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**Finishing the Hat**

by The_Carnivorous_Muffin

**Summary**

Feeling out of place in Konoha, Lee begins an exploration department in Konoha, taking her apprentice Obito with her on an expedition to another dimension a long time ago in a galaxy far, far, away. There, she confronts the strange shinobi culture there and their disdain for attachment.

**Notes**

Obligatory note that this is NOT CANON.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

It was October 10th, the leaves a heady orange and red, giving out their last cry before fading away into the depths of winter. The day, too, was fading into night, the celebrations winding down and the twilight elongating shadows and blurring the edge between realities.

So, that one could almost see the lanterns of the other world, in which this day was not like any other, but was instead a great festival of the yondaime hokage’s last sacrifice for his people and the resealing of the Kyuubi.

It was a year after a day that had never happened, a day that glimmered in and out of the twilight if you could only stare long enough, and it was Namikaze Naruto’s first birthday.

(Also, Obito, for what it was worth, was feeling oddly poetic and nostalgic. Like most things since the Kannabi Bridge mission, he blamed Madara, or perhaps like Lee-shishou tended to insist, he simply blamed the irrationality of the universe.

Mostly, though, he’d find himself blaming Madara.)

And whatever show Lee had put on for Minato and Kushina, perhaps even for Naruto, had long since faded after they had left the hokage manor. Instead, as she gazed out into the horizon, there was a strange inhuman masklike quality to her features, like everything human about them had been stripped away.

Finally, she said, “I don’t think I’m supposed to be here, Obito,”

Maybe before, before, well, everything, he’d ask what she meant by that. Maybe he’d even insist that it wasn’t true. Of course, he hadn’t really known Eru Lee then, she’d always been on the periphery of sensei’s life and the unknown beloved sister of Kakashi. When she wasn’t there Kushina was, and when Kushina wasn’t there she was, and sometimes all three of them were there together, but all the same other than a few fleeting thoughts about how weird she was he hadn’t really given her much thought at all.

Obito would later regret that.

“Sometimes, I wonder if the universe isn’t actively pushing me out. I am, after all, a foreign god.
Worse, perhaps, I am the destroyer of worlds. I am a destroyer of worlds and villages in an era in which we hope to eliminate war entirely.”

There was an odd tilt to her lips with this, it was a line he’d heard her use more than once, even that early into his apprenticeship, but he still felt like he was missing something. But he had glimpsed it by then, he’d seen more of it than probably anyone else would have, even Namikaze Minato, on October 10th one year prior.

And she wasn’t wrong either.

The war hadn’t been kind to Lee’s generation, or Obito’s for that matter, but now that it was over there were certain shinobi that you did not send out into the field unless you meant to ruffle feathers and cause panic.

Eru Lee easily fit into this category.

She was the yondaime’s righteous sword, sheathed for now, always at the ready, but you didn’t use that type of weapon unless you truly meant it.

She sighed, straightened, and said darkly, “I’m having that butter feeling, like butter scraped over too much bread.”

She paused, then looked down at him, considering, “Obito, I’m planning on starting a space-time division, probably through ANBU.”

“A space-time division?” he asked, eyebrows raised, furrowing the brow on the unscarred portion of his face and, well, the other side of his face just didn’t move like it used to.

“Sure, you know, take one small step for man one giant leap for mankind, to find the summit of man’s imagination and the pit of his fears, to boldly go where no man has gone before,” Lee commented with a casual shrug, seeming to fall out of her own bout of nostalgia with the gesture, and into her preferred casualness.

He hadn’t realized it until he’d met her, but really, at the end of things, Kakashi’s nonchalance was nothing more than a cheap knock-off of his all but adopted older sister. It put a lot of Bakashi’s weirdness into perspective.
“That’s… That’s *Star Trek*, isn’t it?”

When one was apprenticed to Eru Lee they oftentimes found themselves recognizing a lot of references to English television and films. Or, in his sensei’s case, if you just lived with them forever and had grown up with them.

“Good catch, young grasshopper,” Lee said, seeming perhaps a bit too pleased, more pleased than she usually was by him mastering a jutsu or technique she’d laid out for him, which probably said more than enough about Lee as a teacher.

Then she paused and some of that sobriety returned from earlier, and when she looked at him it was as if she was looking through him, past the scars and his patchwork skin, past even the memories that he’d sometimes rather do without, to the very core of Uchiha Obito, “You’ve already learned enough to pass your jonin exams, and if you want to take them within the year I’ll stay long enough to watch. However, that said, you’re more than welcome to tag along if there’s something you still feel needs to be learned or said.”

She didn’t offer much more than that at the time, not whether she thought he had more to learn from her (which he probably did), whether he was good enough to hold his own with the likes of Kakashi (which he probably could give him a run for his ryo), or what it was she imagined her space-time division would be doing.

Still, for his own reasons, the fifteen-year-old chunin, so very different from the thirteen-year-old newly minted chunin version of the same boy, Uchiha Obito, said yes.

They came walking out of the deep wilds of the desert, dressed in dark clothing, carrying thickly stuffed packs upon their backs, cloaks shielding their faces and necks and dark goggles obscuring their eyes.

And even then, even when they were just mirages on the horizon, blurred by the sun and the sand, Anakin knew that they weren’t just sand people. That, in fact, they might not even be people at all.

For one thing, only sand people walked in and out of the desert on foot like that, anyone else used a speeder or at the very least a small hover craft. The desert was unforgiving, and even natives of Tatooine wouldn’t last more than a few hours directly under the twin suns.
That said, even at a distance, staring into the twilight as the second sun began to set, they were too tall for sand people. And the closer they came the more their clothes stopped looking like the robes of the sand people and more like, well, Anakin didn’t really know what.

Something off-world, foreign, at the very least.

And they were pale, paler than anyone who lived on the planet, paler than Anakin had thought possible in humans or even most species he’d seen. And that made sense, because for all that they looked human, there was something definitively inhuman about them.

He’d stood there, longer than he should have, long since he should have been headed back to his mother after the deliveries for Watto had been made, sitting on the beaten and bruised speeder staring off into the distance before the pair even reached the horizon.

The sense of something, he didn’t know what exactly but something, approaching had been overwhelming.

And he’d watched, somehow without his eyes, feeling like he was staring into a third sun even as the other two set. The pair shrouded in... he didn’t know what to call it, importance wasn’t the right word, but it was the right idea. Like everything, the suns, the moons, the desert itself, trailed behind dutifully in their shadows.

Like just by stepping foot on the planet everything about Tatooine had changed.

When they finally reached him and the speeder, stopping, the taller of the pair took off their goggles and revealing a pair of startlingly green eyes. He wondered if trees were as green as those eyes, he’d never seen a tree in person before, after all.

For a moment those eyes stared at him, silently, and Anakin stiffened feeling that he was being judged, being pulled apart and put back together, and that there wasn’t any feeling about it. He wasn’t lacking but he also wasn’t exceeding expectations, he was just...

“Koko wa doko?” Her words rang out despite how calmly and softly she said them, and for a moment despite his complete lack of understanding he almost understood, like he could understand the feeling or the thought of the words, even if the words themselves were unfamiliar.
She frowned, a slight expression, one not truly frustrated but certainly verging on it, “What do you call this place?”

The person next to her removed his goggles, revealing two extremely different colored eyes, one a dark flat black like that of a burned out ship and the other the same vibrant green as the woman’s. Anakin started, noting that even with most of the other’s face covered by cloth, by the goggles, the side of their face with the black eye was littered in thick pale scars.

The other, a man, muttered something to the woman, too fast for Anakin to catch syllables, all the same Anakin caught the feeling of ‘don’t bother’ and ‘you shouldn’t expect him to understand’.

