order needed, because he was too concerned with being right, then doing the actual work to see that the change happened.

“If you just followed the code you would be on the council,” Obi-Wan told him, for the hundredth time. It was an old refrain between the two of them. If Master Qui-Gon was on the council, he would have the power to enact the changes he wanted. He would be listened to. But he wasn’t, and he was dismissed as an eccentric, who was too focused on his own issues.

“They will not go along with you this time.” Especially given the disaster that Master Qui-Gon had brought to their door. There was the corpse he was insisting was a Sith, the boy who was too old to
be trained, and apparently, in his Master’s mind, a prophecy brought to life. And that wasn’t even accounting for Leia. The council hadn’t even met her yet, but Obi-Wan couldn’t see it ending in anything but a disaster. She was too abrupt, too certain, and too secretive by half, for their liking.

“You still have much to learn, my young apprentice.” What, that patience and smooth words would get you further than pushing every boundary you came across? Obi-Wan kept his sigh to himself.

In many technical aspects, Master Qui-Gon was correct. Obi-Wan didn’t understand much about the Living Force. He had trouble listening and understanding people he didn’t like. It irritated him, but Master Qui-Gon was so successful in the field, because he chose to listen to everyone. Obi-Wan found it hard to interact with non-Jedi. They seemed so irrational and bound to an ever set of changing rules he could never quite follow. Master Qui-Gon seemed to thrive on that.

“I do Master,” he agreed. “But even I know that Leia meeting the council is probably not going to help you.”

“She is rather forceful and abrupt, isn’t she?” Master Qui-Gon said softly, and then he shook his head. “But she is a witness to my attacker.” A rueful smile played on his lips, “At least I know she isn’t the type to fold under pressure at the appearance of authority figures.”

“No, she isn’t,” Obi-Wan agreed. “She is much more likely to insult them to their face.”

Master Qui-Gon let out a heavy sigh. “Yes, she is. But what choice do I have? I need them to believe me, and she does lend a certain…conviction to what she says.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan murmured, “an absolute belief that she knows best, and everyone else is a fool for not following her. I can’t imagine why you two don’t get along.”

To his credit, Master Qui-Gon only laughed. He clapped a hand on Obi-Wan’s shoulder. “Indeed,” he agreed.

Obi-Wan watched as an elegantly dressed woman entered the council’s waiting room. He flicked his eyes up and down, noting the quality of her clothes, the elaborate weave of her braids, and careful movements. She was using an intricately carved wooden cane as she walked. She looked around the antechamber, spotting Obi-Wan and his master, but her eyes kept going, never stopping. Not even on the view afforded by the open arch to the balcony. It was one of the rarest sights on Coruscant, a completely open view of the Senate Dome, framed by the magnificent architecture around it, with no buildings in the way to block the view.

That instinctive dismissal of that rare sight made Obi-Wan label her as some liaison or aide from the Senate. They were the only ones he had ever seen who went out of their way to not be impressed with that sight.

It shouldn’t surprise him that she was here, but it did. And the Force only knew, what new demand, or petty squabble, they wanted the Jedi to mediate now. Even though a sovereign planet of the Republic had been invaded, with the Senate there was always something more.

Obi-Wan was slightly surprised when the woman sat down on the seat next to Shmi. There were plenty of empty chairs in the room, and he would have thought that the woman’s ragged clothes would put the courtier off. His Master noted where the woman sat too, but when Shmi didn’t seem too alarmed by a stranger sitting next to her, he sank back into his light trance in the Force. Obi-Wan
couldn’t blame him for his immediate concern and attention. Leia Solo would not take kindly to anything happening to the two charges now under his master’s care. And she struck Obi-Wan as someone who would do violence first, and ask questions later.

They all sat in silence for the next few minutes, until the council doors opened. Anakin walked out alone, a curiously blank look on his face. He went up to his mother, as both Obi-Wan and Master Qui-Gon got to their feet.

“Ani?” Shmi asked, but he didn’t answer her. Just wrapped her in a tight hug. The woman looked startled for a moment, then returned the embrace. Beside them, the Senate aide was looking at the scene, and frowning.

Shmi paid no attention to the woman, only pulled back, and looked her son in the face. “Are you alright?” she asked, concern in her voice.

Obi-Wan couldn’t read anything off the boy in the Force, which spoke of a lot of control. If Obi-Wan was reading his body language correctly, Anakin was upset, deeply so, but there wasn’t even a glimmer of it in the Force. Obi-Wan felt his frown deepen. Just how tight was his control, and how had Leia impressed it upon him so thoroughly? Most of the younglings who were Anakin’s age in the temple couldn’t manage this, and they had much less to hide.

The boy only shook his head at his mother’s questions, choosing not to answer her. Instead, he turned to look at the unnamed woman, and Shmi’s hands fell away from him. He reached out and fingered the dress the aide was wearing. Obi-Wan just stopped himself from lecturing the child. Just what kind of culture did Tatooine have that a small child felt that it was okay to touch people he didn’t know?

“That’s a pretty dress,” Anakin said, his fingers slowly rubbing the material. “Where did you get it?”

Obi-Wan was waiting for his mother to rebuke him for his rudeness, or the politician to shriek in horror that some poorly dress child was touching her. Shmi didn’t say anything, just continued her examination of her son, a worried look on her face. The aide, much to Obi-Wan’s surprise, let out a low husky laugh.

“Thank you, Old Man,” she told him, pleasure in her voice.

Obi-Wan’s attention immediately focused on the petite woman sitting in the antechamber of the Jedi Council like she belonged. Beside him, he felt Master Qui-Gon snap to attention too, but Obi-Wan was too busy gaping at the woman to look at his Master’s face. Leia, the woman who entered this room, who both he and his Master had instinctively dismissed as a Senate fluky, was Leia?

Leia reached out, and playfully rapped Anakin on the nose. “But don’t change the subject. Grandmother asked you a question.”

If it had just been a change of clothes, Obi-Wan would have put it together, surely. The outfit she was wearing was beautiful and did everything to imply wealth and elegance. The cane she was using had to have cost enough to feed an entire family in the mid-levels of Coruscant for a year, yet she handled it like it was worth nothing. Her hair looked like it had been done by a professional hair stylist, or a really expensive droid who had the necessary articulation of joints to weave a hair pattern that complex. Leia wore all that elegant worth like she had no concern for it. Every rough edge to her had been sanded away, as if it had never been.

Obi-Wan was aware that it was possible to change your demeanor so thoroughly that you could become unrecognizable. He had done it himself many times. He had a youthful face, and he could
play it up to its full advantage. Something that he found doing more and more often on his missions with Master Qui-Gon. It was useful to look like you were inexperienced, and in over your head, while those around you prattled on, arrogantly thinking he wasn’t paying attention, or didn’t understand what they were saying.

There was that holovid star Bant was forever going on about, who Obi-Wan had watched do something very similar to Leia with nothing more than a posture change. He would die before he would admit it to Bant, but he had learned a lot studying that actor. Obi-Wan knew that Master Windu had spent some time training with the councilor Alexa Dress, and was quite fond of attending the theater when he had a moment to spare. And the reasons he gave were the same as Obi-Wan’s, to those few souls who were brave enough to ask why a revered Jedi Master was indulging in such frivolous activities.

If Leia really had spent her life as a bounty hunter, this act represented years of training. But then again, what did he, or his master, really know about Leia Solo? It was entirely possible that she had been born into a wealthy family and had fallen into hard times. Obi-Wan was aware that such things happened. Not often, the wealthy did their best to make sure they stayed wealthy, but it did happen.

But if that was the case, what was she doing on Tatooine? There were far more pleasant places to end up in the galaxy if you lost your fortune. She had even walked into here like she was a different person. There was no trace of that impatient gait that had eaten up the ground. Instead, she had entered as if she expected the entire galaxy to wait in breathless anticipation of what she chose to say.

There was also the small matter of her proficiency with a blaster, and ease around violence. The wealthy didn’t do that. They hired other people to do that for them. Leia had a breathless familiarity with both, and Master Qui-Gon had mentioned nothing about her sticking out in the local culture on Tatooine. Someone who was raised in a comfortable home, would not find an easy time on a Hutt controlled world. So, was this elegant woman the mask, and the bounty hunter real?

But that didn’t quite ring true. Obi-Wan was sure that the brisk inpatient woman he had met wasn’t a fraud or act. But this carefully composed woman standing in this room wasn’t either. Leia wore this change all too easily.

But none of those mundane changes explained the Force. On Tatooine Leia had been a blinding presence, overwhelming in her loudness. Even on the ship, when she had been contained, he could feel her in every square inch of that space. But standing here in the Jedi Temple, where it was safe enough for Obi-Wan to lower his shields to their lowest level, where she should have shone so brightly as to be blinding, there was nothing. Oh, she had a presence, all life forms did, but that was it, a presence. None of that awesome power he knew she had, was in any evidence around her.

“Qui-Gon?” Master Windu’s voice was irritated, and coming from nearby. Obi-Wan broke his gaze away from the puzzle that was Leia Solo, to note with some surprise that Master Windu was standing in the doorway to the council room. “Perhaps you want to rejoin us?”

Obi-Wan turned to see his Master didn’t seem to have heard Master Windu, his shock was so great, as he continued to openly gape at Leia.

Leia gave him a mocking smile. “Take a holo,” she said sweetly. “It will last longer.”

“You-” his Master started to say, but was cut off by the tapping of Master Yoda’s cane.

“Ahhh, a visitor we have,” Master Yoda’s voice came floating into the antechamber. He appeared next to Master Windu, and his eyes immediately fell on the trio on the other side of the room. “Lady Solo, yes?” he asked, leaning forward a bit, to get a better look at her.
Obi-Wan waited for the confusion and bafflement that so many people had on meeting the Grand Master of the Jedi Order. Holos couldn’t convey accurately how tiny Master Yoda was. When meeting him for the first time, most reacted with condescension, that this short, tiny creature who looked, and spoke so oddly, was the most powerful and revered of all the Jedi.

Leia rose to her feet smoothly. Holding the cane in one hand, she went into a flawless deep curtsey. There was nothing but respect in every inch of her. As she came up, her voice was pleasant and warm. “It is an honor Master Yoda,” she gave him a winsome smile. “But please, call me Leia.”

Obi-Wan’s mouth once again wanted to gape. This was nothing like the bossy, abrasive woman he had been so shortly acquainted with.

Master Yoda dipped his head in acknowledgment. “Then Yoda I shall be for you.” He gave Leia his most mischievous smile. “Many questions we have for you.”

Leia’s face took on a charming look. “I’m sure you do,” she said.

Beside him, Master Qui-Gon’s mouth did drop open. “You-” he pointed an accusatory finger at Leia. “What just happened here?” Obi-Wan wasn’t privy to every detail of what had happened between the two of them on Tatooine, but he knew enough to know that they had not gotten off on the best footing. By Leia’s own confession, everything his Master did irritated the woman.

She didn’t break that calm even tone as she responded to Master Qui-Gon, which in itself, was a miracle. “Manners are the cornerstone for a respectful working relationship, Master Jinn.”

Master Mundi’s voice was just this side of scathing as he appeared between the open council doors. “This is the bounty hunter?” he asked Master Qui-Gon after one disbelieving glance at Leia. “She is the all-powerful Force user that has you in such a tizzy?”

His tone clearly was questioning Master Qui-Gon’s sanity. Obi-Wan couldn’t blame him. If he hadn’t known better, he would have been questioning his Master’s assessment of Leia as well. Even though he did know better, he was having a hard time interlaying the two women on top of each other.

Leia’s eyes narrowed. “I take back what I just said, Master Jinn. Compared to this braying ass, you are the model of decorum.” She flashed a smile that was all teeth, but her voice never faltered from that warm, friendly tone. She could have been discussing the weather for all the offense that she was showing. The contrast made her words even that more cutting. “I am standing right here, and I have a name.”

Master Mundi sputtered, and Master Windu looked over at him, a frown on his face. Master Yoda shook his head and quickly walked over to Master Mundi.

“Correct she is,” he said, looking up at the Cerean’s face. “Rude that was. A youngling I would expect such behavior from.” Master Yoda whacked him across his shins with his cane, lightly in reprimand. It was more to emphasize his point then to hurt him, since Master Mundi was wearing a pair of knee-high leather boots.

Master Mundi had the grace to look abashed, and Leia’s face didn’t lose its smooth, even, composure. If you just went by her face, you would think that she had no opinion about the fact that she had just watched the Grand Master of the Jedi Order publicly chastise a member of the council. Obi-Wan wondered, if Leia had reacted like so many other sentients had to Master Yoda, dismissing him on first sight, if he would have been as firm in calling Master Mundi to task? Probably not, Obi-Wan acknowledged, it happened so rarely that people outside the Order saw Master Yoda for who
he was.

Master Yoda, sure that his point had been made, turned to Master Qui-Gon. “Introductions you should make,” he said in a very pointed voice.

Master Qui-Gon looked down at him, looking bewildered by the series of events that had just happened. He shook his head, gathering himself. “Yes, of course.” Obi-Wan could feel him shove all his feelings of unease and embarrassment into the Force.

He nodded his head to Leia and brought his hand up to gesture to the trio of Jedi Masters standing in the doorway. “Leia Solo, may I introduce you to Master Ki-Adi Mundi.”

Leia gave a very crisp and short nod to the man.

“And this is Master Mace Windu,” Master Qui-Gon finished. “Masters, this is Leia Solo.”

“A pleasure,” she said to Master Windu, and took two steps toward him. She raised her right hand, offering it to him. Master Windu looked startled for a moment, then lightly clasped it into his own, raising it up to brush a light kiss against it. It was a common enough greeting among humans, but only the wealthier classes introduced themselves this way. Again, Leia was acting like this was her due.

Master Mundi, apparently still smarting over Master Yoda’s reprimand, and Leia’s clear, but polite, snubbing of him, gestured towards her. “Do you often wear clothes like that? I can’t think that they are all that practical in your line of work.”

Master Mundi was asking for another whack across his shins. But Obi-Wan was quick to note that Master Qui-Gon looked relieved that someone else was reacting badly to Leia.

Not even by a flicker did Leia show her temper. “When I can afford it, yes.”

Obi-Wan wanted to ask who she was, and where had Leia Solo gone? Then alarm bells started ringing in his head. Perhaps that wasn’t the right question. It was no accident that Leia had dressed in this manner. The Jedi prided themselves on trying to see the person, not the circumstances. But some of them were closer to that truth than others. Even among the best of them, seeing the person, not the appearance, alluded them from time to time. Leia wanted them to take her seriously, so she was showing them the persona that would do that. So, what was it that Leia Solo wanted from the Jedi Council? Obi-Wan had a sinking feeling it wasn’t going to be anything as simple as money, or a favor.

Master Windu cleared his throat, and for a moment Obi-Wan swore that he was stepping on Master Mundi’s foot to get him to stop talking. “If you don’t mind, and have the time,” Master Windu’s hand swept in a courtly gesture to the council chamber, “we would like to speak to you about the incident on Tatooine.”

“I have the time,” Leia said easily. She gestured down at her dress and said in a sweetly saccharine voice to Master Mundi. “I even dressed for the occasion.”

Master Qui-Gon cleared his throat, “Masters,” he said to all of them before they re-entered the council chambers, “about Anakin?” he pressed.

Master Yoda and Master Windu exchanged looks. Leia tensed briefly, and Obi-Wan was interested to note that the boy himself was already standing by the elevator to take him down to the lower levels, his mother by his side. They both froze at the mentioning of his name.
Master Yoda’s eyes drooped. “Speak of that we should,” he said, looking at Master Qui-Gon with a disapproving eye. Obi-Wan could feel his master start to dig his heels in, as he understood they weren’t going to train Anakin. Master Qui-Gon had a remarkable ability to shape events as he willed. As he so often told Obi-Wan, “Your focus determines your reality,” but he had invested too much in this one. The boy was far too old, no matter his midi-chlorian count.

Master Windu was ignoring the tensions in the room, and his face revealed nothing but polite interest to the two Skywalkers. “You both saw the man who attacked Qui-Gon?”

Shmi offered a small smile. “Just a glance,” she said, “then I was running.”

“As you should have,” Leia said, looking at the woman. “I’ve had the training to survive a Sith. You haven’t.” Obi-Wan could see all three masters visibly start at the casual way Leia said the word Sith. Whatever they personally thought about the situation, there was no denying that Leia believed that was what their mysterious attacker was.

Shmi gave Leia a stern glance. “Then why did you insist that I learn how to shoot that blaster of yours?”

“Until you get the lightsaber away from them, blasters do you no good,” Leia said. Then she scowled. “And even then, with some them, it still won’t do you any good.”

Leia was starting to sound like she was veering into the legends of what the Sith were capable of, not what they could actually do. Even Master Yoda was incapable of catching blaster bolts. Avoid them? Oh, yes, that wasn’t the hardest skill to learn, but actually catch them? It was a fantasy. One that many held about the Jedi too.

“And the blaster training wasn’t about the Sith, it was about the other billions of sentients in this galaxy that might mean you harm,” Leia said firmly.

Anakin made a small noise and grabbed his mother’s hand. “Leia’s right Mom,” he said. “He didn’t feel…right.”

Leia looked down at him, a warning note in her voice. “And you should have run too.”

Anakin looked up at her, and a look of defiance crossed his features. “I wasn’t going to leave you to face him alone.”

Master Yoda sighed. “Speak of this man we should.” He gave Anakin a thoughtful look. “Also, of your future, young Skywalker.”

Anakin only tightened his grip on his mother’s hand, face pale. Leia looked down at him, frowning.

“Can I have a minute?” Leia asked the Masters. They all bowed to her and walked out of the antechamber back into the council room. Master Qui-Gon followed them, clearly wanting to have a few words with the council in private before the meeting started about Master Qui-Gon’s attacker.

Obi-Wan started to follow, intending on giving the trio its privacy, but before he could even take a step, the doors to the chamber slid closed with a soft click. He turned, so that he could walk to the balcony. But then his eyes caught Leia standing, and then before he could blink, she was crouched in front of Anakin.