“You’re on Tatooine,” he stopped, flushed as the pair looked towards him, surprise on the man’s… no boy’s, he really wasn’t that much older than Anakin’s, features, and a sort of blank inexpressiveness on the woman’s.

The woman then suddenly grinned, her lips twisting upwards, and she said something to the boy, again too fast and too unfamiliar for Anakin to really grasp while the boy’s eyes narrowed in response.

Anakin liked to think that she was saying, “See, look at that, he isn’t useless after all.”

Anakin smiled at the pair and said, haltingly, feeling out of sorts with everything and like he was messing up something important (something that shouldn’t even be happening, because while there was a feeling of importance there also was a feeling of wrongness, of confusion, of this isn’t supposed to happen), “I’m um, Anakin. My name is Anakin, Anakin Skywalker.”

He pointed back to Mos Espa, “I live there, in Mos Espa, with my mother. We…”

He didn’t want to say it, didn’t want to say he was a slave, not that they would understand but… He flushed them motioned to the speeder, “You shouldn’t stay in the desert, and it will be dark soon, you won’t make it in time on foot… I can take you back with me, to our house, if you need a ride.”

The woman turned to the boy, saying nothing, and the boy threw his hands in the air like something had just been decided.
Then the woman motioned to herself, vibrant red curls escaping her hood, looking like an extension of the sunset itself, “Watashiwa Eru Lee desu,”

Then, with a dramatic arm gesture, she motioned to the boy who now looked painfully awkward and embarrassed by all this, “Soshite, koreha Uchiha Obito desu,”

She grinned and with a strange delicate grace she sat on the back of the speeder, placing the goggles back onto her face with that same sharp edged grin, the boy sighed readjusted his own goggles and offered Anakin a short and rather embarrassed bow before joining to sit behind the woman.

And that was how Anakin first met the jedi Eru Lee and her apprentice Uchiha Obito.

Of course, they never would call themselves jedi.

“Oh no,”

Obito stared out at the wide expanse of seemingly endless desert. Not Suna, though, or any familiar terrain in Wind Country. The sky was a brighter almost white blue, the sand a deeper red, and the dunes great towering waves of what must have once been an overwhelming ocean.

More, in the sky as he squinted up, there were two suns.

(Uchiha didn’t do well enough with one sun, there were cases of truly nasty burns just from extended trips into Suna’s territory or hell even too much time on the ocean in a place like Wave, Obito had no idea what the hell he’d even look like after having to contend with two of them.

 Might as well just call him Obito the Lobster Man. He’d probably come out looking like he had one hell of a blood limit or one hell of a summoning contract, not that he didn’t look like that already being half-man and half-plant. Add red into the equation and he’d start looking like English Christmas and Obito would be that much more terrifying to any civilian girl who crossed his path.
Let it be known that Obito was not popular with the ladies.)

“Well, this is exciting,” Next to him Lee stood, hands on her hips, head tilted upwards, seeming a little calmer about the situation than Obito felt.

“Exciting?” Obito questioned, then motioned out in all directions, and the overwhelming feeling of emptiness encroaching from all sides, “Shishou, if you haven’t noticed, we’re in the middle of a goddamn desert!”

“Well, it wasn’t unlikely,” Lee said with a shrug, “Honestly, the fact that we’re still alive I’d say does wonders for us. We could have appeared in deep space, we could have been crushed by a planet’s gravity, we could have frozen to death in an ice dimension, drowned, been lit on fire, asphyxiated… The universe is dark, cruel, and unforgiving, my young apprentice. Really, considering everything, this isn’t so bad.”

“It’s a desert! A giant desert! Maybe even a dimension that’s only uninhabited desert!”

After all, there was an ice dimension, a mountainous one, then an entirely empty one, which wasn’t even a dimension at all but was instead the dark edges of reality where great gods and demons who lingered out time devoured reality itself, why shouldn’t there be one that’s simply never-ending dunes?

“Alright, it’s a little sandy, I’ll give you that, not that I have anything against sand,” Lee said as she surveyed their surroundings, “But really, not too shabby. And I do feel like I have boldly set foot where no man has gone before.”

Because no one in their right minds would have done this, except for Lee, and him, because he’d decided to tag along because that was what Obito did these days.

(You knew your life was a little… strange, when Bakashi, in comparison, appeared to have normal hobbies and a normal career path. After all, for all Hatake Kakashi’s random exploits and strange encounters, Obito was reasonably sure he’d at least never set foot off his own planet.)

“Who knows? Perhaps this is Arrakis,” Lee said, looking oddly pleased by this idea, which made Obito ten times leerier about it.
“What is *Arrakis* and why does it frighten me?”

Lee grinned, now in full teaching-shishou mode, “*Arrakis* is a desert planet in Herbert Frank’s *Dune* saga. It features an incredibly powerful shinobi with the ability to see many possible futures who takes over the universe in a holy war that kills billions of people. There are also giant sandworms.”

“Oh, oh that is… great, sandworms, I’ve always wanted to see a giant sandworm.” Obito wasn’t even going to touch that holy massacre comment, he just wasn’t. After all, it was far too close to home, to what could easily have been, for comfort.

“That’s the spirit, my youthful and exuberant apprentice,” Lee said with an overly exuberant grin of her own, clearly mistaking the extremely hesitant and swiftly growing sunburnt Obito for Maito Gai.

(Now there was a horrifying might have been, Luckily, for whatever reason, or perhaps divine intervention, Lee had shown no real interest in Gai over the years and had left him, more or less, to his extremely green and youthful devices.

Unfortunately, Kakashi had been warped enough by Lee for an entire generation.)

Then without waiting for him to retort she grabbed his hand, pulled him forward down the dune they were standing on, and began to sprint at shinobi breakneck speeds through the desert, “Now come on, Obito, let’s go explore.”

Anakin had always been good with languages. It helped, being able to pick up things fast, most everyone was at least somewhat fluent in Basic but being able to speak Huttesse was almost essential on Tatooine, or, at the very least, it made things easier.

He’d never really thought how much he might need it though until he realized, after ushering the off-worlders into his house and introducing them to his mother, watching them set down their packs and remove layers of strange clothing to reveal more of that unbelievably pale skin, that neither of them spoke a word of Basic.

He’d thought everyone knew basic. Even in the outer rim, at the very edge of the galaxy, outside of the reach of the republic, they spoke Basic.
But somehow they didn’t.

And he wanted to talk with them, so badly, more badly than he’d ever wanted to talk with anyone before.

Because the first thing she’d done, Eru Lee, when she’d entered the doorway and their small house was to create a kettle of tea out of thin air and pour a cup for each of them. Anakin had never had tea before.

The boy, Uchiha Obito, hadn’t even blinked.

They stayed in their house, explored the village every now and then, didn’t seem to work, didn’t seem to have any need for supplies or things to trade with (in halted basic they’d explained early on that they carried pretty much anything they could ever need with them in the packs), sometimes Obito would be sent out with carved wooden furniture and would return with large stacks of flimsy containing detailed ink drawings of different parts of Mos Espa, sometimes they returned with things traded for at the market. Only, it could be anything and everything they’d bring back, from live fish to broken data pads.

It didn’t seem to matter to them if it worked or not or if it was worth something, they’d bring it back, fiddle with it, ask Anakin or his mother what it was, how it worked, why it was built, how it was typically used, and more before sometimes taking it apart and putting it back together again.

Anakin would help with that, oftentimes finding himself standing over Obito’s shoulder as the older boy cursed in his original language at a faulty chip or sparking piece of equipment.

They always brought back food too, better food than Anakin had ever eaten, never really explaining how they had managed to get it and where they had even found it.

And they wore swords, ancient metal blades with strange characters carved into the surface, the kind that was only in very old stories of primitive planets. And Anakin, when he first saw those, along with the small throwing knives they called kunai, couldn’t help but think and wonder if maybe…

At any rate, Lee managed to beat Anakin to fluency, or rather, fluent enough to carry on actual conversations.
And even though she had tried to explain in the beginning, with drawings and hand gestures and pointing to the leaf carved into her metal headband that she and Obito would often wear, she’d explain again that she and her apprentice Obito were exploring on behalf of their own village on a planet very far away, that they were there to see the sights (although they wouldn’t explain why they thought Tatooine was a place worth seeing) and that they’d stay until they felt their welcome worn out or else had other instructions from their leader, a man called The Shadow of Fire.

But that wasn’t really what Anakin wanted to ask, or hear about, even if he was curious about where they’d come from and if there were more like them, instead his first question, his first real question that he’d waited for understanding to answer, not ‘are you going’, ‘what do you want for breakfast’ , ‘do you want to see me pod race’ was, “You’re a jedi, aren’t you?”

She’d been practicing with wooden swords against Obito, sparring again, and they did that a lot. Not always with swords, sometimes with small knives, sometimes with wire, sometimes with nothing at all.

Not blasters though, they never seemed to use blasters.

Now, finally done, Obito hunched over breathing heavily out, covered in sweat, waving his hands in the air to signal he was finished and lamenting something in his own language, “Why does that never get any easier, shishou?” with Lee giving her usual unsympathetic response of, “Because your kenjutsu still sucks,” Lee turned to Anakin with raised eyebrows, a look she often gave her own apprentice, as she wiped the sweat from her own brow.

“That depends, what’s a jedi?”

Anakin grinned up at her, “Knights of the republic, they go out and help people all over the galaxy, and carry light sabers with them!”

Lee looked down at her wooden practice sword with a frown, “A light sword? That sounds like the nidaime’s sword. You know, it’s kind of eerie how he manages to copy things he’s never seen before… Or you guys stole it from him, and he went to space without even bothering to tell me about it… I should really talk with him.”

She trailed off, her frown more pronounced, before it disappeared and she refocused on Anakin, “Right, anyways, do you have a more detailed explanation?”
Anakin blinked, “Um, I…”

“Because I’ll be honest, if you’re talking about space cops then Obito and I are by no means space cops.” Lee said with a wave of her hand casually motioning to Obito who was trying and failing to not look winded and bruised, “Try more specific, do they use chakra, for example.”

Anakin felt himself frowning, he’d heard that word before, Obito and she used it a lot, or she tended to say it a lot around Obito and he’d sort of smile and nod then scowl when he thought she wasn’t looking, but they’d never really said what it meant either, “Chakra?”

“Natural energy of the universe… Ran into some that call it magic, in everyone, everything, sort of like… well duct tape, keeps everything together… You know, chakra.” Lee said, as if this explained everything, which… well… it didn’t.

“Shishou,” Obito said, finally straightening up and giving his master an exasperated look, “What are you talking about? Is it chakra? Because he might not know what that is.”

“Considering that he has about as much chakra as Kushina without the excuse of being an Uzumaki or a jinchuuriki I’d bet my ass he knows what chakra is.” Lee snapped back in Basic for Anakin’s benefit or Obito’s annoyance.

Obito wrinkled his nose in distaste before pointing out in his own more broken Basic, “Shishou, I’m pretty sure that’s not term, can’t bet ass.”

“Obito, as your illustrious and knowledgeable master I can bet anything I please,” Lee’s eyes darted to Anakin, and again he had the feeling as if she was looking through him, searching for something, before she said, “Regardless, even manipulating chakra does not a shinobi make. The wizards showed us that much.”

Obito wandered over to where Anakin was sitting and offered him a rueful smile as he ruffled a sweaty calloused hand through Anakin’s hair, “Never heard term jedi, don’t think same.”

Anakin knocked hand away, trying to look more annoyed than he was, which just caused Obito to laugh a little at his expression, and Anakin said more forcefully, “Well, I think you must be. Nobody else can do things like you.”
Anakin, wished he could too. Because if he was like them, if he could move things just by looking at them or make things appear out of thin air or walk on walls or do any of the miraculous things that Lee and her apprentice seemed to do every day barely thinking about it, then maybe he and his mother wouldn’t be slaves.

And maybe they’d finally leave, he’d be a pilot and they’d fly off into the distant stars of the galaxy and see all the planets and everything they had to offer.

“You could,”

Anakin’s head jerked up, meeting Lee’s eyes, which suddenly seemed far deeper than they had a moment ago and ten times more serious. She squatted down to his level then, taking her hands in his own, and they were calloused too, just like his were, like his mother’s, like Obito, like they’d seen years of labor.

“Anakin, have you ever seen these jedi of yours?” Lee asked, and Anakin opened his mouth to say of course he had, he’d met them, more they lived in his house, but then closed it and shook it slowly.

Lee frowned and over her shoulder Obito’s face, the expressive unmarred half, twisted painfully into something apprehensive.

“What have they ever made any indication that they would come here and come to find you?”

“No,” He said, almost whispered, because he didn’t understand. Why would they? What was she trying to say?

Obito said something quickly, too fast for Anakin to catch, in his own language but Lee didn’t even look at him. Instead she closed her eyes, only for a moment, and all expression seemed to slip away from her.

(And something in the universe, some great underlying component resting in everything, made a great scraping shift.)
When she opened her eyes a look of determination burned inside of them, “Anakin, I won’t lie to you and say that the life of a shinobi is an easy one or even a rewarding one. However, if you want, Obito and I will work to free you and your mother, and I will train you and take you and your mother back to Konoha.”

He didn’t say she must be wrong, mistaken, because there was nothing special like that about Anakin. And he hadn’t even asked when they’d be leaving, because they’d always left that up in the air, and that thought had terrified him because he liked them.

He liked Lee’s odd expressions, her carefree grin, her stories about daily adventures in Mos Espa and then stories of her home planet and stories about her home planet and all her friends there. Stories about her perverted teacher Jiraiya, her hopelessly talentless teammate Dead Last, her other teacher the kind and honorable Hatake Sakumo and his strange son Kakashi, and about Namikaze Minato, Lee’s greatest friend in the entire world.

He liked how Obito always made time for him, would ruffle his hair, defend him from bullies and thugs in the street, taught him all sorts of neat tricks like how to juggle or do a handstand, and was like the older brother Anakin had never had. He liked how they were there, not just for him, but also for his mother.

Instead of any of this or anything he could have said, or question why they would ask him this, why they would pick him, and why they would say it now, he felt tears springing to the corners of his eyes and without a word he leaned forward and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her wild curling red hair.

Hesitantly, carefully she wrapped her arms around him.

And he believed her, somehow, without even thinking about it, he believed her.

The first time Obito really met Eru Lee, the first time it truly counted, where it really mattered and he saw her as something more than one of the most powerful if strange jonin in the village, as something other than a satellite which orbited around Kakashi or Minato-sensei, was after the Kannabi Bridge mission.

He’d been sitting there, barefoot, half of his body his own and half something patched together out of something that couldn’t be human, chained to a rock, shivering, starved, hunched over himself,
ignoring the yellow eyes and gossip of the Zetsus, and the darker more ominous eyes of Madara as he ranted about the village, the clan, Kakashi, and Rin, and the poison in the world which would destroy them all.

And then she’d been there, had stepped inside, and all their eyes had turned to her.

And she’d glowed, her hair like rays of twisting sunlight from the dawn, and her eyes that vibrant and overwhelming green.

He hadn’t thought anyone was coming, no, he had known no one was coming, and Madara had confirmed it every single day. Konoha had abandoned him, Konoha had left him for the vultures and the dogs, Konoha sacrificed its children to the god of death and carnage.