Obi-Wan barely kept his gasp to himself. Moving that quickly wasn’t that unusual for the Jedi. But it wasn’t something that most of the other Force sects knew how to do. And he hadn’t even felt a ripple in the Force as she used it to move right to the boy’s side.
“What’s wrong?” she asked him, concern on her face. That formal, polite woman was gone, and in its place the woman of fire and determination. Obi-Wan slunk back into the shadows as much as he could. Leia seemed to have forgotten he was there, and he didn’t want to distress Anakin any more than he already was. He might be an involuntary witness to whatever was about to play out, but he could be a quiet one.

“It’s nothing,” the boy said, trying to keep up a brave front. But even from where he was standing, Obi-Wan could see the sheen of unshed tears in his eyes.

“And,” Leia said, crouching next to his side, “whatever it is, it’s all right.”

Anakin shrugged, and his gaze fell to the floor.

“Hey,” Leia said, cupping his cheek, making Anakin look at her, “you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to. But there is nothing, and I do mean nothing, you can do that would ever surprise me.” She gave him a fierce glare. “Or stop me from loving you.”

Anakin looked at Leia, and then his gaze fell to his mother. She gave him an encouraging smile. Anakin’s little face twisted in pain and confusion, “I thought,” he said, voice breaking, “I thought I finally found a place where I wouldn’t have to hide.”

Leia and Shmi exchanged worried looks. “Ani?” his mother said, grabbing both of his hands in hers. “What happened?”

“They saw me, and they said I was dangerous,” those tears slid down his cheeks, and the boy looked at both Leia and his mother, “that my future was clouded, and that I was too ruled by emotion.” Every word was punctuated by small hiccups as he fought to breathe, talk, and cry at the same time.

Inside his head, Obi-Wan started cursing at the council. Yes, he agreed with everything they had said about Anakin. But that didn’t mean you told a child that to his face. No nine-year-old, especially one raised in an environment as harsh as Tatooine and with the limited education he had access to, would hear the subtleties in the council’s warnings. Obi-Wan didn’t always hear the subtlety in their warnings. They approached everyone as if they had a lesson to impart, and that you needed to work it out for yourself. That was fine in the temple, but in the rest of the galaxy, it tended to go over as well as rotting food.

Leia’s face twisted. “Of all the arrogant, foolish,” and the next word was lost to Obi-Wan as she spat something out in a language he didn’t recognize.

Anakin stopped hiccupping and looked at her reprovingly. “Leia, language.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “First off, I’m the adult, and you are the child.” Anakin opened his mouth, and Leia put up one of her fingers in a warning. “No buts, Old Man. Second, I know you don’t speak that language.”

“Tone means everything Leia,” Shmi said, her hands still clutching Anakin’s tightly, but she was giving a disapproving glare at the bounty hunter. “I agree with Anakin.”

Leia opened her mouth to protest, but Shmi went on. “And while I might be younger than you, I am certainly not a child. You should remember your manners at all times, no matter the provocation.”

Leia’s mouth snapped shut. “Yes, grandmother,” she said dutifully.

Obi-Wan wondered at what magical pull Shmi had over Leia to bring her to heel like that. Anyone else, and he was certain the woman would have snapped at them like an angry rancor.
Anakin let out a hysterical sounding giggle that sounded more sad then happy. Then he pulled his hands out of his mother’s and wiped his face furiously. “Maybe they’re right,” he muttered darkly. “Maybe I’m incapable of learning control. That all I am is dangerous.”

“They are not right,” Leia said fiercely.

“But,” Anakin protested, both hope and fear warring on that young face, “can’t they see the future? Further, then we can?”

If Obi-Wan was to believe the boy, that meant Leia could see the future. And Anakin as well? That was a rare gift among the Jedi. A few seconds warning, of course, almost all of them were capable of that. But to see further than that, even if it was only a hint, was a rare talent among them. And Anakin had just casually announced that both of them could do it?

Leia shook her head. “The future is always in motion,” she said, no place for argument in her tone. Obi-Wan started, that was one of Master Yoda’s refrains. Where had Leia learned that particular phrase? “It can be changed. You know that.” She looked at him and brought her forehead to lightly rest against his. “Better than most, you know that.”

“But I’m not in control. I couldn’t even get through meeting them, without getting upset,” Anakin protested, pulling away from Leia’s embrace.

“Because you are nine,” Shmi said fiercely. Obi-Wan almost took a step back at the fire in her tone. He had thought Shmi Skywalker was a quiet sort, with no temper to speak of, yet here was a rage that matched Leia’s burning in her eyes.

“You are a human child,” she said, “not a mindless tool. And you have more control than they ever will.”

Anakin looked at her, voice hopeful. “You really think that?”

Shmi nodded. “Yes,” she said and cupped her son’s face in her hands. “I believe in you. Leia believes in you.”

Anakin’s eyes flickered to Leia’s, then back to his mother. “But you have to think that, because you love me.”

Leia snorted at that. “Old Man, there have only been a handful of people I have loved in my life,” she gave him a mocking wag of her finger, “and I never hesitated to tell them when I thought they were wrong. Or being an idiot. Especially the idiot part.” She adopted a fake look of concern. “Maybe that is why I have so much trouble making friends?”

Anakin gave a soft giggle, as Obi-Wan suspected Leia fully intended him too. But Shmi wasn’t done. She looked at Anakin seriously. “You have never once struck out at anybody with the Force when you were upset or frightened.”

And the undertones in her voice suggested that there had been plenty of times when Anakin had been frightened or scared. Of course, there were. Anakin wasn’t a child who had been brought up in a safe and stable environment. Loving, certainly, but as a slave, Obi-Wan couldn’t even begin to imagine how many times the boy had been put into a situation where he had been scared out of his wits. Or put into an incredible amount of pain.

The more powerful a Force Sensitive, the more they could alter things around them, even if they had no training. And Anakin was the most powerful Force Sensitive on record. At any time, he could have lashed out, and done who knows how much damage, even unfocused. His mother was correct,
that showed remarkable restraint, even before Leia had gotten involved and taught him.

Anakin’s eyes drifted to the closed doors, and Obi-Wan, now that he was paying attention, could hear a very heated argument happening in muted voices on the other side of that barrier.

“They’re afraid of me,” he whispered in a soft voice. Obi-Wan felt himself stiffen. That was a ludicrous charge. The Jedi prided themselves on not being afraid, of controlling their fear.

“They’re idiots,” Leia said dismissively, but Obi-Wan was interested to note that she didn’t correct Anakin’s impression of the council.

“You say that about everyone,” the boy complained. Then he looked Leia straight in the eyes. “But that doesn’t mean that they aren’t right. I am angry. I am scared.” He swallowed hard. “I’m those things all the time.

Shmi’s hands tightened. “Because our life for a very long time was frightening and scary.”

“But we are free now.” Anakin’s voice was confused. “I know that.”

“Oh Ani,” Shmi looked heartbroken. Her hand came up and pressed against his forehead. “Your mind knows that,” her hand fell from his head, and came to rest gently on his chest, “but hearts are stubborn things. They don’t learn the lesson as quickly. Those feelings don’t go away overnight.”

He didn’t look like he believed her. Shmi sighed, and her hand dropped from his chest, as she clasped both of them together in front of her face as she studied her son.

“I’m scared too, Ani,” she confessed in a halting voice.

Anakin looked surprised, “Of what?” he asked.

She gave him a sad smile. “I’m afraid that this is all a dream. Or, that it’s real, and that somehow a mistake has been made. That Watto, or some Hutt, will come and take me away.” Her face twisted. “Or you.”

“This is real,” he insisted.

“I know,” Shmi said, “but it is very hard for my heart to know that.”

Anakin looked at his mother, and then he turned to Leia. “And what do you think?”

Leia reached up and pushed a stray bang off his forehead. “That grandmother is very wise,” she said, “that hearts take a long time to heal.”

Anakin frowned. “But it’s different for me. You told me that I needed to control my fear, or it will control me.”

Leia’s face broke, and Obi-Wan could see the self-reproach there. “I did,” she admitted, “but Old Man, that takes time. This isn’t like learning how to build a droid, or pod racing. This isn’t something you are naturally good at, you have to practice.”

He looked at her, tears again pooling in his eyes. “But I need to know it now. Yoda said that fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering.” Anakin’s face was nothing but heartbroken misery. “I don’t want anyone to suffer. Especially because of me.”

Leia breathed through her nose very hard, and Obi-Wan could see her refraining from all the things she wanted to say about that. Any respect Master Yoda had won in her estimation, Obi-Wan could
see rapidly disappearing. “Can,” she said through clenched teeth, “it can lead that way. It doesn’t
mean it will.”

“But,” Anakin protested, “if that’s true, why would they say it was worrying that I had so much fear
and anger?”

A complex set of emotions crossed over Leia’s face, as she cycled through anger, disappointment,
and strangest of all grief. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them and grabbed Anakin’s
hand, placing it on her chest. “What do you feel?” she asked him.

“My Leia,” he said back, such conviction and possession in those two small words.

A small pleased smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. “Yes, Old Man, that is obvious. I meant
what do you feel from me?”

Anakin frowned in concentration for a second, and Obi-Wan could feel the slightest swell in the
Force, as it wrapped around Leia. “Love,” Anakin said, eyes not quite meeting hers. “Love for me.
Love for Mom.”

Leia’s hand tightened over his. “Old Man,” she said admonishingly, “all of it.”

His eyes closed. “Anger,” he admitted, “enough anger to burn down everything around you, if you
let it.” His voice became slightly removed, and detached, as if he was speaking about someone, or
something, very far away. The Force, which up until now had been quiet, started tingling up and
down Obi-Wan’s skin. Even in the warm balmy air of the temple, he shivered at the tones and
echoes contained in that young voice.

“It isn’t fair. Nothing in your life has been fair, and you’ve lost too many people you loved.” Anakin
opened his eyes to look at Leia, but Obi-Wan had the distinct impression he wasn’t seeing Leia. Or
at least not this Leia, but the Leia who lived through all of those moments. “You’ve had to fight so
many battles, so many wars, and you’ve never been allowed to rest. And now, you’ve been given
the hardest task of your life, and you are alone.”

“Yes,” Leia agreed, “I have.” Shmi looked heartbroken at the simple acceptance that was in Leia’s
voice about her belief that she had no one.

Anakin blinked, and that faraway look faded from his face, and once more he was speaking in a little
boy’s voice. “You are not alone,” he said fiercely, countering whatever glimpse of what he had seen
in the Force. “You have me!” He pulled his hand away from Leia’s grip and pounded his own chest
for emphasis.

Something like wry resignation crossed her face. “And may the galaxy have mercy when you get
going on something, Old Man.” It should have sounded patronizing. Words told to a child to make
them feel better about the helplessness they were feeling. But Leia was in deadly earnest. Like she
had seen a glimpse of the man Anakin would, or could, become.

“And you have me,” Shmi said firmly breaking this strange mood with her no-nonsense tone.

Leia’s eyes flicked over to her, and then a small, shy smile crossed her face. “I do, don’t I?” she said,
wonder in her tone.

Shmi returned the smile and cupped her face. “I may not have always believed everything you told
me Leia, but I never doubted your devotion to me and Ani.” Her voice became fierce. “We are
family Leia, and we take care of each other.”
Leia looked at the younger woman, speechless for a second. Shmi looked at her...what exactly? Obi-Wan didn’t know, for all the fact the woman had declared Leia her family. Were they lovers? Wives? Just friends? None of those labels seemed like the right answer. Especially with Leia’s habit of calling Shmi, a woman who was younger than her, grandmother. It was a close bond, whatever it was.

Leia’s hand came up and laid gently on top of Shmi’s. “Thank you, grandmother,” she said hoarsely.

“I don’t need your thanks for loving you,” Shmi said lightly, “but you’re welcome all the same.”

Leia gave her a watery smile and then dropped her hand. Shmi let hers fall to her side as well. Leia shook her head, and discretely wiped a hand over her face. When she turned to face Anakin, she was remarkably composed.

“Me too,” Anakin said, arms crossing over his chest. “You are my Leia, and I don’t like it when you forget that.”

Leia looked at him, eyes thoughtful. “No,” she said softly, “That is not something I ever forget, Old Man.”

His eyes narrowed. “Your words are saying something different then what you mean.”

Leia’s face became decidedly neutral. “Am I lying?” she asked.

“No,” he admitted grumpily. Could Anakin use the Force to tell when people were lying as well? Just exactly how much had Leia taught him? “But you aren’t saying everything either.”

Leia cocked her head. “Old Man, there are things you are too young to know.”

“What, I can’t learn about those until I’m fifty, too?”

Wait, what could Anakin not do until he was fifty?

Leia sighed. “No. I will tell you before then. I will,” she insisted, to his doubting face, “but it would do you more harm than good to learn it now.”

“But they are hurting you now,” Anakin protested.

Leia didn’t even try to minimize that truth. “Yes,” she said, “they do. But they are very old wounds, and I learned to live with them long ago.”

“But,” he protested, “I’m your Old Man. I wasn’t there when it happened, so the least I can do is help you now.”

“But,” she said softly, “It wasn’t your fault that you weren’t there.”

Anakin looked at his mother, so he missed the subtle flinch Leia gave at those words. Obi-Wan didn’t miss it though. He had no idea what they were talking about, but something inside him told him that it was important that Leia did think it was Anakin’s fault he wasn’t there for whatever had happened to her. That struck Obi-Wan as strange. Despite her prickliness and arrogance, she didn’t strike him as someone who would blame a child for circumstances beyond his control.

Leia shook her head. “We’ve gotten off topic,” she said firmly, ending the discussion on this particular point. “Back to my original point Old Man. I have as much, if not more, anger then you. Do you think I am going to fall to the Dark Side?”
She seemed to be genuinely wondering if he thought that. Anakin looked at her, face serious.

“Maybe,” Anakin said, and Leia’s eyes widened fractionally in hurt. Then a hint of mischievousness crossed his face. He reached out and tapped Leia on the nose. “If you don’t get your caf when you wake up, you might snap and kill us all,” he told her.

Leia was startled for a second, then Obi-Wan felt her joy, light as a feather, play along the Force. He could only marvel at how fast the two of them seemed to jump between serious and playful.

Leia’s face twisted in wry amusement. “Maybe then,” she allowed, then her voice grew serious, “but otherwise?” There was a genuine note of concern in her voice.

“No,” Anakin said, and the boy had such faith in that. “No, you won’t fall. You won’t let yourself. There is too much for you to do.”

“Exactly,” Leia said, “I am far too busy.”

Anakin gave a heavy sigh and leaned his head against his mother’s shoulder. “I know you didn’t want me to be a Jedi,” he told Leia. And why exactly was that? Most people considered it a great honor if someone they knew was selected to be in the Order. “But I was so sure it was the right path.”

Leia leaned back a bit, face thoughtful. “I’m the one who told you to trust your instincts. The real question Old Man, is it the Force telling you this, or what you want the Force to tell you?”

Anakin’s face scrunched up. “I don’t know.”

Leia gave him a rueful grin. “Yeah, when you figure out how to tell the difference, let me know.”

Perhaps if the two of them learned to let all that passion and emotion they leaked everywhere go, they would be able to tell the difference? Detachment from worldly wants made it so that the Force’s will was clear. Otherwise, you were inclined to only see what you wanted to see.

Anakin nodded. “I will,” he promised. “If you promise me that you won’t take your anger out on the council.”

Leia’s face grew annoyed. “Why shouldn’t I?” she asked him, but it was Shmi who answered her.

“Because it’s not about them Leia, it’s about you,” she said, and her arms came to wrap themselves around Anakin. “You can’t control others, only yourself.”

“It doesn’t speak well of them that they scare the wits out of a child,” Leia said darkly.

“Leia,” Shmi said gently, “You know I’m right.”

Leia gave the woman a squinty-eyed look, but Shmi didn’t back down. Leia let out a long sigh. “My Mama would have liked you,” she said in a complaining voice. “She said something very similar to me, all the time.”

“Leia,” Anakin said warningly, “what you have to say is important. Aren’t you always telling me not to let my temper get in the way of what needs to be done?”

Leia looked at him. “You are important,” she said.

“Well, I am to you,” he said, like that was the most obvious thing in the galaxy, “but this is bigger than me.”
What did the boy know? Was this the exaggeration of an inexperienced child? But Shmi looked like she agreed with her son. The little Obi-Wan did know of her nature, was of practicality and not given to flights of fancy. What exactly did Leia Solo have to tell the council?

“I’ll try my best not to lose my temper,” Leia said, and she rose to her feet.

“That is all any of us can do,” Shmi agreed. She let Anakin go and stood herself. Then she blinked and reached out and ran a hand over the fabric of Leia’s dress. “No wrinkles,” she said marveling.

Leia smiled. “It’s why I picked it, so I could still move around freely and not worry about staying presentable.”

And why did a bounty hunter from the Outer Rim know that much about high-end fabric?

Shmi laughed. “You destroyed a lot of dresses when you were a child, didn’t you?”

Leia grimaced. “Much to my mother’s chagrin, yes.”

Anakin looked between the two of them and took in a deep breath. “I’m ready now,” he told both of them.

Shmi gave him a smile. “And we will both be there with you.”

Anakin took his mother’s hand. “Okay,” he said. Obi-Wan agreed with the council’s decision about not training Anakin. However, he couldn’t agree with how they chose to go about telling him that. No child, no matter how unusual, should look like he was walking into his execution because he had to face the Jedi Council.

Obi-Wan was going to wait until Leia entered the chambers, and discreetly follow her. That option was taken out of his hands, when after Shmi and Anakin entered the chamber, Leia’s head swiveled to stare at him.

Obi-Wan froze, then forced himself to relax. He had thought she was so concerned about reassuring Anakin, that she had forgotten he was here. That was an arrogant assumption on his part, especially given what he knew about her paranoia. So, if that was the case, why not let him escape to the balcony, and avoid all of this?

“Why didn’t you ask me to leave?” he asked, staring into those brown eyes, wondering if for once, she would answer a question.

She cocked her head. “I wanted to see what you would do,” she said.

A minor miracle, she had answered him. Unfortunately, it illuminated nothing. “Why?” This seemed far too an intimate moment to expose to a relative stranger, simply for the sake of testing his mettle.

She gave him an enigmatic smile. “To see if you are the man you could be,” she said and walked into the chamber. Obi-Wan watched her go. He took in one long breath, and on the exhale, imagined that all his nervousness and worry was being pushed out of him, and followed her in.

When Obi-Wan entered the council chambers, all the Jedi Masters were seated and talking to their neighbors quietly. Given the side-eyed glances they were giving Master Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan
imagined that once again his Master had stuck his foot into his mouth in front of them.

Master Qui-Gon, by the look on his face, was just as unhappy as the council. Instead of taking his proper place in the middle of the room, he was standing next to Anakin and Shmi. The two Skywalkers were both near the door, and Leia was standing on the other side of them. There was nothing but polite interest on her face as she looked at all the council members and the view of Coruscant behind them. There was no trace of that angry woman who walked into this room moments ago.

“Master,” Obi-Wan said quietly as he came up to him. Master Qui-Gon nodded his head in acknowledgment of him, but his eyes never left Master Yoda, who was staring back at him with a resigned look on his face.

Obi-Wan’s gaze fell on Leia, who was standing on the other side of the mother and son. Obi-Wan had the feeling that she would mind her temper, but only to a point, despite both Anakin and Shmi’s warning. His eyes flicked to Master Qui-Gon, he should at least warn him about what was most likely about to happen.

He leaned a bit closer to the man, and whispered as softly as he could, “I think the council is about to figure out why you were having such a hard time with Leia.”

Master Qui-Gon’s gaze fell from Master Yoda’s, and he looked at Obi-Wan, a frown on his face. “Oh?” he asked in a whisper that only Obi-Wan would be able to hear.

Obi-Wan nodded his head in Leia’s direction, and Master Qui-Gon’s gaze went over to her. He frowned, as he took in her relaxed posture, and sent a questioning look to Obi-Wan.

“I’m sure,” Obi-Wan said.

Master Qui-Gon looked back at Leia, then a delighted smile crossed his face. Obi-Wan wanted to shake his head. Leia wouldn’t help him argue for the Jedi council to accept Anakin. She had made her feelings on that subject clear. So what, precisely, did his Master find so amusing about the possible explosion that was about to happen?

Obi-Wan’s thoughts were cut off by the sound of Master Yoda rapping his cane on the floor. At the sharp noise, everyone fell silent and turned to look at him.

“Leia and Mistress Skywalker,” he said warmly to the two women, “introduce you to the Jedi Council, I will.”

He gestured to his right, “Met you have, Master Mace Windu,” and then his hand came up to his left, “and Master Ki-Adi Mundi.” Both women nodded their heads in greeting, although Shmi’s motions were much more jerky then Leia’s. Master Yoda pointed to beyond Master Windu to the last chair in the semi-circle, “And this is Master Plo Koon.”

The male Kel Dor gave a nod of his head.

Master Yoda gestured to the other side of Master Mundi, and as he spoke their names, each Master nodded their head. “Master Saesee Tiin, Master Yaddle, Master Even Piell, Master Oppo Rancisis, Master Adi Gallia, Master Yarael Poof, Master Eeth Koth, and Master Depa Billaba.”

Leia looked at all of them and then dropped into a curtsey. Obi-Wan noted it was not as deep as the one she had given Master Yoda just minutes ago. “It is an unexpected honor to meet with you,” she said.
Shmi just looked at all of them, eyes wide and terrified. She was trying hard to hide her shaking, but Obi-Wan was closer to her then the council was. He could see the fine tremors running up and down her. He had the feeling that if it wasn’t for the fact that her son was gripping her hand as tightly as she was gripping his, she would have bolted out of the room. He couldn’t imagine as a slave, being in a room with this many powerful people, had ever ended well for her.

Leia looked around the entire semicircle of chairs, and asked in a bland voice, “You had questions about the man I killed?”

“Yes,” Master Poof said.

Apparently, Master Qui-Gon had decided that he was going to take up right where he left off in his conversation before Obi-Wan, and the others had entered the room, because he cut the Master off, with an irritated, “Anakin needs to be trained as a Jedi.”

Obi-Wan contained his wince through long practice at his Master’s rudeness to the council. Master Poof looked at Master Qui-Gon in deep irritation, but Master Yoda was the one who answered Master Qui-Gon. “Has what he needs, he does,” Master Yoda remarked, gesturing to Leia. “A teacher who taught him. A danger to himself, he will not be.”

“You only spent a few minutes on this decision,” Master Qui-Gon protested, “surely the boy’s midi-chlorian count warrants some in-depth discussion?”

“More time, change our minds, it would not,” Master Yoda said. Of what Obi-Wan could see of him, Anakin looked resolutely stone-faced. Leia only looked relieved.

“You aren’t going to let this go, are you Qui-Gon?” Master Windu asked resigned. “Even for the small matter of the identity of your attacker?”

“Of course, I’m not going to let this go,” Master Qui-Gon’s voice was vehement. “The boy is the Chosen One, surely you must see that.”

“Chosen One?” Leia’s voice was suspicious. She shot Master Qui-Gon a disgruntled look. “What do you mean Chosen One?”

There were several looks passed between the council members, and Master Windu sighed at Master Qui-Gon’s mentioning of things best not known to outsiders. “Master Qui-Gon is referring to an ancient Jedi prophecy.” Master Windu tried to keep the explanation as vague as possible.

Leia only frowned at him. “What does it say?” For a woman who was as secretive as she was, she certainly didn’t seem to mind asking questions.

Master Windu only shot a disgruntled look at Master Qui-Gon who seemed to have ignored the subtle hint to intervene with Leia to head her off this line of questioning. Or perhaps, in this case, it wasn’t so much his usual stubbornness, so much as knowing that Leia wouldn’t let anything go that pertained to either of the two Skywalkers.

Master Billaba spoke up, answering Leia’s question. “It says that a person would be born, of incredible power, who would bring balance to the Force.”

Leia’s eyes narrowed. “Balance how?” she demanded in a sharp voice. That caught the attention of several of the council members, especially Master Piell. They were all looking at Leia like they were trying to understand why she would be so interested in what was a frankly esoteric topic, even among the Jedi. Obi-Wan was having trouble himself trying to figure out why she thought this was so important.
“That part is not clear,” Master Billaba admitted.

“How is it not clear?” Leia demanded.

Master Billaba gave her a condescending smile. “It’s not something that is studied all that in-depth anymore,” she said, looking at Master Qui-Gon dismissively. She had never been shy in telling him that she considered his interest in the subject a waste of his time. “For most of us, it’s considered to be nothing more than a tale told to small children.”

“It is real,” Master Qui-Gon insisted, “and the interpretation is clear. The Chosen One will destroy the Sith.”

“They can’t be destroyed,” Master Mundi said, voice rising in frustration, “because they are already gone.” He gestured to Anakin. “Therefore, he can’t be the Chosen One.”

Master Qui-Gon drew his arms into his robe, but before he could say anything, a burst of loud, raucous laughter filled the room.

Everyone’s head swiveled to the source of the noise, and Obi-Wan watched in fascinated horror to see that it was Leia who was making that hollow noise. “Destroy the Sith,” she said, between those sharp barking laughs. “The Chosen One will destroy the Sith and bring balance.”

“Yes,” Master Yoda said. “Funny this is to you? Why?”

She gave him a helpless gesture. “For the manner that the Force likes to make its wishes known.”

Master Yoda frowned. “Understand you, I do not,” he said.

She shook her head and waved a hand in the air. “Master Yoda I am living it, and I barely understand it.” That strange laughter died away, and she gave another one of those elegant curtsies. “But my apologies for the interruption.”

Master Yoda nodded his head. “Accepted it is,” he said with a look of admonishment, “but Yoda I am to you.”

Something flashed in Leia’s eyes, but her voice was firm, “No,” she said, “not here, not in this room. Here you are Grand Master Yoda, head of the Jedi Order.”

Master Yoda looked at her, ears dropping. “Must I be?”

Leia’s smile was bitter. “I grew up knowing how to divide the personal from the political Master Yoda.” And Master Yoda might not know it, but that was probably a very good thing for him. Leia hadn’t been all that forgiving of Anakin’s treatment at the hands of the council when she walked in here. “For what needs to be said in these chambers, I think it is for the best that we both remember that.”

“We are not political creatures Lady Solo,” Master Rancisis said in his soft sibilant voice, his tail moving back and forth. “We do not participate in such matters.”

Leia’s face darkened. “Oh, I am aware,” she said bitterly. Obi-Wan had thought she was more resigned, then anything else, when she had confirmed that neither he, nor Master Qui-Gon, could testify in the Senate as to what they saw on Naboo. But her tone now was full of disappointment and frustration. She looked the Thisspiasian master in the face, his abundant facial hair twitching as he took in the open censure in her tone. “But do not lie to yourselves. You cannot have an organization this large, no matter how well-intentioned, run, much less thrive, without politics.”
Obi-Wan’s eyes narrowed. Leia had stumbled onto a truth he himself had only recently figured out about the Jedi Order. They did try to be above such things, but none of them were perfect. They were an Order, and any such institution of that nature, was inherently political. If rising through the ranks only relied on talent and accomplishments, his own Master would be on the council. He was denied a seat because he refused to play any games to get it. It was admirable, as well as frustrating. Master Qui-Gon had many valid points about the growing ineffectiveness of the Jedi Order in their role as peacekeepers of the Republic, but no one with the ability to change anything would listen to him. If he was on the council, he could start the work now. Obi-Wan didn’t intend to make the same mistake his Master was.

“You are not familiar with our role in the Republic,” Master Rancisis said dismissively.

“No,” Leia admitted, “I am not. But I’ve seen enough of what you don’t do, to come to some unfavorable conclusions.”

Master Koth cocked his head. “Such as?”

Obi-Wan could see Leia reign herself in. When she spoke, it was again that smooth, practiced voice. “I spent the last year on Tatooine, and bore witness to the consequences of ceding that entire planet to the rule of the Hutts.” A note of lecturing entered her tone. “And it is not the only planet on the Outer Rim left in such straights.”

“The Hutts are not a recognized governing body,” Master Poof said.

Leia shook her head. “That doesn’t mean they aren’t the ruling power on Tatooine,” she said. “They have been for at least a century.” She gestured to Anakin and Shmi. “So much so that slavery is flourishing, out in the open.” She gave Master Poof a reproachful look. “Which you would know, if your Order spent any time on the Outer Rim.”

“We go where the Senate tells us to,” Master Poof said defiantly. “We leave it to the will of the people.” He was neatly sidestepping the issue that the Jedi has been trying for years to reassert themselves in the Outer Rim, only to be denied by the Senate.

“And to tolerate slavery is the will of the people?” Leia asked sweetly. “Or is it the corporate interests that hold the Senate’s purse strings that wants slavery to continue?”

Obi-Wan barely contained his wince. Master Poof had nothing to say to that.

“Are you suggesting we should do whatever we want?” Master Windu asked.

Leia looked at him coolly. “I’m suggesting nothing of the kind,” she said. “I was merely remarking on the fact that the Jedi have an interesting definition of the word political.”

“And that definition would be?” Master Windu pressed.

She gave a tight smile. “Whatever suits your consciences best. Meanwhile, millions of people on the Outer Rim pay the price for your lack of action and attention.”

Master Piell’s voice was scornful. “You said you’ve only been on Tatooine for a year. Before that, was the Hutts’ control of the Outer Rim something you concerned yourself with?”

Leia stiffened, and her hand briefly tightened on her cane. “No,” she admitted, “removing the Hutts from power was not a priority for me, before I arrived on Tatooine.”

Master Piell’s looked at her. “Then I suggest you not lecture us on how we handle our
responsibilities. The Republic is vast, and there are many people within it. We are too few to handle every injustice there is.” He gestured to Shmi and Anakin. “The only reason you are so impassioned about this now, is because you care for these two. The Jedi do not have the luxury of indulging in such sentimentality. We have to consider the whole.”

Leia’s eyebrow arched. “If you won’t take care of the weakest of your charges, then who will you protect?” Her gaze moved from Master Piell to look at each council member in the eyes. “If that system does not let you do your most basic task, seek ways to change it.” Her smile was openly condescending. “After all, we do live in a democracy, and your voice should count for something.”

Master Qui-Gon was wisely keeping his mouth shut, but Obi-Wan could feel him want to whoop in joy that he had found an ally that was willing to say to the council’s face the points he had been making for years. Maybe it was for the best the two of them had gotten off on the wrong foot. He couldn’t imagine what this conversation would be like if both of them were attacking the council at once.

“Don’t pretend your righteousness doesn’t come from your concern for those two,” Master Piell said. “Speaking of changes, why didn’t you simply buy them and remove them from the situation they were in?”

Leia looked at him dumbfounded, then said in a slow, measured voice. “Because I didn’t have the money to do so.”

Master Mundi let out a disbelieving snort. ‘Wearing that dress, you expect us to believe you have no money?”

Leia turned to look at him. “Yes,” she said simply, “because the funds were here, on Coruscant.” That explained the upgrade in her wardrobe, and why she didn’t buy the Skywalkers outright in the last year. But it didn’t explain how she ended up stranded on Tatooine without access to them in the first place. Leia looked critically at Master Qui-Gon. “It’s the whole reason I even agreed to travel to this planet right now.”

Obi-Wan could feel embarrassment coming from both Master Mundi and Master Piell. The Jedi rarely need to deal with money in the sense that most of the galaxy did. They could recognize quality, and things that were well made, and probably expensive, but the subtler day to day things often escaped them. They were taught to appreciate what they had, and what was given to them. Their physical needs were seen to by the Senate, in order that they could maintain their non-bias when dealing with the populace. In fact, Tatooine had been the first time that Obi-Wan had run into the problem of not being able to afford the supplies they needed. It had been a frustrating, and humiliating, lesson on some of the indignities the people of this galaxy had to endure.

“Planning to come here, to the Temple, were you?” Master Yoda asked, ears pricked up in interest.

Leia nodded. “Yes, I was.”

“Without Anakin,” Master Qui-Gon remarked softly, looking at her.

For just a moment, Obi-Wan could see the combative woman Leia was. Then it all melted away. “Yes,” she said, “without Anakin.”

“Even though he wanted otherwise?” Obi-Wan’s gaze fell on the boy, who was still standing stone-faced. He had dropped his mother’s hand at some point, and both his fists were clenched at his sides. It was the only sign he was angry about what was being said about him.
Leia gave Master Qui-Gon a grim smile. “I was hoping to avoid the very situation you have put him in the middle of.”

“Is that why you didn’t inform us that you had found a strong Force-sensitive?” Master Koth asked.

Leia’s eyes sharpened. “You don’t want to train him, so why does it matter I didn’t inform you about him?”

Master Koth shook his head. “A decision I disagree with,” he told Leia. “Anakin is bright, talented, and would be an asset to this Order.”

He would think that. Master Koth had also been older than most younglings when he had been brought to the temple. But he hadn’t been as old as Anakin, or as troubled. He couldn’t see the problems the rest of the council could, because of his own personal, and extraordinary, experiences.

“Training him as a Jedi or not,” Master Koth went on, “we still would have helped. Leaving one as naturally strong in the Force as Anakin is, so near the Hutts would have been dangerous.”

“Oh,” Leia asked sarcasm dripping from every word, “and you would have been allowed to intervene?”

“The Senate has granted us the authority to rescue any Force Sensitive from an abusive situation,” Master Tiin pointed out.

“In the Republic,” Leia said back, “and Tatooine is not the Republic.”

“It is a protectorate—” Master Piell started to say.

Leia snorted in derision. “Please. You would have asked for permission and would have been denied. Then someone would have sold that information to the Hutts that there was a strong Force Sensitive on Tatooine.”

“You have a low opinion of our resources and political ability,” Master Tiin observed, shaking his head. Given the impressive horns on the side of his head, he had to make it slower than a human, making the minor gesture all the more thoughtful looking and grave.

“What political ability?” she asked. “You said it yourself, you have no voice in the Senate. You do as you are told, no matter what else the Force might tell you.”

“And know what, of the Force’s will, do you?” Master Yoda asked.

Leia let out a small bark of laughter. “That it will see it’s will be done, whether you are listening or not.”

Master Yoda sat up straighter in his chair, looking intrigued by her answer. “Much truth there is in that,” he agreed. “Mysterious and elusive the Force can be.”

“A lesson that took me a long time to learn,” Leia admitted.

Master Windu cocked his head. “And was it worth it when you finally did take heed?” he asked her.

Leia looked at him flatly. “Ask me in a few years.”

Master Qui-Gon spoke up, bringing the conversation back to the topic he thought was the most important here. “I don’t understand how you do not see this,” he said, gesturing to Anakin. “He is the Chosen One.”
Master Billaba’s voice was gentle for all the fact the words themselves were less than polite. “For all we know, he is some by-blow of a Force Sensitive from this Order.”

“There was no father,” Shmi said so quietly that Obi-Wan was sure that the rest of the council hadn’t heard her.

His Master had though. “Excuse me?” he asked Shmi.

She turned terrified eyes on him, and then visibly paled as all the council members swiveled their heads to look at her.

Shmi looked at Leia, like she couldn’t believe she had dared to speak at all. Leia gave her a smile and reached out a hand to squeeze Shmi’s. “You’re free,” Leia said to that frightened face. “You can speak, interrupt, hell, even cuss if you want to.”

Shmi rolled her eyes, and she seemed a bit more relaxed. “Leia, language,” she said firmly.

“I can’t even talk about cussing?” Leia said back easily, but her eyes never left Shmi’s, and she didn’t let go of the woman’s hand. “ Seems unfair.”

Shmi gave Leia a wan smile, but the small bit of humor seemed enough to settle her. She took a deep breath in and answered Master Qui-Gon’s question in a voice that was loud enough for the entire council to hear. “There was no father,” she repeated.

Obi-Wan could hear the whispers, and he could feel several of the Master’s tense in the Force.

“Sure, of this, you are?” Master Yaddle asked.

Shmi finally looked away from Leia, and her head turned so she could look in the small Master’s direction. Her eyes were firmly fixed on the floor, but her voice was steady. “Yes Mistress,” she said. “I carried him. I gave birth. I raised him. I can’t explain what happened.”

Master Qui-Gon’s shock was very quickly replaced by triumph. He hadn’t known this part. The council members looked doubtful. Obi-Wan was inclined to believe that Shmi believed what she was saying. There was no falsehood in her. A great deal of fear, and nervousness, but no falsehood.

Given that she had been a slave most of her life, these were understandable reactions at being confronted with some of the most powerful people in the galaxy.

“Trauma has a way of clouding one’s mind,” Master Billaba said, and her voice was nothing but gentle. “Perhaps you don’t remember what happened?”