(Kakashi hadn’t wanted to leave, Rin had had to drag him away, and Obito had had to listen as their footsteps grew fainter and fainter and the sound of Kakashi’s hoarse voice promising that he’d send someone, he’d send Minato-sensei, or his father, or even his sister, that he’d come back for Obito, even if it was only for his body and… And Obito couldn’t even see them, see either of them again, because by that point he’d already given his eye to Kakashi to see the future for him.)

And somehow, even with his last memory of Rin’s face, he’d never seen anyone look so beautiful as Eru Lee in that moment.

He imagined Skywalker Anakin was seeing something similar.

After all, she was wearing the same expression with him that she’d worn with Obito.

And the same one she’d worn with him weeks after she’d carried him back through Konoha’s gates and into the hospital, as she stood outside the doors (when Obito had been lost and alone and uncertain of where he was supposed to stay, not inside the clan, not after dying and giving his eye to Kakashi) and informed him that as his genin team had been split apart in his absence, Kakashi having joined ANBU and Rin working as a medic nin, Obito was now her apprentice and they had work to do.

The boy was gone now, long since cried himself out in joy, his smile almost burning through his tears as he held on tightly to Eru Lee and everything she promised. He had then excitedly informed his mother who in turn had interrogated them both before frowning in either disapproval or doubt as Lee had repeated her words with the same unshakable conviction (if Anakin wants to be a
shinobi, if he chooses this life, then I will do everything in my power and more to see it a reality), before the pair had finally returned inside to sleep.

And Obito and Lee, they stayed outside and stared at the moon and the unfamiliar stars, drinking the tea that she always provided for this sort of a setting.

“Shishou, are you sure about this?”

Lee’s eyes slid over to his, still sober and determined, “Yes,”

“These *jedi* could very well be shinobi, something close to it anyways, or at the very least like the *wizards*, they might be waiting for him to be older.”

She stared out past him, into the desert where they had come from, walking for far too long for Obito’s comfort or ease of mind, and said, “Then he would know that, particularly someone with his levels of chakra. I can’t imagine any sane hidden village would leave power like that for any foreign ninja to take.”

And the boy was, Obito might not be the sensor that Lee was, so strangely in and out of tune with reality per her own convenience, but even he could feel just how overwhelming the amount of chakra the boy had was.

“Even if that’s true, shishou… Using mokuton to make furniture, selling goods you make out of thin air, hell even stealing, that’s all well and good for small market things but shishou, the Hutts… We’re not supposed to draw that kind of political attention to ourselves.” And they would, if they realized that Lee, that even Obito, could produce miracles for the money they’d need to free the boy and his mother and strip Watto of both of his sources of labor.

If they realized that single handedly, with barely a thought, Lee could transform their barren desert planet into a tropical paradise overflowing with water and life.

And these desert feudal lords, strange slug creatures that all but oozed greed from their skin, would certainly turn their attention to them.

And then… Well, Lee and he would be lucky if they could leave without a sizeable bounty on their head, and at worst they would leave with war and rebellion in their footsteps and a planet in chaos.
“Then we do it the long way, we have time, you still need to learn Basic, Anakin still needs to build that pod racer of his, I still need to find blue prints to space ships and battle fighters and anything in between to ship back to Konoha, and we still need to figure out exactly what this republic is and who the jedi are and why we’ve seen virtually no sign of either. We have time, Obito,”

(Yes, they did didn’t they? It was a longterm mission, based upon the length and duration of the English mission which had taken place years ago now when Lee and Minato-sensei had still been teenagers and only freshly minted jonin.

It was hard to keep track in this strange world with its two suns, with its different length days and years, but they must be close to reaching Naruto’s second birthday. Last time they’d checked in, a few months ago, Minato-sensei had brought Naruto to see them.

Somehow, even with Minato-sensei’s hair and eyes, he also looked exactly like his mother. Especially his grin, that was all Uzumaki.)

“How? I can sell furniture, sure, but that would take years and…”

“Pod racing,” Lee said shortly, pointing then to Obito’s black eye, “With your sharingan I’m sure you’ll make quite the pilot. And we can hire Anakin to race for us and collect winnings from that. There are also their gladiator arenas too, I can enter myself into those, we’ll get the money.”

And there would be absolutely no talking her out of it.

Maybe she had a point, really, taking Anakin in these sorts of conditions to be trained as a shinobi would have the stamp of approval even from the most cautious council members. Of course, that wasn’t why she was doing it, that would be what she told them, but it wouldn’t even be what she told the yondaime the next time they saw him.

The thirteen-year-old Obito, naïve in too many respects, wouldn’t have even guessed what she might say. Of course, thirteen-year-old Obito had barely known her. Even early on in the apprenticeship, after finding himself back in Konoha with Minato-sensei as the yondaime hokage, moving in with Kakashi and his father because he wasn’t legally an Uchiha anymore, he wouldn’t have understood.
Really, it hadn’t been until Minato-sensei had asked him to visit him one day, and had told him a story about his best friend, a god who had grown up inside of a cupboard, convinced that reality was nothing more than an illusion because she could not explain the thoughtless cruelty of the world she grew up in, who had one day decided to leave that world entirely because she saw no point in its existence, that he began to understand.

Anakin reminded her of herself.

And that was more than enough to compel Lee to train him, and maybe more than enough for Obito to hold his tongue, because he liked Anakin, the kid was eager and sweet and perhaps unsuited for shinobi life but hell Obito liked him all the same.

So, he just said, “You know, shishou, I’ve seen those pod racing accidents and… I really think I’m too young and pretty to die.”

“Now, personally, I believe hand seals are bullshit, but the rest of the shinobi population uses them and who am I to argue with the majority of the shinobi population?”

Lee and Obito had suddenly become much busier, and Anakin discovered what Obito had whispered to him with a chagrinned and almost embarrassed expression and Lee had outright told him, that it wasn’t easy being Lee’s student.

Of course, Obito was off to the side right now, not really paying much attention to Anakin or Lee, whittling away at the furniture once again, shaping the wood with his hands alone, utilizing something called a kekki genkai and something else called senchakra, calling it mokuton.

He’d been doing that all week, creating more and more ornate pieces of furniture, tables, chairs, great wooden creations that were difficult to find on a desert planet like Tatooine and probably on most planets if the amount they sold for was any indication.

Lee had also started disappearing at night, a grim faced Obito watching her with hooded eyes, only to return in the morning with credits signed by the Hutts and blood stains on her borrowed, Tatooine, beige clothing.

(His mother commented, softly, supposedly out of Anakin’s earshot, that she was sad that Lee was
so unnaturally good at cleaning out blood stains.

Lee responded that if she wasn’t she’d own nothing but red, and that made one a very large target in the field.)

They also stopped spending as much on small things, and the stack of metaphorical electronic money grew higher and higher, until one day Watto would have enough of a deal that he wouldn’t even think of saying no to.

But now, during the early evening every day, after Anakin had come home from the shop or the village, Lee was entirely focused on him and teaching him how to be a shinobi like her and Obito.

“Now, there are five hand seals…”

Obito interrupted, “Twelve, shishou, there are twelve,”

Lee spared an annoyed glance at her apprentice, “Okay, there are twelve hand seals.”

Lee then brought her hands together and began to slowly go through different motions, fingers brought together in different ways, “Let’s see, there’s rat, dog, I think there might be a cat in there…”

“Jesus Christ, shishou, it’s based on the zodiac,” Obito then turned away from his half formed chair to Anakin and rapidly worked his hands through the positions too quickly to be anything but ingrained muscle memory, “There’s rat, dog, tiger, rooster, dragon, ox, ram, boar, snake, rabbit, monkey, and horse.”

Then flushing as he caught Anakin staring at him, stood, put his hands on his hips, and gave Lee a truly reprimanding look that reminded Anakin eerily of his own mother, “Do you need me to do this for you, shishou?”