Shmi’s gaze fell back on Leia, but she answered the Master’s question. “Such things are not unknown to me,” she said, and beside her, Anakin grabbed his mother’s free hand. The other one, Obi-Wan noted, had a white-knuckled grip on Leia’s. Not even by the slightest flinch did Leia show that she was in pain, although Obi-Wan thought she had to be, with how tight Shmi’s hand was on hers. “I didn’t forget any of those times. Why this one?”

The Force came up in a soothing rhythm to swirl around Shmi. Obi-Wan would give Leia this, she was trying to be subtle about it. It was nowhere near the intensity he knew she was capable of. But it wasn’t completely hidden either. Whether she was trying to hide it, and failing, or was trying to exercise some restraint, Obi-Wan didn’t know.

What he did know, was that several of the stronger council members head’s shot up, as they caught onto that subtle call of strength and support. The less powerful members on the council, unknowingly relaxed into their seats, not strong enough to know where this peace and comfort was
coming from, but they could feel the effects flow through them. Obi-Wan closed his eyes, and for a second allowed that love and calm to pass through him. His eyes opened as that energy suddenly became very focused, and he watched, fascinated, as Leia poured that emotion into Shmi. The woman gasped, and stood up straight, as if suddenly a great burden had been lifted from her shoulders. It suddenly occurred to Obi-Wan, that no one had tested Shmi’s midi-chlorian count.

Then there was a presence that was as familiar to Obi-Wan as the Temple he stood in, rising up beneath that gentle whirl of power. Master Yoda was reaching out, his curiosity blazing in the Force, as he touched that well of power that was pouring into Shmi.

Obi-Wan gasped, for a second disoriented, and so bereft of the reassurance that the Force had been humming in his ears. All that soothing power was gone, as if it had never been. Beside him, he felt Master Qui-Gon stagger a bit, and several of the council members shook their heads as if they suddenly found themselves awake. Obi-Wan wasn’t pleased to note the tremor of fear that ran through the Force. They all knew that Leia’s strength in the Force was considerable. Had so many of them really dismissed her so readily because she wasn’t screaming it from the moment she entered this chamber?

Leia too, was the opposite of calm. She whirled, placing herself between Shmi and Master Yoda. “Do not ever do that again,” she snarled at Master Yoda.

The old master looked at her, taken aback. “Prying I was not,” he said, voice trembling. “Trying to see what you were doing, I was.”

Leia bared her teeth. “That wasn’t everything you were doing.” Her finger came up to point at him. “Stay out of my head.”

Master Windu looked at Master Yoda questioningly, and Master Yoda shook his head. “Trying to get into your mind I was not,” he insisted.

“Call it what you will,” and Leia was shaking, she was so angry, “but I know what I felt.”

Master Yoda looked at Master Qui-Gon. “Understand I do not,” he said. “Did no more than Qui-Gon did. Testing your walls, I was. Nothing more.”

Obi-Wan felt his heart pick up its pace. No, it wasn’t considered intrusive, but it was rather rude. The other Force sects had very different ideas of what was, and wasn’t, acceptable, even among the Light-Sided ones. They were all aware that Leia had been trained by someone, and there was no telling how such an action would be received by one not taught within these walls.

Master Yoda had no idea what he was playing with here. Leia was strong, so strong, and she had come into this room, predisposed to lash out at him. Master Yoda knew Leia had power, there was no denying that, given he felt her cry out on Tatooine, as he stood in this very temple. But hearing someone cry out in the Force was nothing compared to what it felt like to be standing next to her as she did it. Obi-Wan felt himself shiver, just at the memory of that fierce chaos of emotion she had let loose on Tatooine. What was the old Master thinking? He couldn’t have missed the iciness in her attitude to him, no matter how warm she had been when they had first met. And she had enough power to make her displeasure known.

Leia shook her head, then took a deep breath in. “You are much more powerful than Master Jinn,” she said, and Obi-Wan could see her fighting for control. “You could do so much more than he is capable of.”

“Intend to hurt you, I do not,” Master Yoda said, but there was a tightening around his eyes as he
spoke.

Shmi laid a hand on Leia’s shoulder. “Leia,” she whispered, and Obi-Wan watched as Anakin dropped his mother’s hand, and reached out to take Leia’s, squeezing it hard. “Leia we are here,” Shmi said in a firm even tone.

Leia closed her eyes, and Obi-Wan could see her lips moving. A mantra of some sort? A prayer? Her eyes opened, and she looked back to Shmi. Whatever was on Leia’s face was enough to convince the woman that Leia was on steadier ground, because she removed her hand from Leia’s shoulder.

Leia looked down at Anakin, but he shook his head, and continued to hold her hand.

Leia let out a sigh. “Fine Old Man,” she said. “Have it your way.”

“What was that all about?” Master Mundi demanded, now that it looked like Leia wouldn’t swat them all if they moved the wrong way.

“An old wound,” Leia said, looking up from Anakin, “one that Master Yoda poked, with a very large stick.”

Master Yoda’s ears flattened. “My apologies I offer,” he said.

Leia shook her head. “How were you supposed to know?” she asked. She gave a regal nod of her head. “I offer my apologies as well. Both for saying you were trying to pry into my mind, and for overreacting as I did.”

Master Yoda nodded, but he looked troubled.

Master Poof’s grey head swung from side to side, a clear sign of his agitation. “Someone who has been caught in a trap does not react well to even the hint of a new one,” he said, trying to offer some comfort.

Leia nodded her head. “Yes,” she agreed, “but I have been in enough traps in my life that if I flinched at every little thing, I would never leave my home.”

“And where would that home be?” Master Koon inquired.


Master Gallia cleared her throat. “I think he was more asking where you were born?” It was rare for her to speak in a council session involving outsiders. But then again, she always did favor the subtler approach when she could. Perhaps she was thinking knowing Leia’s birth planet would help narrow down the mysteries this woman presented. At the very least a starting point on where Leia came from.

Leia’s face was amused, “You know, I actually don’t have an answer to that question.” She looked down at Anakin. “Best guess?”

“The moons of Iego?” he said, and there was something of a sly smile on his face.

Leia rapped his nose. “Too cheeky,” she said. ‘You are too cheeky by half. I am many things, but I am most definitely not an angel.”

“If you don’t mind,” Master Piell said, voice disdainful, “we are discussing something important here.”
Anakin’s face fell, and his shoulders hunched defensively. Obi-Wan gave Master Piell a startled
look. Leia was making them all uneasy, but that was no excuse to take it out on a child.

Before Obi-Wan could think of how to best point that out to the council, Leia snapped back at the
one-eyed Master, “And Anakin’s comfort and mental wellbeing isn’t important?”

“We hardly have the time-“

“Make it,” and now there was nothing but icy fire in her voice, “because he is a child. A child you
scared half out of his wits because he frightened you.”

Master Yoda spoke up then, “Our intention that was not.”

“I don’t care,” Leia said, voice haughty as a Queen’s, “It’s what you did.” Obi-Wan winced. She
would look at it that way, not taking into account the intent of what the council had been trying to
do.

“Warned him of the dangers he faces, we did,” Master Yoda said. “Clouded, his future is.”

Leia gritted her teeth. “Just because it’s hidden from you, doesn’t mean that it is a bad future. It only
means you can’t see it.”

Obi-Wan supposed she had no way of knowing how adept Master Yoda was in seeing the future. It
was the only explanation for her rather cavalier attitude. If Anakin’s future was clouded, it meant
nothing good.

“For his own good, it was,” Master Yoda insisted.

Leia’s tone was frigid. “What kind of compassion do you practice when you tell a nine-year-old, he
is essentially doomed.”

“Said that, I did not,” Master Yoda said emphatically.

“Then why refuse to train him?” Master Qui-Gon asked, stepping forward in the opening Leia had
unwittingly provided.

“Know why, you do, Master Qui-Gon,” Master Yoda said, voice cross. Usually, he had more
patience with Master Qui-Gon’s stubborn ways. What exactly had his Master said to the council
when Obi-Wan was still in the antechamber that would make Master Yoda this irritated with him?

“Is it because you’re afraid?” Leia asked, voice challenging. Obi-Wan looked at her, gobsmacked.
What was she doing? She didn’t want Anakin to be a Jedi anymore then the council did. So why
was she picking their refusal apart like this?

“We did not refuse to admit him to the Jedi Order because we are afraid,” Master Rancisis said.

“Really?” she asked. “Because from where I’m standing that is the only reason to refuse.”

“Too old he is,” Master Yoda said simply. “Too old to learn the ways of the Force.”

Leia’s mouth dropped open. “I beg your pardon?” she asked. “He’s nine. What do you mean he is
too old?”

Master Koth’s voice was steady as he answered. “Yoda feels that he is too old to be a Jedi. That he
would not be suited to this way of life.”
Leia shook her head. “I do not disagree with that point. It’s one I happen to share.” She looked at Master Yoda critically. “But that is not what you said. What do you mean nine is too old to learn the ways of the Force?”

“Control he could learn, yes,” Master Yoda admitted.

Leia’s face twisted. “Control he has,” she said.

Master Yoda looked at her curiously, “The beginning of control, has, he does,” he conceded, as his eyes fell on Anakin, “but more, he cannot learn.”

Leia scowled. “Why?”

“Too much to unlearn,” Master Yoda said simply.

Leia flushed. “Are you implying that because I taught him some basic techniques, that he has learned too many bad habits?”

Master Yoda shook his head. “Mysterious is the Force. Odd, its ways are. Learn how to listen, he could, but true control?” Master Yoda looked tired as he told her. “No. Shaped, his mind is. The older the being, the less one can grasp the true power of the Force.”

Leia just stared at him for a very long minute. “Are you serious?” she asked. “You are telling me that he can’t learn anything complex in the Force, because he already has a point of view of the world?”

Master Yoda paused, thinking, then nodded his head. “Simple an explanation that is, but work, it will.”

Leia shook her head. “I’m not sure what is sadder. That you said that, or that you think it’s true.”

She said that like it was the most obvious thing in the galaxy. As opposed to flying in the face of a thousand years of Jedi experiences and doctrine. Obi-Wan had known she was arrogant, but he hadn’t thought she was this arrogant.

“For eight hundred years have I trained Jedi,” Master Yoda huffed. “My own counsel, will I keep, on who is to be trained.”

“And that is your prerogative,” Leia said. And wasn’t that generous of her to allow? “But I’m talking about your very arrogant assumption that Anakin isn’t capable of learning anything complex.”

Master Qui-Gon frowned at Leia. “You don’t want Anakin to be a Jedi,” he challenged. “Why are you arguing for the Jedi to take him?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Leia said. She gestured to the various members of the council. “It matters what you think.”

“And what I think,” Anakin piped up in a very soft voice. He hadn’t let go of Leia’s hand, but he no longer looked so unhappy. He had a thoughtful look on his face. “I see what you are trying to prove to me Leia,” he said.

She blinked and looked down at Anakin. “Do you?” she asked, voice probing.

His eyes circled the council, taking them all in, and he nodded. “I don’t like it though.”

Leia sighed. “I don’t either, Old Man,” she said, voice suddenly tired. “It seems I was right, but not for the reasons I first thought.” She gave him a sad smile.
“You were right about here,” Anakin asked, voice sounding uncertain. “But later, and far away? Would I have fit in there?”

Leia looked surprised, then she rolled her eyes. “You don’t give up, do you?”

Anakin shook his head.

“Yes,” she harrumphed. “You would have done fine there.”

Anakin would have been fine where? And how, in any way, was this mysterious place related to the Jedi?

Leia took her hand out of his, to wiggle a finger in his face. “I’ll let you gloat, just this once.”

Anakin grinned, and rocked back on his heels, looking incandescent.

Obi-Wan supposed it was some private joke between Anakin and Leia. Although what the context of that joke was, was beyond him.

Master Yaddle leaned forward in her chair. “Control you have,” Master Yaddle remarked, “but more, you could have been.”

“Control is all I ever wanted,” Leia said evenly.

Master Mundi’s eyes were fierce. “Yet, you trained the boy.”

Leia’s shoulders tightened, and her hand came to rest on Anakin’s shoulder. “The boy is standing right here,” she said through gritted teeth, “and he has a name.” She looked around the semi-circle of the council, “If you all need a refresher course in manners, I have a droid who would be more than happy to help you with that.”

May the Force be merciful, Obi-Wan hoped she wasn’t thinking of that mish-mash of a droid they had brought aboard the Queen’s ship. He had only spoken to him once, and that had been enough.

Master Yoda’s ears flicked back, but he accepted the reprimand with no complaint.

“You trained Anakin,” Master Windu said, his hands coming to a steeple in front of his face.

Leia snorted. “Trained is a stretch,” she said, and Anakin looked up at her.

“That is not true Leia,” he said. “You are wizard at what you do.”

“And they are capable of more,” Leia said, gesturing to the assembled members of the council.

“You may quibble with the word,” Master Windu said, voice serious, “but that is what you did.”

Leia shook her head. “I just taught him control,” she said, and there was the sound of real panic underneath that cool exterior. Her hand was so tight on her cane, it was starting to turn white. Why did this bother her so much? Taking on a student, Jedi or not, was one of the most important tasks any sentient could do in the galaxy.

“Why?” Master Windu asked, but his question was curious, not hostile.

Leia’s eyes flicked to him, and then away. “I taught Anakin because the galaxy is a harsh place to those who are different, Master Windu. Given Anakin’s circumstances, I thought it best to offer what little protection I could.”
Even Master Mundi couldn’t argue with the truth of that statement.

“But believe you do, more he could learn?” Master Yoda asked.

Leia shook her head. “This isn’t about Anakin being a Jedi, Master Yoda. This is about learning how to use the Force.”

“There are other Force sects in the galaxy,” Master Poof said gently, “and they do take in Force sensitives older than we do. In the past, we have tried to teach them our ways. It never works. They are too locked into what the world is, instead of what it could be.”

Leia looked around the council and saw all of them nodding in agreement. “You only take in children?” she asked. “Young children.”

“Yes,” Master Tiin said. “It is the only way to reach the deeper abilities the Light Side of the Force is capable of granting.”

Leia looked at Master Tiin’s serious expression for several long seconds and then shook her head. “You’re wrong,” she said simply. Obi-Wan wanted to argue with her. But there was so much conviction in that voice.

“Possible, it may be,” Master Yoda allowed, “for older students to learn. But dangerous, it is.”

Leia’s lips compressed in a tight line. “Why?” she asked.

“Not trained to control their emotions, they are. Too easy, to take the quicker path.” It was the other reason the Jedi confined themselves to only teaching children. The far distant past was littered with cases of Jedi, who were taught as adults, falling to the Dark Side, and wreaking havoc on the galaxy. It had taken the Jedi far too long to recognize that particular truth, and so many in the Republic had paid the price. This current method had been in place for a thousand years, and the lack of former Jedi trying to overthrow the government was proof of how it was the superior method.

“The Dark Side,” Leia said flatly.

“Yes,” Master Yoda nodded his head. “A hard life, this is. A Jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. A life of glory this is not.”

“I never thought it was,” Leia shot back, “but are you really trying to tell me that the young children you take in know that?”

“Prepare them, we do,” Master Yoda said. “A choice, they have to make. Keep them here if they wish to leave, we do not.”

“And what are they supposed to do if they leave?” Leia asked, speaking faster and faster in her agitation. “Their family is here. Their support systems are here. Their home is here. Not to mention they probably don’t have a trade they can engage in. And if by your shocked looks about me not having money until very recently, have no understanding on how to manage money. How is that a choice?”

“One must follow the will of the Force,” Master Poof said in a lecturing tone, “and trust that it will guide you.”

“And how do you tell the difference between what the Force wants and what you want?”

“When you are calm,” Yoda said promptly. “At peace.”
Leia closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. “We are going to have to disagree on that point Master Yoda,” she said. She dropped her hand and looked at him. “Every time the Force has made itself very clear to me, I was in no way at peace.” She looked at Anakin. “And that goes for Anakin too,” she said softly. And how would she know that? Obi-Wan knew better then to ask. For one, he was still a Padawan, and unless he was asked a direct question, not allowed to speak in these rooms. And even if he did want to risk censure from the council, asking was pointless. Leia would tell him nothing.

“Perhaps you will acknowledge that the Jedi have existed for millennia,” Master Mundi’s voice was frosty. “We have served the Republic well, using these methods you are in such contempt of.”

“Yes,” Leia agreed, “You certainly have served the Republic.” She didn’t say that like it was a compliment. Obi-Wan felt his shoulders tighten in offense.

“What would you know?” Master Piell demanded, giving voice to Obi-Wan’s thoughts. “You are nothing but an Outer Rim bounty hunter, who won’t even give us her real name.”

Leia’s eyes narrowed. “Leia Solo is my name,” she said firmly, and the Force did nothing but sing in affirmation of that fact “I was born Leia, and Solo is all I have left of my husband, who I loved dearly. So please, show me some courtesy and stop saying it is something I made up. It’s very rude.”

Master Piell looked taken aback at the hurt that punctuated every word Leia was saying. Obi-Wan couldn’t blame him. But he was interested to note Leia very carefully did not mention her full birth name. Why go to such lengths to hide it? One name surely couldn’t give that much away about her, could it?

Leia turned from him to face Master Yoda again. “If you did take in someone older?” she asked. “How would you train them?”

Master Yoda’s ears flattened back. “Dangerous that would be,” he said. “To live this life, train early you must. Do it, we would not.” He shook his head. “Allow it, I would not.”

Leia gave Master Yoda a mocking grin, “I would be careful about how you lay out ultimatums, Master Yoda. It could come back to haunt you.”

His eyes narrowed. “Seen something you have?”

“So many things,” she said, “including the folly of that particular statement.”

Master Koth cleared his throat. “I was taken in later than most younglings,” he offered, “although I was not as old as Anakin. If he was accepted into the Order, then he would be treated like any other youngling.”

Leia just stared at him, then she gave out that strange hollow barking laugh again. “Treat him like everyone else,” she said, head shaking from side to side. “Of course, you would. Why change anything?” She massaged the bridge of her nose. “This explains so much.”

Explain what? It wasn’t a secret that the Jedi Order did not take in older children or adult Force Sensitives. So, what exactly, did this explain to Leia?

Leia opened her mouth to go on, but Anakin spoke up at her side. “Leia,” he said softly, “It’s alright.”

She stopped what she was going to say, and took a deep breath in. She looked down at the boy, and Obi-Wan could practically see the conversation the two of them were having wordlessly.
“Honestly,” Anakin said earnestly into that doubting face. “It’s fine.”

“No, Old Man,” she said fiercely, “it is not.” Obi-Wan was surprised to see a tear fall down her cheek. “You have no idea, how much all of what they just said, is not fine. Where it would have led.”

He gave her a wobbly smile. “Aren’t you the one always telling me don’t be focused on what could have been?”

Leia closed her eyes, looking heartbroken. “You value yourself too lightly,” she said hoarsely. “You’re here, and you stood up for me. Mom’s here. I am not alone.” Anakin was pleading with her, as he said softly, “Leia, let it go.”

Leia opened her eyes and looked down at him. Her finger lightly grazed his cheek. “I’m the adult here,” she whispered. “It’s my job to see to your welfare.”

He gave her a small grin. “So, see to it. We have bigger problems.”

Leia looked like she wanted to argue with that, but Shmi came up and whispered something in her ear. Leia’s shoulders slumped, but it wasn’t lost on any of the Jedi Masters sitting in this room, the power Shmi Skywalker held to sway Leia.

“All right, Old Man,” she said, voice sounding defeated. “I’ll keep my complaints to the now.” He gave her a sad smile.

Leia straightened her shoulders, and looked Master Yoda in the eyes, “Let’s talk about the reason I’m here now, in this room.”

“The man who attacked me,” Master Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan held out little hope that he had really abandoned the idea of training Anakin as a Jedi. But even Master Qui-Gon had to recognize that everything he was too fraught right now to push further.

“Who you claim was a Sith,” Master Mundi remarked.

Leia shot him a funny look. “Because he was.”

Master Mundi looked at her disbelieving. “That is impossible,” he said, “the Sith have been extinct for a millennium.”

“You keep saying they’re gone,” she said, voice desperately thin on patience, “but that was what he was.”

“Know much about the Sith, do you?” Master Yoda asked, voice suspicious.

Leia turned her eyes to him. “More than I care to.”

“How are you so sure that he was a Sith?” Master Billaba’s voice was curious.

Leia cocked her head. “The lightsaber,” she said.

Obi-Wan noticed with interest that Anakin, and Shmi, both shuddered at the mention of that lightsaber. Had they too, sensed it was wrong?

“What about it?” Master Windu asked. “It’s worrying that this man had a Kyber crystal. We have strict control over all the known mines of them, but beyond that, what is so special about it?”
“But it’s red,” Leia said, voice incredulous. Master Yoda sat up fully in his chair, eyes wide and locked on Leia.

Master Windu shrugged. “The color is unique, I grant you. According to our records, that was the color the Sith preferred.” He gave her a serious look, “Red is rare, but until me, there hasn’t been a purple blade in the Jedi Order for centuries. Red is no more an unusual color variation then mine, and I’m certainly not a Sith.”

“No,” Leia agreed. “You are not.” She looked disappointed, and her shoulders slumped. “You don’t know,” she said in a tired voice. “It’s been so long, it’s been dismissed, or forgotten.”

Master Poof’s head waved back and forth. “Forgot what?” The rest of the council also looked puzzled, except Master Yoda. He was looking at Leia with open wariness now.

Leia gave Master Poof a bitter smile. “Kyber crystals aren’t red naturally. There is only one way to get that color.”

Most of the council looked at each other in confusion. Master Yoda did not. His ears flattened back, and his voice was full of contempt, “Unnatural that is,” he said.

“I am not disagreeing,” Leia said smoothly. “I’ve never seen it done, but that blade that I took from the Sith on Tatooine, it isn’t the first one I’ve seen like it.” Her face grew pained and haunted. Leia turned and looked at Obi-wan. “And they all feel like that.”

Obi-Wan shuddered. That one lightsaber had been bad enough, to feel several of them, he didn’t want to contemplate a world where that was possible.

Master Qui-Gon cleared his throat. “Care to explain?”

“You make it bleed,” Leia said simply. “You throw all your pain, hate, and anger into the crystal to warp it into a twisted version of itself. That is how you get a red-bladed lightsaber.”

That would explain the wrongness Obi-Wan had felt when he had touched the thing. There were aghast mutterings from the council members, and Obi-Wan was in full agreement with them. To do such a thing to a Kyber crystal was obscene.

Master Yoda though, his eyes were narrow and thoughtful as he looked at Leia. There was no surprise there, and Obi-Wan had to wonder what he knew that the rest of the council did not. “Corrupted Kyber crystals, the Sith did,” he said softly.

It sounded like he agreed with Leia. Obi-Wan would have believed that simple explanation, if it wasn’t for the worried looks Master Windu was shooting Master Yoda. What was he seeing in what Master Yoda said that Obi-Wan was not?

“If Master Yoda says it’s something they did, I believe him,” Master Tiin said. “He is the oldest and wisest among all of us. I’m sure that he has forgotten more things than most of us ever knew.”

Master Yoda nodded his head in acknowledgment of that, and Master Tiin went on. “But aren’t we overlooking the obvious?” All the council members looked at him. “We do not know all the secrets of the other Dark Side cults in the galaxy. It is entirely possible that one of them picked up the practice.”

Leia’s face clearly showed that she thought he was being deliberately stupid.

Noticing her expression, Master Windu said in a lecturing tone. “There are other Dark Side users in
the galaxy.”

Leia transferred that incredulous gaze to him. “Oh, I am aware,” she said. “More intimately then you could possibly know, I am aware of that. But the Sith were nothing if not jealous of what they knew. They never shared this knowledge, except among themselves.”

“Yet know about it, you do,” Master Yoda said softly.

Leia looked at Master Yoda for a very long moment. Long seconds passed as they stared at each other. Leia’s face took on a look of resigned acceptance. “Yes,” she said finally, breaking this strange staring contest they were in. “I do. Because I have seen one before. That corpse you are even now in possession of, whoever he was, was a Sith.”

Master Qui-Gon cleared his throat, and his voice was just this side of disrespectful. “As I stated in my earlier report, he was very well trained in fighting with that lightsaber. They were Jedi techniques, just using the Dark Side of the Force to power them.” He looked at Leia seriously. “No matter how fantastical it sounds, I agree with Leia’s assessment. He was a Sith.”

Leia looked surprised that his master agreed with her. In that, at least, Obi-Wan understood where she was coming from. She didn’t seem to appreciate his methods, and his Master didn’t like her questioning of his motives. It was a shame the two had chosen to butt heads over the fate of the boy. If they had met under better circumstances, they might have been friends. She certainly seemed to share his Master’s low opinion of the Jedi Council’s inflexibility.

However, one of his Master’s greatest strengths was understanding when there was a bigger battle to fight. This Dark Side user, he presented the bigger threat then the mystery of who exactly Leia was, and his Master was aware of that. Obi-Wan didn’t know what to think. He hadn’t seen the fight, only felt the effects through the Force.

Obi-Wan had brushed up against the Dark Side several times in his life. There were places in the galaxy that were naturally more attuned with that side of the Force then the Light. There had been his own struggles when he was younger, as he had fought to understand his place in the Temple, and the galaxy. But none of them had felt like that bitter cold that had engulfed him on the queen’s ship.

Then it had all been obliterated away by the overwhelming presence of Leia and Anakin. But his Master was convinced that Leia was right, and she was about to find out how useful an ally Qui-Gon Jinn could be in fighting unwinnable causes. He had his teeth in it now. There was no stopping him.

“If he was a Sith, why wait this long to resurface?” Master Piell asked.

“I have no idea,” Leia said, “but is it so improbable to you that they could have?”

“They were not known for their discipline,” Master Piell sniffed. “They gave in to their passions recklessly and with abandon.”

Leia’s eyebrow went up mockingly. “You think that is what the Dark Side is?” she asked. “A loss of control?”

“Oh of course,” Master Piell said, taking on a patronizing look. “The Light Side is order, the Dark chaos.”

Leia cocked her head. “I will grant you I haven’t known that many Sith Lords,” she said slowly, and what did she mean, many? How many had she met? “But of them, the Master, he was the most cold-blooded calculating creature I have ever had the misfortune to come across. He made Jabba look warm and fuzzy.” She leaned forward on her cane. “He was only defeated through his sheer
arrogance and luck. It had nothing to do with a lack of discipline.”

Master Poof leaned forward, ever the eager scholar. “Really?” he asked her, “I would have thought that wouldn’t be the case. Given all the destructive emotions are so aligned with the Dark, and positive ones with the Light.”

Leia just looked at him, dumbfounded.

Master Qui-Gon cleared his throat. “For the Unifying Force that is the case,” he said, harping on his own take, “but the Living Force is a much more chaotic thing.”

“That is why it is the lesser aspect of the Light,” Master Poof said, eyes narrowing at Master Qui-Gon.

“Oh good,” Leia said, “that’s what is needed now, an academic discussion.” They both stared at her, and she shook her head. “Frankly, I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“The Living Force—” Master Qui-Gon started to say, and Leia waved a hand, cutting him off.

“It’s the Force,” she said, looking around at all the councilors. “Are you truly all that arrogant to think you can dissect it into little pieces so that you can understand it in full?”

All the councilors just looked at her, and she lifted her cane to point it at each member, punctuating her words in time with its thrusts. “This is ridiculous,” she said. “You are arguing about the composition of one star, while looking into the night’s sky, and thinking that is what the entire sky is made of. There is no separating it out. It all exists with each other.”

This was beyond an arrogant view, and rapidly heading into heresy. The difference between the Light and the Dark Side of the Force was distinct and profound. There was no interweaving of the two. Just what kind of brand of madness did this woman have to think otherwise?

“Even the Dark Side?” Master Yoda asked in a quiet voice.

Leia looked at him, and her voice became lecturing. “The Force is capable of the most beautiful and wondrous things Master Yoda. It is also capable of the most unfeeling cruelty.”

“Yes,” Master Yoda agreed, but he looked at Leia warily.

“And because both of those aspects are true, we have divided the Force into the Light and the Dark. But that is our understanding of the Force, not what it is.” Leia shook her head. “What the Force is, we will never fully grasp.”

Master Poof cleared his throat. “Then if it’s pointless, why bother trying to broaden your understanding of it?”


Master Poof sputtered, “Because otherwise, we are nothing more than mindless beasts.”

Leia nodded her head, “Yes, I suppose you would look at it that way. For me, it’s knowing I’m going to die, and that in the grand cosmic scheme of things, it means nothing.”

Anakin gave a pained whimper at that. She looked down at him, “Not that I have any intention of going anywhere anytime soon,” she said, more to him, then the council.
Anakin looked up at her, and she gave him a small reassuring smile. “The Force has gone out of its way to show me the insignificance of my wants and desires.” He nodded his head, as if he knew what had happened to Leia for her to understand that. Her smile faltered as she took in his still serious face. “And that my understanding of my own history was woefully inadequate.”

She certainly hadn’t approached the council like someone who was humble. She talked to them like she knew more than they did, and thought they were idiots for not seeing what was right under their noses.

Leia’s gaze fell back to Master Poof. “But even with that hard won lesson, I still know that the struggle, the path, that is worth doing, simply because it is there.” Her expression turned sad. “I don’t know how shallowlly you are swimming in the Force, but it has been nothing but chaotic from the first time I touched it. Trying to impose any order on it is beyond absurd.”

Master Poof stiffened. “By that logic then, the Sith are a natural manifestation of the Dark Side, like we are the manifestation of the Light.”

“The Jedi are nothing like the Sith,” Leia hissed. Obi-Wan thought they could all be forgiven for thinking she held the Jedi in just as much contempt. She had done nothing since she had walked into this room but attack them, and pass judgment.

“You, you all are simply misguided,” she went on. “The Sith are parasites,” and there was such hatred in those words. Obi-Wan was glad, at that moment, that Leia’s shields were as strong as they were. He didn't want to know what it would feel like to be bathed in the Force with that much vitriol from someone of Leia’s strength.

“You are confusing the fact that the Dark Side exists, will always exist, with what the Sith do with it, to get what they want. They take, and they take, and they take, and there is no amount that will ever satisfy them. They are a plague upon this galaxy, and need to be eliminated.”

“Gone they are,” Master Yoda said, voice firm. “Your fear, allowing to overwhelm you, you are.”

“The corpse you have stored in this temple of yours would say otherwise,” she snapped back, pointing a finger down to indicate the levels below the spire of the Jedi Temple.

“We have no evidence-“ Master Poof started to say.

Her voice was scathing as she cut him off, “If it walks like a porg, talks like a porg, and carries a red lightsaber, it’s a Sith Lord!” She gritted her teeth. “You are the Jedi High Council. You are supposed to be the wisest and most learned beings in the galaxy. How can you deny what is right in front of you?”

Master Piell snorted. “Are we just supposed to take your word for it, that is what he was?”

Leia looked completely taken aback. “Why would I lie about something like that?”

“Why not?” retorted Master Mundi. “We don’t know anything about you, Leia Solo.”

Leia arched her eyebrow. “And the fact that the truth is coming from an inconvenient messenger somehow makes it a lie?”

“No,” Master Yaddle said, voice gentle. “The truth, always itself, it is. But speak, you do, of seeing a Sith before. From where you come, that such a thing is known to you?”

Master Poof’s voice was curious. “And how far outside of the Republic’s borders is that? Even if
you born on the Outer Rim, you should have been found long ago.”

Leia looked at Master Yaddle for a very long moment. Then her gaze moved from council member to council member, as if she was taking each of their measures. Her eyes landed on Master Yoda, and he looked back at her curiously. Some conclusion passed over her face, and she sighed.

Leia turned from Master Yoda and looked at Master Yaddle and Master Poof. “I’m from nowhere,” she said.

Obi-Wan blinked. That was a rather drawn out pause, only to lie to all of them. Everyone was from somewhere.

“You didn’t fall out of the sky,” Master Billaba remarked.

Leia arched an eyebrow. “Some days, it feels like that’s exactly what I did,” she said dryly.

“What harm can it do, to tell us where you are from?” Master Yaddle probed.

Leia’s expression was blank. “More than you can possibly imagine.”

“Hmmm,” Master Yoda looked at Leia thoughtfully, “see through you, I can.”

Leia’s smile grew mocking. “No, I very much doubt that.” She might have greeted Master Yoda initially with respect, but Anakin was right. She was letting her temper guide her reaction to him now. That she allowed such an emotional reaction was disappointing. Understandable, given her fierce loyalty to the boy, but disappointing. Master Yoda was the oldest and wisest among all of them. His sharp eyes and keen understanding of the Force missed nothing.

“Much pain I sense in you,” Master Yoda closed his eyes, brow furrowed in concentration, “much grief and sorrow.” His eyes opened back up to look at Leia’s.

Leia didn’t lose her amused dismissive tone. “Did the Force tell you that?” she asked, not sounding impressed at all, “or the stress lines around my face?”

Master Yoda blinked, then gave a nod of approval with his head. “Clever you are,” he said proudly. “Fallen for that, many people have.” Then that false cheer faded away. “Your face it was,” he admitted.

Leia gave a snort. “My Papa was fond of that trick too.” There was no doubt by the contempt in her voice that she was not making a favorable comparison between the two.

“Leia,” Shmi said softly from behind her, “manners.”

Leia sighed and softened her tone, but there was a note of finality that she would say this much, and no more on the subject. “If he couldn’t use it to trick me into admitting that I went to that party, he’d expressly forbidden me to attend at fourteen, I’m not going to tell you where I am from.”

She might as well have shouted that she was not going to answer any more questions about this subject. And she was right. There was no way to make her. She had committed no crimes that they knew of, and she wasn’t the one under investigation. But her flat refusal did not sit well with the council. Obi-Wan could practically feel the air around some of them grow suspicious. Why wouldn’t she answer even the simplest of questions? Where you are from had to be one of the most basic inquires one sentient could ask another, and it did not bode well Leia was refusing to answer.

Master Yoda’s aura grew grim. “An island unto yourself, you are not.”
Leia shook her head, “I’m an orphan,” she insisted.

Shmi leaned forward and grabbed Leia’s hand. Her voice was firm as she told Leia, “Your family is here. You are not alone Leia.”

Leia shuddered, and then her eyes broke contact with Master Yoda. She met Shmi’s eyes. “Yes, you are,” she said, “and I intend to keep it that way.”

Perhaps this was the answer to the question his Master had asked about why Leia was so attached to them. What they gave her that she found so dear, that she was willing to do so much for them. A home, and a place to belong again.

Leia broke her gaze from Shmi, and turned her head to glare at the council, like they had personally threatened Shmi. “Since you all are so reluctant to accept the truth that is staring you in the face, I will use every trick I know to do that. Including my limited skills in the Force.”

“Limited? You think what you can do is limited?”

At first, Obi-Wan was convinced he had lost control of his tongue and had voiced the thought aloud. Then every head turned to look at Master Windu, who was staring at Leia in disbelief.


The council just looked at her in pure bafflement.

“No,” Master Windu said slowly, “we do not.”

For the first time in the conversation, Leia looked like she was at a loss. “Excuse me?”

“Your cry,” Master Windu said. “It was heard across the whole quadrant.”

Leia grimaced, then, shockingly, turned to Obi-Wan and gave him a curtsey. “I owe you an apology, Padawan Kenobi. And you as well Master Jinn,” she added, her lips twisting wryly.

Master Qui-Gon frowned. “For what?”

“I knew I was being loud. I didn’t realize it was that loud.” She shook her head. “I know better, and I’m sure the experience was unpleasant for you both.” It was somewhat reassuring that Leia had some idea of how overwhelming she was. She didn’t understand the true depth of it, but she did have some understanding.

“That doesn’t explain how you did it,” Master Piell demanded.

Leia frowned. “Did what?”

“Cry out in the Force like that,” he said, gritting his teeth in annoyance at her confusion.

Leia didn’t look like that cleared up anything for her. “I shouted?”

Obi-Wan would accuse her of playing dumb, but beside her, Anakin was also looking very confused. A feeling of dread opened in Obi-Wan’s stomach. If Anakin also thought that this was simple, it meant-

Obi-Wan cut that thought right off. No, Leia was one thing, but a child? A child mastering the ability to speak in the Force? Master Yoda was the only one on the council who could consistently do it. There were members in the Jedi who weren’t on the council who could do it, of course. They all had
their strengths and weaknesses, but it took years of training. Anakin was nine.