“I preferred it when you couldn’t speak Basic,” Lee offered blandly, before turning back to Anakin, “Right, what he said, and did… Those things are important, ”
Obito continued to stare at her for a moment even as Lee turned her attention back to Anakin, then threw his hands in the air in defeat and turned back to the chair, “By the way, shishou, I really don’t think you should be focusing on hand seals first thing,”

“I’m sorry, Obito, are you an S-ranked jonin who has ‘flee on sight’ written in every single bingo book ever printed since the end of the third war?” Lee asked with a too bright grin that had Obito balefully glaring at her over his shoulder.

“No, because somebody said we should explore space and other dimensions before someone else could take his jonin exams.” Obito said rather testily before adding, “You should start on taijutsu, if anything, and maybe the leaf exercise. If he can’t find his chakra then there’s no way in hell he’s doing any sort of ninjutsu.”

“It always comes back to taijutsu, doesn’t it?” Lee said before sighing, and saying, “Alright then, we’re going to do something much more boring and with way less explosions, we’re going to learn how to get leaves to stick to our skin.”

Lee handed him a leaf, out of nowhere, and Anakin took it staring at it. It looked vaguely like what was inscribed on their headbands. They wore them most days, not every day and not all the time, but certainly times like now and when they were training they wore it.

Anakin had never seen a leaf in person before, it really was as green as her eyes were…

“Will I learn how to do that?”

Lee blinked, “Do what?”

He motioned to the leaf, “Make things out of air, like you do.”

“Oh, well…” Lee trailed off, looking for once strangely uncertain.

“Probably not, shishou is… Special,” Obito finished for her, rather lamely, “I don’t think anyone can do everything shishou can.”
“Oh,” and that was all he could say to that, because he wasn’t sure what else to say, and for whatever reason the topic seemed to be closed between them.

“Right, so your chakra reservoir, the source is inside of your stomach, and if you spread the right amount (not too much or too little) through to other parts of your body you can get leaves to stick to you…”

And it went on like that for some time, and to Anakin’s embarrassment he wasn’t good at it, in fact it took him a solid two weeks to get it down, and even then the leaves always trembled a bit as if they would fly off at a moment’s notice.

Anakin had always been good at everything he did, he’d been great at everything he did, and throwing kunai he apparently was very good and same with katas once Lee had started him on those but that leaf exercise…

“Trouble is you have so much chakra,” Obito explained one night after he’d watched Anakin screaming in frustration for about five minutes over the stupid piles of leaves that he couldn’t get to stick to his body, “Even though you have great control you’re going to have a tough time with the small stuff like this,”

And that seemed to be a theme, even when they started moving on to hand seals and basic jutsus, to creating basic clones and henges, things that should have been so easy but were so much harder than it looked because he just couldn’t get the hang of moving the chakra like that and when he did it was like all of it rushed out at once.

But he was also happy.

Suddenly, after a few months of working on how to kick, punch, dodge, and even run away, Anakin thought that maybe he could stand a chance against someone like Sebulba. And each day Obito and Lee seemed to gather more and more money and suddenly Anakin didn’t have to think that this would be the rest of his life.

He was going to leave, not just someday, not just when he was adult, but soon. He was going to leave and become a jedi knight in a far off village hidden in the leaves. He was going to meet people like Jiraiya, Sakumo, Tobirama, Hashirama, Kakashi, Rin, Shikaku, and Minato.

Minato who Lee talked about the most and most reverently of all.
(But when he dreamed at night the universe whispered, in its voice laced with senchakra, that there was something important still coming. Something he wasn’t thinking about, was no longer waiting for, something important was coming.

Wait for it, the natural chakra of the world whispered.)
Chapter 2

“I’m sorry Eru-san…”

Lee, twenty-four then, glanced at him over her shoulder as she ushered him into her small and rather bare apartment, “It’s shishou now, Obito,”

Obito was only fourteen-years-old, just returned from the hospital, no, just returned from the clan compound where all his belongs had been summarily tossed out into the street and over the walls for him to collect.

And wasn’t it funny how he just stood there and stared at it? Like he couldn’t believe it was happening even though…

Even though he’d broken all the rules, even though his grandmother had died in the months when he’d been gone, even though they’d always seemed to tolerate him at best anyways. Why should he be surprised, he wondered as he picked up the extra unbroken pair of goggles his grandmother had gotten him ages ago, he’d always thought if given half the chance they’d throw him out.

And he’d finally given them more than half the chance.

He’d been given the room next to hers in the Hatake compound, a small unused room that had once belonged to one of Kakashi’s great uncles, back when there had been more of a Hatake clan than two people.

(And this was after much awkwardness and trying to find a way to thank Kakashi, thank his dad, really thank them, more than he’d thanked anyone in his entire life, when neither of them would accept any of it because Hatake Sakumo was far too honorable for that sort of thing and Kakashi was… well… Weird about that kind of stuff.

“You gave me your eye, Obito,” Kakashi had said, unusually sober for Kakashi, when Obito had first protested in the hospital when Kakashi, now with his headband covering the eye he’d lost and Obito had replaced, “You gave me your future. If I couldn’t offer you room and board, after all of that, then I would be worse than the bottom feeding vermin that eat the shinobi who are worse than trash.”
And, really, how was Obito supposed to say no to that?)

Strange, that when he’d taken an idle curious glance into the room Kakashi had said was hers, it had seemed to have so much more life in it, so much more personality, than the place she was supposed to be living in.

“Right, shishou… I just, I’m not sure I understand…”

Obito, before the Kannabi Bridge mission, had never been this unconfident, this hesitant. Sure, after meeting Bakashi he was the second most rational person in team seven (although that was a very low bar and Rin still had him outstripped by a mile), but he was still the loud mouth of the group, and probably would have been the biggest idiot if not for Kakashi. But, well, Kakashi didn’t really count since he was one of those idiot-savants while Obito was just plain dead last.

Not that he’d ever admitted this, even to himself most of the time.

Lee pulled him in, pushed him inside and sat him down at her table, quickly setting up a kettle of tea and placing a cup in front of him.

Finally, as she was hustling and bustling and not even looking at him, he said, “I don’t understand why you’d want me for an apprentice,”

She didn’t look at him, only paused slightly as she lit the fire on the stove, then still staring at the kettle she asked, “Do you want to be my apprentice? I’m sure, if you showed Senju Hashirama your new tricks with plants, he’d be more than happy to all but adopt you into the family.”

Obito flushed, almost blurted out that Fugaku would have him flayed for even thinking about abandoning them for the Senju of all clans (only worse, maybe, would be the Hyuga), but then stopped when he remembered (again) that he wasn’t an Uchiha anymore. In blood, yes, but everything else…

“No, I… Just, why?”

She stood over the stove, waiting for the tea to finish and the kettle to whistle, and when it was done finally returned and started pouring for both herself and Obito, “There are a few reasons. The first is simple, you have great potential.”
Obito’s eyes narrowed and he felt a grimace come across his features, and for the first time ever he admitted out loud, “You know I’m dead last right?”

“Well, there’s dead last and then there’s dead last. As Dead Last could talk about for hours, if you were so inclined to broach the subject with him. Regardless, at the very least you’ve revived a dead kekki genkai which is nothing to sneeze at. So, there’s that,”

Right, the mokuton, funny how everyone seemed so much more focused on that then his awakened sharingan. And he’d been so focused on that, that had been all that had mattered but…

“Second, you gave Kakashi your eye and didn’t demand it back, even when you returned from the dead, even at the risk of your clan and family… If you hadn’t done that we most likely wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Somehow, he’d almost forgotten that Lee was practically a sister to Kakashi, and that if anyone approved of his actions, it’d be her and the White Fang. Honestly though, until the clan had started shouting at him about it, he hadn’t even thought about taking it back from Kakashi. It’d been unthinkable, “Oh, um, you’re welcome?”