“You knew Anakin would hear you?” Master Qui-Gon was looking at Leia like she was a revelation.

Leia cocked her head. “Of course,” she said.

“It’s not the first time Leia’s talked to me that way,” Anakin said easily.

Master Qui-Gon paled. “When we met,” he said hoarsely, “you said she was supposed to be gone for at least another week.” He looked at both Leia and Anakin. “There was no com unit in your home,” he said slowly.

Leia shook her head. “Why would there be? Watto certainly wasn’t going to pay for something so frivolous. Who exactly were they going to call anyway?”

“You told Anakin how long your job would take, when you were still away, didn’t you?” Master Qui-Gon’s voice was wobbly.

Obi-Wan felt his stomach roll as Anakin and Leia looked at each other, puzzled. Leia shrugged. “Yes,” she said carelessly, “the day before. But, as I said at the time, I caught my bounty early. I decided I was going to surprise him and Shmi.”

Instead had been surprised herself, by Master Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan forced himself to ask the question through a suddenly very parched throat. It didn’t matter he wasn’t allowed to speak in these chambers. Leia was in an answering mood, and he needed to know.

“Did you teach him how to answer you?” From the shocked looks the council gave him, that little wrinkle had occurred to none of them.

“Of course,” Leia said dismissively, “My profession is not the safest. It made him feel better that he could reach out any time, and know I was all right.”

Anakin nodded eagerly. “It’s like having a secret language,” he said. “Only better, because no one can hear us that we don’t want to.” The words rang through the Force with his childish glee.

Leia glared challengingly at Master Yoda, who looked like his entire world had been turned upside down. “I know it’s a simple thing, but he did learn it faster than I did.”

A simple thing? Leia thought this was a simple thing? By the Force, what did she think was hard? And she had taught this to a child. A powerful child, but a child. Master Yoda had said Anakin only had the beginnings of control. Obi-Wan had never known a time in his life where the oldest and wisest of them all, had been so wrong.

Anakin had more than the beginnings of control, he had a firm and solid grip on it. And in this one instance, probably better then Obi-Wan himself did. Leia had also been right to be dismissive of the claims of the council that older children couldn’t eventually master the deeper techniques of the Jedi. She, and Anakin, had just casually upended centuries of Jedi belief on this subject.

Anakin shook his head. “It’s cause you’re a good teacher.”

Leia snorted. “I’m a lousy teacher.” Obi-Wan looked at the council member’s faces as the shock grew into outright disbelief for many of them. Leia, who had done what most of them thought was
impossible, thought she was a lousy teacher?

Leia grimaced. “We’re just both fortunate you learn fast. If you took as long as I did, you’d still be struggling with it.”

“And how long did it take you to learn?” Master Billaba asked in a strangled voice.

Leia stiffened. “To be consistent? About a year.”

“That is not possible,” Master Mundi finally sputtered.

Leia gave him a frankly unimpressed look. “I’m sorry that I don’t meet your exacting standards-”

“Leia,” Master Qui-Gon interrupted gently, “that is not what he meant.”

“Then what did he mean?” Leia asked, banging her cane on the floor in irritation.

“Leia--” Master Qui-Gon’s voice faded. He just looked lost.

“Are you going to finish that thought?” she snapped. “Or are you going to stare at me?”

“Who taught you?” Master Qui-Gon breathed. “Why didn’t they tell you, you are extraordinary.”

Leia lost all of her defensive posture. “Excuse me?”


“No,” she shook her head, “that can’t be right. It’s not that--”

“Hard,” Master Windu finished for her, and she turned to look at him. “I think you have a very skewed idea of what is hard, Mistress Solo.” He gestured around the council, “None of us, save Master Yoda, can talk in the Force like you, and” he paused, looking at Anakin, his words coming out like he couldn’t believe what he was saying, “young Skywalker, can.”

“But that can’t be right,” she said, taken aback. “Lu-” she cut herself off and corrected to. “The person who taught me this, every one of his students could do this.”

The entire council’s focus narrowed in on her. Master Yoda spoke sharply, “Taught you this, your Master did?”

Leia’s face darkened. “Master?” she asked in a dangerous voice.

“Your teaching Master,” Master Qui-Gon interjected quickly. “Not master in the sense that you were owned.”

Obi-Wan kept his grimace to himself. That had been a horrible word choice for Master Yoda to pick. Obi-Wan didn’t think Leia had ever been a slave, or if she had, she hid it well. But the connotations of the word Master was in no way similar to what the word had been twisted into in the Outer Rim. It would be a sore spot for Leia. Especially given what she had seen on Tatooine, never mind that it involved people she cared for. Sometimes Obi-Wan thought that the council could do with a remedial course in language and meaning.

Leia looked at Master Qui-Gon, and her irritation faded. “No,” she said softly, “that wasn’t what he was to me.”
“Then what was he to you?” Master Windu asked.

A fond smile broke out on Leia’s face. “First and foremost, he was my friend. And someone I loved dearly.”

“That wasn’t an answer to the question,” Master Mundi said, voice tight in annoyance. Obi-Wan was sympathetic, he could feel the council’s worry and concern. Part of the Jedi’s role in the Republic was to keep an eye on all of the other Force sects. It was done so that never again, could any of them rise up, and threaten the Republic like the Sith had. That a sect had emerged, and was capable of this level of manipulation of the Force, and the Jedi had no idea, was at best, worrying. At worst, it was a dereliction of one of their most sacred duties.

Leia’s eyes flashed. “It was an answer, but it’s not one you would understand,” she said. “But in the context of what you are asking, he was my tutor, whose help I needed.”

“Hmmm,” Master Yoda said. He closed his eyes, “A Jedi, I think he was,” he said, and there were gasps all around the room. His eyes opened. “Your shields, how you cried out, techniques too similar to ours to be anything else.”

For the first time in this conversation, Leia looked uneasy. She stared at Master Yoda, and then said in a reluctant voice, “Yes, he called himself a Jedi.” Not, he was a Jedi, that he called himself one. Interesting.

“And he never offered to teach you more?” Master Windu asked, leaving aside who this mysterious Jedi could possibly have been.

Her chin came up. “I was never his apprentice,” she said hotly.

“By your choice, or by his?” Obi-Wan was mortified to find the question rolling out of him without thinking. He gave a bow to the council. “I am sorry for speaking out of turn Masters-” but Leia cut him off.

“Mine,” she said firmly. Obi-Wan was surprised to see genuine interest in her eyes as she looked at him. “But he also knew how I felt about being a Jedi, so he never offered.”

“His name?” Master Yoda asked.


Master Yoda’s ears flattened, “His name, that was not,” Obi-Wan blinked. He had felt a wobble around that name, but not an outright lie.

Leia gave Master Yoda a bitter smile. “That was his family’s name,” she insisted.

Master Yoda harrumphed. “Hiding something you are.”

“Yes,” Leia said simply. “But it’s not a lie to say Luke’s family name was Lars.” There was nothing but the truth in that statement.

“Who trained him?” Master Windu asked,

Leia looked at him coolly. “Luke didn’t give me the entire lineage of his teachers, Master Windu.”

He gave her a disappointed look.

Anakin squeezed her fingers. “Leia,” he said softly. She looked down at him, and his voice was
chiding, “They are only curious. Wouldn’t you be?”

Her face still held that stubborn set for a moment longer, then it softened, “The irony of you counseling me to patience and understanding is not lost on me,” she told him primly. He only grinned back at her.

Leia rolled her eyes. “Fine,” she huffed at Anakin. “Luke said his first teacher’s name was Ben,” she said, with no small bit of resentment.

Obi-Wan wanted to gape at her obstinence. She might have decided to give an answer, but she was going to make the council fight for every word. He had thought his Master was the person who could most rile the council in the entire galaxy, with his obstinance and headstrong ways. He had nothing on Leia.

“Ben what?” Master Billaba asked.

Leia’s mouth twitched just the slightest. “Kenobi.”

As one, the entire council turned to look at Obi-Wan. He fought not to show his consternation on his face. “I know of no one in my family who ever became a member of this Order,” he said very quickly. The Jedi weren’t encouraged to seek out their blood relations, but they weren’t forbidden either. Obi-Wan had done it more for curiosity’s sake, then any real desire to know. He knew that Master Gallia had a cousin in the Order, but the women weren’t all that close.

Master Windu peered at Leia, “Do you know of any connection between the two?”

Leia regarded Obi-Wan thoughtfully. “I didn’t know a lot about the man,” she said. “He died before I ever met him. But I think I can safely say he wasn’t in any way related to your young padawan here.”

Again, the Force said that was the truth. And again, his read on her body language said lie. Obi-Wan had been taught his whole life to trust in the Force, and the instincts he had when listening to its message. So why was it contradicting itself?

“Is there anything else you can tell us about this tutor of yours?” Master Piell asked. Obi-Wan knew that the moment this meeting was over, Master Jocasta was going to be summoned and immediately tasked with searching the Jedi archives about every padawan and knight who had left the Order, or gone missing.

Leia shook her head. “He’s gone,” she said, “and his students with him.”

While Obi-Wan could feel the grief rolling off her, he was relieved. The last thing the Order needed now was a schism brewing.

“Telling us everything you are not,” Master Yoda said, reproach in his voice.

Obi-Wan looked at the master in surprise. Yes, it was troubling that another Force sect had come and gone without the Order being aware. The fact that this Luke Lars had called himself a Jedi was something the Jedi were going to have to investigate. But Leia wasn’t lying when she said they were gone. This was a problem that wasn’t immediate and gave the Jedi more breathing room to figure out what was going on. Getting Leia to indulge anything required a gentle touch. She had already proven herself stubborn and unwilling to answer even the most basic questions. Did Master Yoda really think he could push her into revealing anything right now? The long approach was the one to take, the Jedi were supposed to be patient. Why was Master Yoda missing that?
Leia shook her head. “We are not here to talk about me,” she said. “I am here to talk about the Sith.”

Master Mundi shook his head, “He was not a Sith. And we will get to the bottom of whoever attacked Master Qui-Gon,” he said. “We are more interested in you.”

“A rather cavalier attitude to take to my wellbeing, Master Mundi,” Master Qui-Gon said. “Especially given that Leia wasn’t the one who attacked me. She is here, of her own free will, to help us.”

Master Piell glared at Leia. “If that is the case, then she is being willfully stubborn.”

“I’m stubborn?” she asked, incredulous. “One of your own knights was attacked by a man who was wielding a red lightsaber and used the Dark Side of the Force. Yet you refuse to accept what he was.”

“But because it is impossible,” Master Mundi said, voice straining to keep his anger in check.

“Oh, because you declare it so, then it must be the case,” Leia snapped back. “As impossible as talking through the Force halfway across the known galaxy?” Leia asked, an eyebrow arching. “That is also something I am capable of.” She glared at Master Yoda. “Or as impossible as learning to control the Force even if you are older?”

None of the council members had an answer to those very good points. She huffed, “I am wasting my time. You won’t even listen to me about the Sith who is currently rotting away in this Temple of yours. Why are you even bothering to ask me any other questions if you think I’m a liar, and am here to deceive you all?”

This was rapidly heading out of control, but Obi-Wan could see no way to divert it. Leia wouldn’t listen to him, and the council certainly wasn’t going to heed the word of a padawan.

Master Poof cleared his throat, “No one is accusing you of anything Mistress Solo,” he said softly.

Leia’s gaze flicked to him, and then back to Master Yoda, “Aren’t you?” she said softly.

Master Yoda said nothing, just stared at her.

Master Mundi glared at Leia, “We are not,” he insisted. “But you are proving to be far more of a hindrance than help at this point.”

Leia snorted. “No, I am a clear warning shot across your bow. You just don’t want to listen to what I have to say. The Sith are a threat.”

Master Koon cleared his throat. “Even if he was a Sith,” he said cautiously, “he is dead. By your own hand.”

Leia looked at him, and some of her hostility faded. “Yes, he is,” she allowed, “but he didn’t learn what he did from nowhere. Someone taught him.”

“Like you?” Master Yoda asked,

With that, Leia’s anger was back. “Luke is gone,” she said. “You know I’m not lying, so why are you pressing this?”

“took a student, you did,” Master Yoda pointed to Anakin. “For true mastery, a student one must take.”
Leia’s eyes narrowed. “Control,” she said, “I taught him control. I have no interest in being a Jedi, or whatever else you think I’m up to.”

“Taught him more than that, you did.” Master Yoda’s ears flicked back. “Skills he has, some not mastered by Jedi here.”

Leia shook her head. “It’s not my fault that you think you know everything about the Force.” Her voice was tight. “Even the weakest of Luke’s students learned how to talk in the Force. Not as far as I can, but they did learn it.”

“And did this Ben Kenobi teach him how to do it?” Master Koon asked.

Leia’s eyes landed on Master Yoda, and then oddly, she looked at Obi-Wan. “I used to think so,” she said slowly, as she studied Obi-Wan’s face, “but given your reactions today, I think this is something Luke figured out on his own.”

Master Yoda’s eyes narrowed. “Believe you, I do not. Told you more he did.”

Leia shook her head. “No, he didn’t.”

“Are we supposed to believe that you just blindly followed his teachings?” Master Piell sounded very doubtful. Obi-Wan couldn’t blame him. He had known Leia for less than two days, and he already knew she wasn’t someone who trusted.

Leia looked at him, shocked, “In this, yes. He knew what he was doing. I didn’t.”

“Deceived you easily, he could have,” Master Yoda pointed out.

“You yourself said he called himself a Jedi,” Master Tiin piled on, “Not that you believed him about being one.”


Her morals? That was the only thing her tutor relied on to keep her from the Dark Side? Yes, Leia struck him as an opinionated, self-righteous woman, but that wasn’t enough. When the Force was involved, perception became everything.

“What else did he teach you that we would consider difficult?” Master Billaba asked.

“How should I know?” Leia asked back, frustrated. “As I said, I am not a Jedi, and I have no idea what you do, and do not, consider hard.”

“And you say that this Luke is gone, and his students are dead?” Master Windu asked.

Leia looked at him, and nodded her head, “Yes,” she said dully. Obi-Wan was struck by the look of grief on her face. She wasn’t lying, she had loved this tutor of hers. If it wasn’t for the fact that the last name was wrong, he would have thought Luke was her husband.

Master Windu cocked his head. “Did the Sith kill them?” he asked.

Leia flinched, “No,” she said, “It wasn’t the Sith. It was…” her voice trailed off. Anakin came up and took her hand again. She took in a deep breath, looking down at him. He gave her a smile. She gave him a watery one in return. She shook her head, and looked Master Windu in the eyes. “It
doesn’t matter. They are gone too.”

“Did you kill them?” Master Billaba asked, voice deliberately neutral.

“No!” Leia almost shouted, and beside her, Anakin’s face went very pale, and he sucked in a breath. For a moment, Obi-Wan caught the faintest glimmer of the Force moving between them as easily as water through a river. Leia closed her eyes, and that faint hint, and the emotion behind it, was gone. Anakin’s face immediately relaxed.

Neither Master Windu, nor Master Yoda missed that little exchange between the two of them. The rest of the council did, Obi-Wan noted, they were too startled by Leia’s vehement denial. Despite her cutting tone, that one word was the closest she had come to yelling in this entire conversation.

“No,” Leia said, in a much calmer voice, “I did not kill them. But they are still gone.” She shook her head. “And even when they were still around, they were not the threat the Sith are now.”

Master Yoda rubbed his chin. “Determine that, on our own, we will,” he said.

“Why am I not surprised?” Leia asked resigned.

“Head of this Order, I am,” Master Yoda said. “My duty it is to see all threats, and handle them, it is.”

“Like me?” Leia asked mockingly.

Master Yoda leaned back in his chair, and Master Windu said softly, “I don’t think the Sith could have returned without us seeing it.”

Leia snorted. “Like you saw how Anakin is doomed?”

Master Yoda shook his head. “Saw what I did, you did not.”

“No,” Leia agreed in a coolly malevolent voice, “but I know what I’ve lived through, and the future I have glimpsed. Trust me when I tell you, it’s worse than anything you could possibly imagine.” She gave them a condescending look. “If I’m not letting my fear rule me, why are you?”

“Clouded his future is,” Master Yoda restated, holding Leia’s gaze, “but no future I see for you.”

Both Anakin and Shmi gasped, and stepped closer to Leia on instinct, as if they could ward off whatever disaster was coming. Leia’s cool, calculating look didn’t change. She didn’t look all that perturbed about her possible death. Did she not care? Or had she faced it so many times as a bounty hunter, it no longer phased her?

“Can’t see a future as in, there is no future for me?” she asked. “Or can’t because you can’t see me?” Master Yoda’s eyes flickered to Master Windu, who leveled him a look. “See you I cannot,” Master Yoda admitted.

Both Anakin and Shmi looked relieved while several of the council members shifted uneasily in their seats.

“Hidden yourself from me, you have.” Master Yoda stomped his cane. “Impossible that is.”

Leia shot him a pitying look. “You keep saying that, and I keep proving you wrong.”

Master Yoda didn’t look all that reassured by that reminder.
But in this case, your inability to see me has nothing to do with anything I have done or am doing.”

Master Windu steepled his fingers in front of his face. “You might not be doing it, but you have a theory as to why it’s happening.”

Leia looked back to him. “No, I don’t. Mainly because I don’t have any idea what you are talking about. Seeing into the future has never been one of my strengths. Since I’m not doing anything, ergo, I am doing nothing to cause the problem.”

She couldn’t see into the future? Then what were she and Anakin talking about earlier? Or was this one of those things Leia thought she only had a “basic” grasp of?

“Know this, perhaps, you do not,” though Master Yoda sounded like he was doubtful of that, “but learn to hide what you are, from others, that you did.”

“Yes,” Leia said.

Master Yoda’s eyes grew troubled, “Why?”

Leia cocked her head. “Because it’s not something I want to broadcast everywhere?”

“Were you hiding from us?” Master Koon asked.

Leia blinked and then shook her head. “No, of course not,” she said, and again, nothing but the truth. Leia didn’t consider them a threat to her.

Master Yoda’s eyes narrowed. “But hide you did want to.”