“And third…” Lee paused, stared into his eyes, well, eye, and even though he had the sharingan he somehow felt it was her dark green gaze that was that much more dangerous, “You’re like me. If you chose to, if you were compelled to, if Nohara Rin were to meet some tragic end or perhaps even Kakashi, then you would do everything in your power and more to rewrite reality so that such a fate would be inconceivable.”

She took a long drink of tea, tilting her head back, exposing her pale throat even as he watched wordlessly his throat suddenly dry with the words, “I would never” caught inside of it.

“You, Uchiha Obito, are a destroyer of worlds.”

(October 10th, that same year, when the world seemed to tremble and not tremble in the same moment and reality blurred.

When he saw not only sensei standing on the roof tops in his kage robes, Naruto in his arms, fire surrounding him as he faced the Kyuubi and the unseen shadow of Eru Lee, but also a strangely
familiar might have been in an orange spiraled mask, he realized just what she meant.

And for that single, moment of absolute clarity of all he had the potential to be, he was terrified of himself.

Anakin loved chakra, he loved ninjutsu, genjutsu, and even the grueling taijutsu that would see him sorer than he ever had been working for Watto in the junk yard. But, probably more than anything in the world, he loved the shadow clones that Obito would spawn, henge into Anakin, and then work in the shop for him.

Of course, they couldn’t do that all the time, even though, after months, Obito was finally starting to sound fluent in Basic, he didn’t know any Huttesse, and he certainly didn’t know how to fix engines, build pod racers, or even identify the various parts and pieces just by name. In other words, Obito didn’t make a very good Anakin, and only the fact that Obito’s clone really really looked like Anakin stopped Watto from thinking it was anyone else.

Still, every once in a while, maybe twice a month or so, Obito would offer him a sly grin in the morning, a glance towards the door as if Watto might be lurking outside of it, and would lean in and whisper, “What do you say we test your employer’s situational awareness?”

And Anakin would grin in response, dash upstairs to collect the kunai Lee had produced out of thin air for him along with the wooden practice blade and ninja wire, and would practically be skipping all the way to the outskirts of the village, just beyond the slave huts, where Obito and Lee often would practice.

And today, today there was even more of a feeling of excitement, because that feeling was back again. The feeling he’d had when Obito and Lee had first shown up walking out of the desert, that feeling of bright anticipation, as if something was just about to click into place but wasn’t quite there yet…

“What’s got you so excited?” Obito asked, eyebrows raised and an amused smile on his face, as he stared down at Anakin, “Did you finally finish that pod racer when I wasn’t looking?”

It was always hard to tell how old Obito was, or at least, it was in the beginning for Anakin. If you looked at the one side of his face, he looked only a few years older than Anakin really, not even an adult yet. He also was very good looking, on that side, probably better looking than any human
Anakin had seen on Tatooine (of course, living on a planet filled with slaves and thugs, they tended not to be an attractive bunch). But then, then there was the other side…

Covered in scars was almost an understatement, almost split down the middle, there were thick pale scars, raised edges along his face, running down his neck, and then disappearing down his shirt and out of sight.

And from that side, his green-eyed side, Obito looked much older than sixteen.

“I finished that days ago!” Anakin said, and Obito’s grin turned somewhat sheepish as he rubbed the back of his head.

“Right, right, almost forgot about that. Considering that, after your last crash, shishou wants me in the cockpit… Well, let’s just say I’ve been in glorious denial that you would ever finish fixing it.”

Anakin felt his face heating up, probably matching the near constant sunburn that Obito had, and stared down at the sand, “That was… That won’t happen next time, I swear!”

Obito held up his hands in defense, “I didn’t say I didn’t think you would, just that with my god granted perfect vision and shishou’s constant desire to put me in mortal peril, it’s going to be my ass in the hot seat next time with your crash as the excuse. Plus, you won’t hear your mother complaining that way, and when your mother isn’t complaining we’re all happy people.”

Anakin’s frown became more pronounced and he glared up at Obito, but all Obito did was laugh, and say, “You’re far too young, untrained, and adorable to be using that kind of glare on me, Anakin-kun,”

Anakin merely huffed, walking a little faster, which had no effect at all as Obito easily lengthened his stride to keep up.

“Alright then, if it’s not the pod racer, and you’ve already updated your overly polite puppet, then what is it?”

Anakin didn’t answer right away, not sure how to say it, like he wasn’t sure how to say any of this kind of a thing.
He’d told them about the dreams before, sometimes horrible, sometimes beautiful, and sometimes just strange. Like the dream with his mother, dying, tortured to death and pulled apart in the desert where… Where Anakin wasn’t there.

(That one was less frequent now though, only the occasional flash, it didn’t have the same weight anymore. Not like it used to, it lacked… certainty.)

He dreamed about seeing the galaxy and flying through the great void of space, about jedi he’d never met, never really about himself though or his own future…

And now, now he tended to have dreams about Obito and Lee, except… Except they rarely made any sense at all. Oftentimes they would feature a man who looked a little like Anakin, with bright blonde hair and pale blue eyes, dressed in white, facing a great fiery beast, holding an infant in his arms as well as a great glowing seal, and standing across from him, wearing the mask of a fox and the body of a mortal woman, floating on the golden strands of reality itself, was Lee.

Apparently, this kind of a talent wasn’t unheard of, but was somewhat uncommon for people from their own planet.

“The English wizards call it divination, and they tend to think of it as a kekki genkai,” Lee had explained after Anakin had woken in a cold sweat and had rushed outside to cool his head only to find Lee and Obito staring out into the desert drinking tea.

“Not everyone can do it, and it’s not something you can just learn either, I haven’t heard of anyone from Konoha managing to do it, well… Except Obito, on Tuesdays, but Obito at this point is a Frankenstein mess of genetics so who knows what the hell is in his system.”

Obito spared Lee a withering glance over his cup of tea, “Gee, thanks shishou, I was just getting over my time spent as Madara’s unfortunate guinea pig.”

Lee waved this away as she continued, “We’ve always thought of it as one of those quirky blood limits that developed over thousands of years in England, and now, apparently in another dimension out in space.”

“So… you don’t have dreams like that?”
Obito and Lee then spared a glance, then looked back at Anakin, finally Lee said, “…Only on Tuesdays.”

Now though, walking with Obito, Anakin just said, “Something important is going to happen, I can feel it.”

Months ago, when Anakin first met him, he wouldn’t have been able to tell how seriously Obito took that statement. Obito and Lee for that matter, tended to be very expressive, but there were times when they were very subtle, and took great lengths to hide what they were thinking.

“Good important or bad important?” Obito asked.

“I don’t know… Just… important,” Anakin said with a frown before adding, “I don’t think it’s bad.”

“Let’s hope not,” Obito said, before offering almost as an aside, “With shishou, and well me too if I’m being honest, when things tend to go bad they go very bad.”

Anakin grinned, and then dashed forward as the empty make shift training ground came into view, practically bouncing up and down he asked, “So, Obito, are you going to teach me the shadow clone technique today?”

Obito barked out a harsh laugh, like he usually tended to whenever Anakin asked, “Hell no,”

“That’s a forbidden Konoha technique and the nidaime would have my ass if I offered it to unenlisted quasi-genin like you, not even getting to Minato-sensei’s reaction. Plus, while it’s not necessarily tricky to perform there’s chakra drain like none other and not designed for lowly souls like yourself who have yet to control their chakra enough for normal clones.”

Anakin crossed his arms, huffing, and asked, “Well, I’m going to be a Konoha jedi anyways, right?”

And it was small, very small, but for a moment Obito hesitated, and then, “Not until you’re in Konoha, brat,”
Lee never did that, true there were certain techniques, Konoha techniques, which she said he had no business knowing at this point (as Obito himself had said), but… But Obito would always hesitate, just for a moment, as if he wasn’t sure that Anakin would be going with them to Konoha.

Not that he didn’t want Anakin to come, not that he didn’t like Anakin, but just like he was waiting for the other sandal, unseen and unpredicted by any of them, to drop.

Obito crossed over to him, rested his hands on Anakin’s shoulders, and offered him a soft and fraternal smile, “Let’s work on those normal clones, today, alright? And remember, the key to everything, for you, with these basic techniques, is less chakra.”

Obito had seen it coming for half a year, long before any sign of it was on the horizon, long before he’d had any reason to doubt Anakin’s perspective as a slave on a backwater planet on the very edge of a galaxy wide republic.

Officially, he’d told his misgivings to the yondaime, when he and Lee had broken the news of this absurdly powerful boy in another dimension, gifted in the English blood limit of divination, with superb control over his chakra despite its size (not quite enough to rival the young Itachi but certainly nothing to dismiss either), a brilliant mechanic and pilot, and conceived without a father perhaps by a god or chakra itself.

A boy who had been left to rot by his people as a slave on a desert planet, and seemed doomed to stay there for the rest of his natural life, barring good fortune and his own ingenuity.

In other words, an opportunity that was almost too good to refuse.

“And no one is coming for him?” Minato asked, cutting straight to the point, and staring straight at Lee as he did so (even though Lee, without hesitation or any sign of intimidation, started straight back).

“In the months that Obito and I have been flagrantly using chakra and blood limits no one has shown up,” Lee responded with a shrug, “Surely, Minato, that’s a sign of something.”
As Minato frowned and considered this, and it was at this point that Obito chipped in, “There are rumors of people called *jedi*, chakra wielding swordsmen who act as guardians of the republic, the boy seems convinced that we’re *jedi* or that shinobi is just our directly translated word for *jedi*.”

“But, like I said, even after using mokuton to turn Obito here into a miraculous desert carpenter Jesus-style, as well as my own almost daily bouts in the arena, we haven’t seen any sign of them,” Lee quickly pointed out, offering Obito a small chiding glare, to which he responded with his own chiding glare.

Minto said nothing for a moment, stared at both of them, and then slowly said, “This is an exploratory mission, and in that you have already been quite successful. However, you’ve also been relatively careful, and relatively unobtrusive… *England*, which we were more prepared for and more familiar with, we’ve always had somewhat problematic relationships with, especially given your history there, Lee… I don’t need any more accusations of poaching than I already have.”

He looked every inch a kage then, all traces of Minato-sensei washed away from him, his eyes sharp and calculating and belonging to the Yellow Flash, terror of Iwa, rather than Namikaze Minato, “Right now we are indisputably the strongest of all the villages, we have an unprecedented number of S-ranked ninja in the village, and quite a few coming up swiftly in the ranks to join that number. While I would like another S-ranked ninja, as well as divination blood limits, I don’t need them at the risk of an interdimensional war with these *jedi*.”

For a moment, Lee just stared back at him, and glancing at her, at the way her eyes bored into Minato’s, Obito had the feeling that there were a thousand silent words passing between them that Obito simply couldn’t hear.

Always, when Lee looked at Minato, there was that shadow of overwhelming devotion in her posture, and perhaps a love so strong that it ceased even to look like love. When she stared at him, or even was in the same room as him, you knew that she would do anything for him. Like… Like a knight, kneeling before the throne of an English king, head bowed and sword sheathed and held in front with both hands.

“I promised him, Minato,”

And she had promised him, and not once had she wavered in that promise, even as she’d been drafted into more and more arena fights, even as she’d been approached by sneering alien men seeking to be her manager and set her up with more interesting opponents and luxurious quarters.
And those fights… Obito had been to more than one, had almost brought Anakin to one despite the
fit Shmi would no doubt throw (although that just went to show how out of the loop Shmi was
when it came to shinobi, how much Lee and Obito had left out in their bare summaries, because as
soon as he set foot in Konoha there would be no saving him from violence or even death. Even in
peace time, won by the blood of the third war, shinobi couldn’t escape the overwhelming shadow
of destruction) but after watching only the first one he’d immediately changed his mind.

It was a show, it was a barbaric show of death and blood, aimed to entertain the corrupt civilian
masses who had no taste for true death or butchery. It was ducking, dodging, weaving, barely
making it away in time from the edge of a laser axe, and then deliberately slow and inefficient jabs
with a sword, cutting here and there, growing faster with the roar of the crowd, until finally the last
blow was struck, often fatal.

And often, when it wasn’t fatal, it soon would be as the other would limp off stage, strange colored
blood pooling out of alien skin, and no one offered medical assistance.

Then the audience would stand, applaud as Lee took her final, curt, bow before them, and would
chant the title she’d given herself when she’d entered this whole business, “Shinigami”

Obito just dutifully carved his furniture, grateful that it wasn’t him in the ring, and that she’d never
even asked if he’d rather be doing that instead.

And the credits had built up swiftly, to the point where they could easily purchase Shmi, could
barter for Anakin, could buy two slaves from any other vendor, but would still be hard pressed to
convince the somehow immune to genjutsu owner, that it was a great bargain for both Skywalker
Shmi and her son Anakin.

That, the fact that they were so close, was probably half of what was feeding Obito’s perception of
a rising storm. Of course, Anakin’s uncanny and vague premonitions certainly didn’t help either.

Regardless, when the storm hit, when the jedi finally got off their asses and showed up,
confronting Obito’s shadow clone dutifully pretending with all its clone heart to be Skywalker
Anakin (which it never really managed to get down, not being a mechanical genius or all that
fluent in technical Basic), Obito wasn’t surprised at all.

Just, really, really, apprehensive.
The moment the boy came hurtling into the shop, summoned by his owner’s sharp yells in Huttesse, Qui-Gon felt himself hesitate in his connection to the force, almost as if he was blinking and looking again, because the boy… The boy wasn’t a boy at all, instead he was a shell, crafted by the force to look incredibly human, but the force itself did not flow through him.

The shell, blonde haired, blue eyed, disheveled and covered in grease (so many details, why so many details, so many distinctive memorable details, for something so painfully artificial), spared Qui-Gon, Padme, and Jar-Jar a wide-eyed and then rather assessing glance before his attention was forcibly redirected towards the toyarion.

“Coona tee-tocky malia?”

The boy gave the blue toyarion a blank look which slowly but surely transformed itself into a sheepish grin, “Uh, Watto, would you believe I hit my head and forgot all of my ability to understand Huttesse?”

Watto, it appeared, did not believe this but also seemed too impatient to truly deal with it, “Again, you keep forgetting then remembering then forgetting again! This is second time in month!”

“Well, it’s dangerous work we do here and accidents happen not only frequently but almost bi-monthly…” the boy offered with that same chagrined smile and a shrug, however, there were no true emotions as the boy had no true force signature, instead there was that constant, slowly draining, circulating force in the rough shape of a boy that didn’t seem to feel or want anything at all.

Watto cut him off before he could continue, “What took you so long?!”

“Maa, maa, Watto, I was cleaning out the bin like you…”

“Never mind the bin! Watch the store! I’ve got selling to do here!” Watto then turned his attention to Qui-Gon, flying closer with that leering grin on his face, “So, let me take you out back, find what you need, eh?”

For a moment, Qui-Gon stood, hesitated, his eyes darting to the boy who… raised his eyebrows back, that assessing look back in his eyes, this time clearly focused on Qui-Gon versus Padme, who’s eyes were now roaming the shop, or Jar-Jar who had picked up a piece of equipment and
was trying to pry it apart either unconcerned or unaware of the likelihood of him electrocuting himself.