“Not everyone who is a Force User is as benign as the Jedi Order. It seemed,” she shrugged, “prudent.”

“What age, you were? When you learned this, you did?” Master Yoda pressed.

“Consciously or unconsciously?” she asked back flippantly.

“Unconsciously?” Master Koon asked, leaning forward in his seat.

She turned to him, but apparently, she read his scholarly interest in the Force. With the mask, Master Koon’s voice could be hard to read without practice. “Yes,” she said, voice less hostile “Where I grew up it wasn’t safe, for Force Sensitives. My tutor theorized that I picked up on that at an early age, and learned to,” she waved a hand in the air, “curb what I was.”

“Interesting,” Master Koon settled back in his seat, “I suppose with a strong enough connection to the Force, you could bend it enough so that you would escape the notice of others with a weaker connection to the Force then you. I’ve never seen it happen firsthand, but I’ve theorized that is what happened once or twice, with some of the younglings we found in precarious situations.” He tilted his head. “They sensed the danger and cloaked what they were.”

Leia blinked. “Really?”

Master Koon nodded. “Of course, it was only with the strongest of Force Sensitives that this happened.” He gave her a long level look. “Qui-Gon said you were aware of what your midi-chlorian count was.”

“Are you asking me if I care to share?” she said, but there was the slightest bite to her voice, as if she was rapidly losing patience with Master Koon
“Yes,” he said plainly.

Leia laughed. “Well, I will give you credit Master Plo Koon, you certainly don’t beat around the bush.”

“Why bother?”

“Why indeed?” she seemed amused by his straightforwardness, and Obi-Wan let out an internal sigh of relief that at least one member of the council didn’t irritate her. “And yes, I do know it. And no, I will not be sharing.”

“Why?” Master Koon asked.

Her smile went from amused to forced. “Because you are already afraid enough of me.”

Master Yoda stomped his cane, impatience in his tone. “Answered my question, you have not. Know what I meant, you did!”

Leia’s face grew hard. “It was heavily implied, yes,” she said, “but I want no miscommunication here Master Yoda.”

Several council members muttered under their breaths.

“How old were you, when hide yourself, deliberately?” Master Yoda gritted out.

“The technique? When I was twenty-three.” Those murmurs and whispers came again. Obi-Wan couldn’t blame them. Most of them couldn’t manage it to the degree Leia did, and they had much less to hide, and years longer to practice. Until today Obi-Wan would have said it was impossible for an adult to learn a skill up to the level of a Jedi’s mastery. But not only had Leia done that, but she had also surpassed them.

Master Yoda shook his head, “Worrying you are,” he said.

Leia looked at him sadly. “Because you are afraid of me?”

Master Yoda shook his head, “Afraid of you I am not—,” then he gave out a startled yelp, and he fell back into his seat, clutching his head.

“Master Yoda—” Master Tiin started to say, and then a massive wave moved in the currents in the Force around the room. Every member of the council in the room sat up straighter, and Obi-Wan hastily threw up every shield he had as Leia’s power was suddenly there and pulsing along his skin painfully.

Leia herself was rigid, and Obi-Wan could see even from where he stood how she was vibrating with fury. She turned furious eyes on the Grand Master of the Jedi Order. “I warned you about trying to enter my mind,” she said, every word very clearly enunciated, fists clenched. “Do not ever try that again Master Yoda. Or I will not be as kind when I throw you out the next time.”

Master Yoda’s gasp was drowned out by several of the councilors gritted teeth, and Master Qui-Gon stepped forward, “Leia—” he started to say.

She whirled on him, “What? Or are you going to stand there and defend—”

Master Qui-Gon put his hands up in surrender, “No,” he said hastily, and he just managed to contain his wince as the Force pulsed in time with her words, “but perhaps, you can tone it down a bit?” he
asked. He gestured to himself, and then the rest of the council, “I’m afraid that you are hammering a bit hard on all of us.”

Leia’s face remained frustrated. “Then strengthen your shields,” she snapped.

“We are,” Master Windu’s voice was tight with pain, “but you are overwhelming all of us.”

“But-“ Leia looked down at Anakin, who only looked back up at her in confusion. Then her gaze fell around the semi-circle of the council as she noted the expressions on all their faces. Abruptly everything cut off, and Obi-Wan let out a long sigh of relief.

“But I wasn’t even trying to hurt you. I was just making my point.” Leia looked completely taken aback. “Why are your shields so weak? You are the Jedi Council, you should be some of the strongest Force users in the galaxy.”

“Not all of us,” Master Billaba said, rubbing her forehead. “Strength isn’t only about raw power. It is also about wisdom, and learning. About how to lead, and how to follow.”

Leia actually looked abashed. “You are correct,” she said, and Obi-Wan was fascinated to watch as a blush crept up her face. “I offer my sincerest apologies, to those who I completely took off guard.”

“You’ve done something like this before?” Master Windu’s mouth was a firm line.

“Yes,” Leia said, “When I wanted to get someone’s attention.”

“This someone was a Force user?” he pressed.

“Of course,” Leia said. “There is little point doing that with someone who isn’t a Force Sensitive.” There was a frown on her face. “But none of them ever reacted like that, and I know most of them weren’t as strong as me.”

Master Piell gave her a hostile look. “Maybe they were too afraid of you to tell you,” he said.

Leia snorted and rolled her eyes. She actually rolled her eyes at a member of the Jedi Council like a sulky teenager. “Unlikely.”

“You knew them, and you interacted with them?” Master Koon asked, and even his face mask couldn’t hide the surprise in his voice. “The students of this tutor of yours. You knew them.”

“Of course, I knew them,” Leia said, like that was the most obvious thing in the world. As if she was unaware that even the smallest glimmers on information were impossible to extract from her. “And yes, I interacted with them. Generally, that is what you do to get to know people, unless the Jedi have some other way, I’m unaware of.”

Master Mundi ignored her sarcasm. “Which means you were aware of the teaching methods this Luke used.”


Master Poof’s head swung back and forth on his long elegant neck in his excitement. “Can you tell us? In as much detail as you can remember?”

Leia’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Because every Jedi lineage has its own way of doing things,” Master Poof explained, voice rising in
pitch at the possible solution he had found to this question. “Of approaching the Force.”

Leia blinked. “Really?” she sounded dubious.

Master Poof nodded, “Yes. Certain phrases, certain meditation techniques, what history is, and is not passed along. It is not an exact methodology, but it could set us on the right path to finding out where Luke came from.”

“Why is this so important to you?” Leia asked. “That you know where Luke’s teacher came from?”

“It is our duty.” Master Piell started, but was cut off before he could finish.

“To make sure that everyone is using the Force the way you deem fit?” Leia asked, arching an eyebrow.

“We are entrusted as guardians of the Republic,” Master Rancisis said gravely, “but we were also tasked to ensure that all Force users are monitored, thus ensuring that a threat such as the Sith, never rise again.”

Leia let out a sudden bitter laugh. “You are failing on that,” she said. “You have no idea how much you are failing at that task.”

Master Rancisis nodded. “We are,” he agreed with her, “Because you are here, as proof, that one of our members has struck out on his own.”

Leia shook her head. “That was not what I meant. And Luke was never a member of this Order. I can promise you that.”

Master Tiin nodded his head. “Probably not,” he agreed, “But his teacher, Ben Kenobi, he more than likely was. We need to know how many students he had, because Luke is probably not the only one.”

“What makes you say that?” Leia asked.

“To see a student to becoming a Knight, a great responsibility that is,” Master Yoda said, finally speaking up, “but also, much we learn, when we teach others. More and more skilled we become, showing others the way.”

“You think that Ben taught many people, so he could become more skilled?” Leia asked Master Yoda.

He nodded. “Know everything about what you know, we must.”

She looked at him for a very long moment, then shook her head. “No,” she said. “Luke was his only living student.”

“How would you know?” Master Piell demanded. “You said you never met him.”

Leia’s face twisted in frustration. “No,” she said slowly, “I did not. But Luke knew Ben, and he said Ben had only one other student, who was destroyed years before Luke began his training.”

Master Yoda tapped his fingernails on his cane. “Much trust you have, in your Mast-tutor’s judgment.”

“Something I learned to have faith in the hard way,” Leia answered back cryptically. And what had this tutor of hers done, to earn such faith from this woman? “And I think you are using Luke as an
excuse to avoid talking about the Sith.”

Master Yoda glared at her. “Tell us everything, you should.”

Leia stiffened, and Obi-Wan was surprised to see the briefest flash of fear cross her face. “Are you going to go rooting in my head again for the answers if I don’t?”

Master Yoda sounded aghast. “Trying to enter your mind, I was not.”

No, he wasn’t. To do that, against the will of someone, required the Dark Side. But Master Yoda had been probing those walls again, more than likely trying to see if anything slipped out of them during a heated discussion. Given her reaction the first time he tried that, he had been trying to stay hidden about it.

But what was even more worrying, was that Leia had felt Master Yoda do it when he was trying to stay hidden. That was no easy task. And she had pushed him away. With the barest of efforts, she had pushed away the strongest Jedi that the order had ever seen.

Leia sneered. “You are relying on semantics. You have no right to anything from me, Master Yoda. I have had enough strangers in my head for one lifetime.”

“Who?” Master Windu asked leaning forward in his seat, looking concerned. Sith Lord or no Sith Lord, pressing into another’s mind without their consent was something one could only do with the Dark Side. None of the sects they currently were watching were capable of it, but if one of them had figured out how to do it, it needed to be dealt with, now.

“A Sith Lord,” she spat, “named Darth Vader.” As soon as that name left her lips, she froze. If the look of horror on her face was anything to go by, she hadn’t intended to say that name out loud. Both Anakin and Shmi were looking at her with an almost hungry interest. So, it just wasn’t the council she kept things from. It looked like neither of the Skywalkers had heard this name either.

“The Sith are-” Master Mundi started to say.

That broke Leia out of her paralysis. She whirled and pointed her finger at him, cutting him off. “If you say extinct I will-”

“Leia!” Master Qui-Gon cut her off, and she turned to him, face ready to snarl. But there was nothing but sympathy and understanding on his Master’s face. “Was he the reason you sought training?”

There were several sharp glances from several Masters towards her, and understanding flowed through all of them. If Leia had been attacked by a Dark Side user, it certainly explained a few things about her. Why, even if she was disdainful of the Force, she had sought help in learning to achieve more control of it. Her violent reaction to Master Yoda’s prying. Master Yoda truly hadn’t been trying to get into her mind, but the experience was close enough to the assault that Leia had once endured, she had lashed out. No wonder she had warned him to stay away, if that was the reaction she had to unfamiliar minds near hers.

Leia blinked, looking a little taken aback. Then she nodded. “Yes,” she said. “Because of him.”

Master Qui-Gon looked thoughtful. “What happened to him?” he asked, sounding concerned.

Leia’s face paled, and her breath started coming in slightly faster. “He’s gone,” she said through bloodless lips. “Like everything else.” But there was something off about that statement. Obi-Wan wasn’t sure if it was because Leia was letting her fear of this man cloud her judgment, to the point
where she couldn’t fully accept that he was gone. Or was it because she really wasn’t sure?

Master Piell let out a long sigh. “If you really did suffer an attack from another Force user, then your fear is understandable. As is your confusion about him being a Sith Lord.”

Leia’s hesitancy vanished in a moment. “Are you telling me I don’t know the name of the person who forced his mind into mine?” she asked incredulously.

Master Poof’s voice was gentle. “No, but just because your attacker believed he was a Sith, didn’t mean he was. There have been a few Dark Side users in the last thousand years who have tried to claim the mantle of the Sith. They were nothing but hollow echoes.”

“Vader was a hollow echo of nothing,” she snarled, and Obi-Wan could practically feel the fear in her words. “I once watched him mow down an entire squadron of highly trained, and armed soldiers, in less than three minutes.”

Obi-Wan suppressed a shiver. The Jedi preferred not to use violence, but once they did, it took more than just one squadron to slow them down. A Sith would have all the same skills, only honed for destruction.

Master Yoda looked concerned. “Yet survived, you did,” he said.

Leia shuddered. “Only because I could lead him to something he wanted,” she told Master Yoda hoarsely.

“And what did this Sith Lord want from you, hm?” Master Yoda asked.

Leia paused for a second. Obi-Wan could see her gather herself, that panic and pain locked away from her face. She straightened to her full height, and her chin came up. “Something he was never going to get.”

Master Yoda looked at her. “Certain of that, are you?”

A grimly satisfied smirk crossed Leia’s face. “Yes,” she said.

“Familiar with their ways you are,” Master Yoda said accusingly.

Leia flashed him a mocking smile. “Yes, I am,” she agreed, and there was the slightest bite to those words. Obi-Wan was missing something here. Leia and Master Yoda were having an entirely different conversation than the rest of them. “Because, as I said, I have had the misfortune to have one force himself into my mind.”

Master Yoda leaned forward in his seat and pointed a finger at Leia. “No,” he said, “know of impossible things you do. Lying to us, you are.”

Leia’s mocking attitude didn’t fade. “As Master Tiin said,” she pointed out, “you are the oldest and wisest of the Jedi. Did I ever directly lie?”

“No,” Master Yoda agreed reluctantly, “but your words, twisted they are.”

Leia’s mouth quirked. “My Papa called that being diplomatic,” she said lightly.

Diplomatic? What did Leia think hostile looked like?

Master Yoda stomped his cane. “Knew that creature was on the planet, you did.”
Leia’s playful hostile manner dropped, and that fierce resolve and anger of hers took its place. “No, I did not,” she hissed. “You can imply I’m a Dark side user all you want Master Yoda, but I will not tolerate even the suggestion I would endanger my family like that.”

And several puzzling instances in this conversation fell into place in Obi-Wan’s mind. He looked around the council, Master Qui-Gon looked disappointed in the suggestion, and Master Windu looked grim, but unsurprised. Everyone else looked shocked, and immediately quiet murmurings broke out among all of them.

This small chaos went on for a minute, until Master Windu cleared his throat pointedly, bringing everyone’s attention to him. Master Windu looked at Leia, face grave, “No, I don’t believe that you would endanger them,” he said, voice serious. “But you do have to admit from our perspective, your actions, your existence, is cause for alarm.”

Leia let her gaze rest heavily on Master Yoda. “Because you are uncertain of my motives?” she asked in a soft dangerous voice. “Or because you have no way to control me?”

Master Billaba sputtered. “We do not-”

But Leia cut her off. “Master Yoda?” she pressed.

“Dangerous you are,” Master Yoda insisted. “Strong you are. Familiar with our ways, you are. Answer our questions, you will not.”

“Of course, I’m dangerous,” Leia said to Master Yoda, temper making her face slightly red. “You’re dangerous.” She pointed her cane in Obi-Wan’s direction. “Obi-Wan over there is dangerous. But that doesn’t mean we will do anything that crosses our minds.”

Master Qui-Gon stepped forward, voice strident. “Master Yoda,” he said firmly, “Leia is not our enemy.”

“Tell us who trains her, she will not,” Master Yoda insisted. “Hidden from me, in all ways, she is. Knows the abomination the Sith did with the Kyber crystals, she does. A threat she is.”

“So that automatically makes me a Dark Side user?” Leia’s voice was this side of incredulous.

“Why tell us nothing, you will?” Master Yoda asked, voice scathing. “Even from where you came?” He settled back in his chair. “Only sinister motives you have, to hide such simple things.”

Leia let out a bitter laugh. “How fortunate I didn’t tell you where I’m from,” she said. “You wouldn’t have believed me. You can’t even accept the fact that Master Jinn encountered a Sith, even when his body and lightsaber are right here!”

“He was not-” Master Mundi started to say.

“And that isn’t even taking Anakin into account.” Leia said, not letting him finish “balance, the Chosen One is supposed to bring balance. Did it ever occur to you in order to do that, things have to be out of balance?”

“You believe he is the Chosen One?” Master Qui-Gon would seize on that in the middle of this mess.

Leia looked at him, face grey. “If the prophecy is, as you have told it to me, then yes, Anakin is the Chosen One.” She looked at the council, and her gaze lingered on Master Koon and Master Koth. “And some of you believe it,” she said accusingly, “Or are starting to. But the thought of what he
represents frightens you.” Her face became withdrawn. “Just like I frighten you. But I’m an adult, and I can fight back.”

No one on the council said anything to that. It was Shmi, who broke the silence. She came up and squeezed Leia’s hand.

“Tell them the truth, Leia,” she said in a quiet voice. “They need to know.”

Leia looked at her for a long moment, then shook her head. “No,” she said. “No, that is not the way.”

Shmi looked at her gravely. “Why?”

Leia’s grin was bitter. “Why bother speaking to those who won’t listen?” Shmi flinched, and tried to move away, but Leia tightened her grip on her hand. “It wasn’t a complaint against you, grandmother,” she said, and she sounded so tired, “only an acceptance of what reality is in front of me.”

Shmi looked at her, and she looked so guilty. “I believe,” she said softly.

“Now,” Leia pointed out, “but I don’t have the luxury of giving them the same amount of time that I did you.” She dropped Shmi’s hands. “They have more proof then you did, and they still won’t see.”

Master Qui-Gon was watching all of this with great interest, but Obi-Wan was trying to follow what was going on in the Force. He could sense….something. Like the feeling that had been plaguing this entire mission since they accepted it. But the Force refused to answer his quiet pleading. It merely sung and danced away.

Obi-Wan’s eyes flickered to Master Yoda, who was watching the pair from beneath hooded eyes.

“Tell us you will not?” he asked. “Come here for help, you once planned to do.”

Leia let out a bitter chuckle. “And I would have been sorely disappointed.” She closed her eyes and seemed to be gathering herself. When she opened them up, she stood up straighter. “So be it,” she said, “It certainly isn’t the first time in my life I’ve had to scream to the skies, and no one listened or saw me. I will handle this myself.”

Beside him, Master Qui-Gon was staring at Leia intently. “I can see you just fine, Leia.”

She looked at him ruefully and shook her head. “You,” she said, “oh by all the gods, you are the one who is the most reasonable about all of this.”

She shook her head again, and spun around, clearly intending to leave.

Master Yoda called out, “Done, we are not.”

“Am I under arrest? Or a prisoner?” she asked, not even bothering to turn around.

“No,” Master Windu said slowly, “you are not. Even if you are a Dark Side user, it’s not against any Republic laws to be so.”

“Then I am done,” she said.

Shmi caught her arm. “Leia-” she started to say.
“Not yet,” Leia said sadly, looking at the woman. “I need a moment. Several moments, before I do something I might regret.

Shmi let Leia go, and she made her way out of the chamber.

Master Yoda waited until Leia was out of earshot, and asked quietly, “Tell us what you know, will you, Mistress Skywalker?”

Shmi turned around, and Obi-Wan was interested to note that she met the master’s eyes firmly, and her voice was clear. “That isn’t much, Master Yoda,” she said.

Master Poof’s voice was gentle, “Even the smallest bit would help.”

Anakin was the one who answered. “Leia said a storm is coming,” he said.

The council members exchanged wary looks, “What kind of storm?” Master Piell’s voice was considerably kinder than it had been through the whole disastrous meeting.

Shmi shook her head, “She didn’t say.” She gave Master Piell a disappointed look. “And I didn’t need to know. When someone you trust says duck, you don’t argue about the details.” Her gaze went to the door. “Especially when you know they are speaking the truth, even if they won’t tell you how they know.”

After that, there was no more need to question the Skywalkers. Master Koth had gotten to his feet, and offered to take them to the guest chambers of the Temple. Shmi had tried to protest, but Master Qui-Gon was the one who pointed out that until Leia came back from where she had gone to, it was the best place for them to be in the Temple.

“It is a large building,” he said. “And easy to get lost in. I will be sure to tell Leia where you are.”

Anakin looked at him. “You don’t have to,” he said. “Leia always finds me, even when I don’t want her to.”

Master Qui-Gon cocked his head, “She taught you to hide in the Force?” he asked, and the other Master’s in the room quieted, to not so subtly, listen to Anakin’s answer.

“Yeah,” he rubbed his eyes. “Said it would be safer for me. But no matter how hard I try to hide from her, I can never quite do it,” he said dully.

Having confirmation of something regarding Leia Solo was nice. Even if that something, was information they had all already inferred.

Shmi looked down at her son, and a look of concern crossed over her features. Obi-Wan couldn’t blame her. Anakin looked tired and beaten. A far cry from the energetic child of a few hours ago. “It would be nice to be able to take a small rest,” she acknowledged.

Master Koon gestured. “If you would follow me,” he said, and he led them out of the room.

The rest of the Masters soon followed suit, with Master Yoda leaving the room first. He was probably heading to his room to meditate. He had managed to hide it during the meeting, but given how stiffly he was moving now, the push Leia had given him in the Force had caused more damage
than Obi-Wan initially thought.

Soon it was just him, Master Qui-Gon, and Master Windu.

“When I asked you earlier today, what the hell you had done, I wasn’t expecting quite this much trouble Qui-Gon,” Master Windu said ruefully, as he got out of his chair.

Master Qui-Gon shrugged. “I didn’t create Leia,” he said. “I only found her.”

“And Anakin,” Master Windu pointed out.

Master Qui-Gon dipped his head in acknowledgment.

Master Windu massaged his temple. “You don’t think she’s a Dark Side user, do you?”

“No,” Master Qui-Gon said. “I don’t.”

“And you Padawan Kenobi?” Master Windu turned to look at him. “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” Obi-Wan said. “She cares for the Skywalkers. Enough to put their needs above hers. Dark Side users usually aren’t capable of such actions.” He bit his lip. “But Master Yoda is right. If she isn’t a Dark Side user, what is she hiding?”

Master Qui-Gon looked at him thoughtfully. “You felt her in the Force, on Tatooine. Did you feel any darkness?”

Obi-Wan thought about it. “No,” he admitted. “However, she was so loud I really couldn’t focus on anything but trying to shut her out.”

“Hmmm, there is that.” Master Qui-Gon asked Master Windu, “What do you think?”

“That she knows more than she is saying,” Master Windu said, “And about things we should know.” He gave a troubled frown to the door Leia had exited from. “But I don’t sense anything about her.”

He didn’t sound happy about that. Master Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow, “Shouldn’t that be a good thing?” he asked.

Master Windu shook his head. “No, I don’t sense anything about her, or her intentions, good or ill. It’s like she exists in a blank hole in the Force.”

Master Qui-Gon gave an indelicate snort.

Master Windu shook his head. “When she is standing in front of me, of course, I can sense her, Qui-Gon. She is rather hard to miss.” He closed his eyes. “Around the boy, I see many paths, most of them dark, but around Leia…” His voice trailed off, and he opened his eyes to look Master Qui-Gon in the eyes. “She might be hidden completely from Yoda, but I can see her.”

“I don’t understand,” Master Qui-Gon said.

Master Windu looked puzzled. “All the futures and paths flow around her. Like she cannot be taken into account.”

Obi-Wan and Master Qui-Gon exchanged worried looks. “Has that ever happened before?” Master Qui-Gon asked.

Master Windu shook his head. “No. And that worries me.”
“For now, she isn’t going anywhere,” Master Qui-Gon pointed out. “We have time to figure this out.”

“Once she calms down, she is going to leave this temple, and take those two with her,” Master Windu pointed out.

Master Qui-Gon looked frustrated. “We can’t allow that to happen,” he said. “We need more time.”

Master Windu shook his head, “I think you could wait centuries, and the decision will stay the same. Anakin won’t be trained as a Jedi.”

“But look at what he can already do-” Master Qui-Gon protested.

“And Leia can do it too,” Master Windu pointed out. “Are you suggesting we take her on as well?”

“If she can be convinced of it, yes,” Master Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan’s mouth dropped open. A child was one thing, but Leia was an adult. Was this Master Qui-Gon’s attempt to ask for the impossible, in order for his request to train Anakin seem more reasonable?

“Are you being serious?” Master Windu sputtered. “Qui-Gon, she can’t learn this. She is far, far too old!”

“Mace,” Master Qui-Gon said softly, “you were here, in this room. I rather think she can.” Master Windu made a face, but he didn’t disagree. “In fact, in some regards, I think she is years ahead of most of us. She might have reservations about learning more in manipulating the Force, but she isn't nearly as hostile about the philosophy behind that teaching.”

He was being serious, Obi-Wan realized with a sinking heart. He knew his Master was fond of going out on a limb, of accepting almost impossible fights, but this was lunacy. Never mind the council, Leia was never going to agree with this.

“And that’s why you think we should bring her into the Order?” Master Windu looked disbelieving, but open to his Master’s reasoning.

Master Qui-Gon looked thoughtful, “Mace, we have no way to know the extent of her abilities. By bringing her in, we would have the opportunity to learn them. She can also teach us in return. She knows many things we do not.”

“She has already refused to answer even the most basic of questions-” Master Windu started to say.

“Because she was attacked!” Master Qui-Gon sputtered. “And she was right. Why keep questioning her, if we weren’t going to believe her? If we give her time, and a reason to trust us, she would open up to us.”

Master Windu shook his head. “Are you really that desperate for an ally for your reforms in the Temple you would advocate her?” he asked.

Master Qui-Gon smirked. “She isn’t wrong,” he said.

“Only because you agree with her,” Master Windu snapped. “Personally, I think you just want someone in the Temple who is more of a pain in the council’s ass then you are.”

“There is that,” Master Qui-Gon admitted, semi-seriously. “But it also has to do with her potential.
Of what she can do, and be. Think of her loyalty to the Skywalkers, imagine that dedicated to the Order.” His face darkened a bit. “And frankly, I think, on the whole, the council would rather have her here, where they can watch her, then running around the galaxy, doing Force knows what.”

Obi-Wan was inclined to side with his Master on that point. Oh, not about her becoming a Jedi, that was folly of the highest order. But being able to keep a *very* close eye on Leia Solo was the most sensible thing his Master had proposed in the last few days.

There was also the small matter of the Sith that she kept going on about. Obi-Wan had no reason to doubt the history of the last thousand years. There had been no hints of the Sith anywhere, and for the first few centuries following the last Sith War, the Jedi had been hypervigilant about snuffing out the smallest *trace* of them. Obi-Wan didn’t think that they could have survived such methodical hunting.

But Leia wasn’t lying, not about that. She had been very clear and precise. So, that meant, either she was wrong, or the council was. This morning, Obi-Wan would have, without thought, taken the council’s side. He would have agreed that what Leia said was impossible. But then in the space of an hour, Leia had done several impossible things like they were *nothing*. It gave Obi-Wan pause. If Leia was right, about what could and could not be achieved in the Force, despite what the council thought, could she be right about this too?

“You said she isn’t our enemy,” Master Windu pointed out.

“And I don’t think she is,” Master Qui-Gon agreed. “But I don’t think her agenda matches ours. And if we get in her way, we will soon become a problem she has to solve.” A crafty look came across his face. “I would much rather have her as an ally, then face her across any battlefield.”

“You place a lot of faith in the abilities of one woman, that we know precious little about.” Master Windu pointed out.

“Yes,” Master Qui-Gon agreed, “a woman who is a master in her particular skills in the Force. Who learned it from someone we know nothing about, apparently lived on Coruscant at some point in her life, and managed to hide *all* of that from us, and the Republic.”

Master Windu looked worried, “And how do you know that?” he demanded. The Jedi didn’t have access to that information. They maintained their own databases of course, but they didn’t have access to the entirety of all the Republic’s intelligence and population data. That was the purview of the Judicial Forces, and if Master Qui-Gon had gotten this information through them, it meant they were about to insert themselves into this mess.

Master Qui-Gon shrugged, “The part about Coruscant? Shmi was who brought that up on our flight to the Temple. The part about her having no record in the Republic? The head of the Queen’s guard apparently had as many questions about Leia as we do. He had some contacts in Judiciary, and they ran her face through all known databases. She isn’t in *any* of them.” Master Qui-Gon looked thoughtful, “Which means she’s evaded *everyone’s* notice until now.”

Master Windu sighed, “When you put it that way,” he muttered. “It does sound impressive.”

“This is all a problem for tomorrow, I suspect,” Obi-Wan said.

Master Qui-Gon and Master Windu looked at him puzzled. “Leia is not going to leave tonight,” Obi-Wan pointed out. “Shmi and Anakin are *exhausted*, and I don’t think she would push them to leave until they’ve rested. Not when there is no physical danger here in the Temple.”
Master Windu nodded his head, “Agreed,” he said. “We will convene later tonight, with the council, and consult about what is to be done.” And with that, he left the room.

Obi-Wan sighed. “That could have gone better,” he observed.

“It could have gone worse,” Master Qui-Gon said lightly.

“How is there anything positive in any of this?” Obi-Wan demanded.

“I am now not the one Leia is the angriest with,” Master Qui-Gon said cheerfully. Obi-Wan just looked at him, flummoxed. “There is a bright side to everything my padawan. If you know where to look.”

Of course, because this was Leia Solo they were talking about, all their plans came for naught. They didn’t even need to go looking for her, she found them.

They were both in their quarters, after having eaten dinner, meditating. Both of them were in desperate need of such calming, and neither of them wanted to do it in the gardens and rooms set aside for that purpose in the Temple.

Obi-Wan wasn’t sure what the Temple at large knew about Leia, or Anakin for that matter. But he did know that the fact that he and his Master had brought a body back with them had spread like wildfire throughout the Temple. Even eating in the mess hall, there were whispers, and curious looks sent their way. Neither of them wanted to deal with questions right now, so they ate and retreated to their room.

It was ten minutes before they needed to leave for the meeting with the council, when there was a knock at the door. Obi-Wan was the closer of the two, so he was the one that got up to answer it. And for the second time in less than two days, was surprised to find Leia Solo on the other side of it.

She had changed her clothes, was his first thought on seeing her. She was no longer dressed in that expensive, elegant dress she had been wearing earlier. Instead, she was clothed in a pair of black leggings with a brown tunic for a shirt, tied off with a wide belt. It looked very similar to the style she had been wearing on Tatooine, but Obi-Wan couldn’t help but notice the quality of the fabrics.

Leia looked tired, as she met his gaze, her face was pale and worried. “Are you alright?” Obi-Wan asked out of habit, then any real desire to know.

Leia shook her head. “No, but that has been true for a long time now.”

Obi-Wan shuffled on his feet. Looking at this tired, beaten face, he had a hard time believing that she was a Dark Side user. It just didn’t fit with what he had seen of her, and her personality. She was a frustration, a mystery, and too hot-tempered for her own good, but not a Dark Side user.

This had all been handled poorly, on both sides. Obi-Wan had agreed with most of what Master Yoda, and the council, had said about Anakin. But he couldn’t condone how they had gone about it. They had frightened Anakin. And that, in turn, had unnecessarily riled Leia up so that she was hostile to them from the moment she had stepped foot in the council chambers. And in turn, her anger had fed into their unease and wariness of her. Leia knew something, something important. She was annoying and unnecessarily cryptic, but she was far from hysterical. If she said there was trouble coming, Obi-Wan was inclined to believe her.
But he was also aware that the council would never apologize for how they treated her. They didn’t see the need. But if he could be polite and welcoming, maybe, just maybe, she might confide in him.

“I’m aware the council can be a little rough,” he said. “I’m sorry that it came down upon you.”

Leia stared at him blankly for a moment, then let out a snort of derision. “No,” she said, “that is not why I’m not alright. They didn’t hurt me, or all seven of my feelings.”

Obi-Wan fought to keep his face neutral, as his instinctive retort was held back. He was trying to offer her manners and respect. All he got in return was sarcasm and deflection. But voicing that thought aloud wouldn’t get him what he wanted.

Leia’s eyes narrowed, “Say it,” she said. “I saw that thought fly right into the tongue biting down on it.”

“Seven is a little generous, wouldn’t you say?” he shot back, frustrated with her, this whole mess, everything. “I would say four, five at most.”

Leia just looked at him blankly, then burst out laughing. “Oh,” she said, “when you forget all the knots you tie yourself into, you are fun.”

Master Qui-Gon’s voice came from behind Obi-Wan. “He can be, yes.”

Leia’s grin was sharp, as she looked over Obi-Wan’s shoulder to Master Qui-Gon. “You should encourage that more.”

“Obi-Wan can be quite stubborn on rules and propriety,” Master Qui-Gon said as he joined Obi-Wan to stand in the door frame. “But if the council isn’t the reason for your foul mood, would you mind telling me what is?”

The amusement slid off Leia’s face, “That’s why I’m here actually.” She took a deep breath in. “Queen Amidala is going back to Naboo.”

To do what? Be captured by the Trade Federation? But it wasn’t the Jedi’s place to question that decision, only to defend her.

Master Qui-Gon kept his voice light. “I see. And how do you know that?”

Leia bit her lip, and she looked worried. “Because she asked me to come along.”

Master Qui-Gon arched an eyebrow “Did she?” he asked mildly.

Leia shot him a hostile look. “Yes, she did.”

Master Qui-Gon still looked politely disbelieving. “And I was just as surprised as you are that she asked,” Leia said hotly. If Master Qui-Gon wanted to get into Leia’s good graces, he wasn’t doing a good job of it.

And why did Queen Amidala want a bounty hunter in battle? Had she even had a conversation with the Leia?

“Very well,” Master Qui-Gon said. “I will inform the council.”

Leia gave a short nod of her head. “She said she would be coming here, to the Temple to pick us all up, after she gathered up her own people.”
“All of us?” Master Qui-Gon’s voice was wry. “That was a bit presumptuous of you.”

“You are still her guards, are you not?” Leia asked.

“Of course,” Master Qui-Gon said.

She flashed him a smug smile, “Then it wasn’t presumptuous. Just me being right.”

“You think that a lot?”

The smile dropped from her face, “Yes, because I usually am.” She didn’t sound all that triumphant about it. No, the emotion dominating her voice was sorrow. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and gave a long sigh. “I’m not here to fight with you Master Qui-Gon.”

“I am glad to hear it, for all that you are a worthy opponent.” Master Qui-Gon said, voice full of open admiration. She dropped her hand from her face and looked at him suspiciously. He simply looked back at her, only friendly politeness on his face.

She frowned, and said, “I just finished my conversation with the Queen. I still need to let Anakin and Shmi know I’m leaving.”

Master Qui-Gon nodded his head, “Of course. May I ask how long we have before the Queen arrives?”

Leia was looking very suspicious now. “She said about an hour.” She peered into Master Qui-Gon’s face. “Are you feeling alright?” she asked.

Master Qui-Gon looked startled, “Yes, of course, I am.”

Obi-Wan jumped in before Leia could get her back up more. “He’s in a good mood because he was butting heads with the council,” he told Leia. “It always puts him in a better frame of mind.”

Leia blinked, and hearing the sincerity in Obi-Wan’s voice, asked Master Qui-Gon dubiously. “Really?”

Master Qui-Gon nodded. “Yes, and it was a pleasure to have someone on my side for once in those chambers.” He flashed her a grin.

She gave him a long side-eyed glance, looking like she didn’t believe him, but couldn’t call him out, because there was nothing but sincerity in that statement. “You need better hobbies,” she told him.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan groused, “he does.”

Leia looked between the two of them, but all she asked was, “Is it alright if Anakin and Shmi stay here in the Temple while I’m on Naboo?”

Obi-Wan wondered why Leia didn’t simply get a hotel and stash the two of them in there. Why leave them here in the Temple, a place she had no fondness for? But Master Qui-Gon answered her, before Obi-Wan could ask. “It would be our pleasure.”

She nodded to him “I’ll be in the hangar bay in one hour,” she told him, and walked away.

“Well,” Obi-Wan observed, “We were going to have a meeting tonight anyway, how convenient.”

Master Qui-Gon laughed, “Indeed.”
Obi-Wan let out a long sigh. What was her Majesty thinking? She was going to take on the Trade Federation’s droid army with two Jedi, some pilots, and Leia Solo? It was all a recipe for disaster. But the Jedi obeyed, and he had been ordered to protect her. “Here’s where the fun begins,” he muttered darkly.

“What, the battle on Naboo?” His Master asked, “Or the one in the council chambers?”

“Both,” Obi-Wan groaned. He rubbed his hands over his face. “What perverse punishment is the Force trying to inflict upon us with that woman?” he asked, not really expecting an answer.

Master Qui-Gon laughed. “Whatever the Force has decided we needed to learn,” he said.

Obi-Wan kept his curses to himself. Perhaps he would use the trip to Naboo to imagine all the ways his life would have been infinitely easier over the last two days, if Leia Solo had never appeared into his life.

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