Stealing himself, Qui-Gon plucked it from Jar-Jar’s hands and put it back on the shelf, “Don’t touch anything.”

Qui-Gon then walked out, following the toydarion, but felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as the shell disobeyed the orders and stepped out of the shop as well, Padme and Jar-Jar stepping out along with him, and while he made no true move to follow but all the same, even as Qui-Gon walked further away, out of earshot of anyone not trained in the force, Qui-Gon felt the boy watching and listening.

“Here it is… a T-14 hyperdrive generator! You’re in luck, I’m the only one around here who has one, might as well buy the whole new ship, would be cheaper. Which means, how you gonna pay for all this farmer?”

Qui-Gon felt himself jerked back into the moment, somehow losing track, and then quickly said, “I have twenty-thousand republic dataries,”

Watto spat and sneered, and from the entrance to the shop Qui-Gon could almost feel the shell’s eyes narrowing, and that artificial mind whirring away, “Republic credits no good out here, farmer. I need something more real…”

Qui-Gon raised a hand, calmly felt for the force, and insisted, “Credits will do fine,”

“No, they won’t.”

“Credits will do fine,”

“No, they won’t,” Watto paused, sneered once again, and said, “You think you’re some kind of jedi, waving your hand around like that? You’re the second outlander who tried that! I’m a toydarian, mind tricks don’t work, only money. No money, no parts, no deal!”

And it appeared so, because no amount of negotiating from that point moved the blue alien, until Qui-Gon was forced to hastily retreat, finding himself facing the boy as well as Jar-Jar and Padme.
And the boy, the boy was laughing, physically wiping tears from his eyes as he watched Qui-Gon’s walk of shame, clearly having managed to see and hear all of it despite the distance, “Oh god, that, sir, was hilarious,”

Padme spared the boy a look of concern, which the boy did not heed as he continued, “If only I’d had enough *chakra* for the *sharingan*, I could watch that… I don’t even know how many times, believe me, it would never get old.”

Letting out one final round of laughter the boy shook his head almost pityingly at Qui-Gon before offering him a somewhat sympathetic smile, that was marred by his clear good mirth, “Honestly, I think that just made my month, or well it almost makes all of this worth it… Ah, ha, good show man.”

Watto gave another irate shout in Huttesse again and the boy snapped to attention, the smile instantly gone from his face, and then he offered a small bow to Padme and Jar-Jar and then to Qui-Gon along with a more apologetic expression, “Right, well, nice meeting you. And, for whatever happens next… Well, you seem nice.”

You seem nice, why, as the boy disappeared back into the shop, did that seem so very ominous?

Shaking himself, and his feeling of unease, he looked back down to Padme and Jar-Jar and said, “We’re leaving,”

The feeling of unease only grew as he called Obi-Wan over the commlink, confirming that there was nothing to trade with for the only shop in Mos Espa that held the part they needed, as Qui-Gon had instinctively known in the junk yard.

The solution would come, he could feel it, but he also felt that his path would cross with the boy again and that whatever solution did present itself… would be complicated, to say the least.

And indeed, the second he left Jar-Jar Binks to his own questionable devices, which resulted apparently in some sort of street fight with a local thug, there was the boy again, looking across at Qui-Gon with an almost smug expression, “You should take better care of your friends, sir. Your friend here was about to be turned into orange paste after picking a fight with Sebulba.”

“Nosir, nosir. Mesa hate crunchen. Dat’s da last ting mesa wanten.”
The boy blinked, stared at Jar-Jar, and said slowly, “Was that… Was that Basic?”

“Yes, thank you.” Qui Gon offered with some trepidation, to which the boy just laughed.

“Oh, don’t thank me, I was looking for you anyways.”

“You were?”

The smile disappeared and a cold intensity, out of place on a boy’s face, replaced it, “Yes, you see, the boss is going to want a word with you…”

The boy then looked up, stared up at the sky with narrowed eyes, “And a storm’s coming…”

“Oh, really?” Padme asked, looking up at the sky and seeing nothing but the bright, almost white-blue.

The boy said nothing, frowned, and then, “Do you have shelter?”

“Yes, a ship…”

“How far?”

“Oh the outskirts,” Padme supplied, ignoring Qui-Gon’s own apprehension or else discounting it, and the boy stared at them for a few moments before coming to some decision.

“You’ll never make it that far in time, and besides, the boss will want to talk to you anyways.” The boy then pulled Jar-Jar up off the ground, put a hand under the small of Padme’s back (ignoring the way she flushed and looked as if she was about to protest) and offered them all a bright smile, “Come with me, friends, it will be an adventure we’ll never forget!”

And indeed, as they walked, the winds began to pick up and the boy ushered them on faster. And
perhaps it would have been too far to make it to the ship, and perhaps it was best not to tempt the storm, but none the less Qui-Gon felt himself unprepared for this, like he was being rushed into something he didn’t quite understand yet.

It was too late though the boy pushed them inside of a small house on the edge of the village, deep in the slave quarters, without a word of warning and as soon as he, Padme, and Jar-Jar were all inside disappeared completely, the force that was binding him together dissipating back into the living force, leaving nothing but temporary smoke where the boy had been only moments before.

And turning his head in shock from where the boy had been, he found himself staring at another, truer version of the boy sitting at a table with a kettle of tea in the center, a cloth strip tied around his head pushing the blonde hair up and back, along with a middle aged blonde woman who greatly resembled the boy (his mother perhaps), and two people even stranger than that.

A boy, only a few years younger than Obi-Wan, with mismatched eyes (one black and the other a startling green), wearing a metallic headband and worn drab clothing, and then a young woman, with startlingly red curly hair, and the same green eyes as the boy that seemed to at once see past them and through them.

And perhaps, even more startling than their appearances, was the overwhelming amount of presence in the force, coming from three out of the four of them at that table. As if Qui-Gon had unexpectedly found himself wandering inside of a sun.

They all stared at the three of them, dumbfounded, until finally, the black-haired boy with the headband, put his head into one hand, raked it through his hair, and said quite succinctly, “Well, shit,”

Anakin was still beaming at them, the strangers that Obito’s clone had rescued from the sandstorm, one of them, the tall man with the beard, judging by the way Obito and Lee seemed focused on him entirely as well as the light saber strapped to his waist, was probably a jedi.

And if that wasn’t enough then the girl, Padme, was the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen in his life. Almost like… Like she was an angel that the pilots who’d been to deep space had talked about, or even the angels Lee had mentioned occasionally, which were considered holy messengers in England.
The third, Jar-Jar Binks, even though he was kind of funny and more than a little clumsy, Anakin maybe could do without.

For the moment though all of them were sitting in a too crowded and awkward silence, sipping tea provided by Lee and Obito (except for Jar-Jar who was trying to eat the cup whole, even while Lee and Obito watched in morbid fascination and his mother in quiet disapproval), each waiting for the other to speak. Or at least, they were, Anakin was doing all the talking for them.

“Sorry about not being in the shop earlier, if I’d known you were going to be there I would have been there too. Obito’s clones can be kind of rude sometimes, but Obito’s nice, once you get to know him I mean!” Anakin said, looking more at Padme than the other two, even though he meant it for all of them.

“Oh, um, thank you,” Padme offered him a smile, a soft sweet thing, directed straight at him that had Anakin stupidly smiling back, “You work for Watto then?”

“Well, work is a pretty broad term, mom and I are slaves he won from Gardulla the Hutt.” Anakin then flushed, regretting saying that almost instantly, “But we’ll be free soon, Obito and Lee are raising a lot of money to buy us from Watto and then we’re going to move to Konoha.”

“Oh, I’m sorry I… I can’t believe there is still slavery in the galaxy. The Republic’s anti-slavery laws…”

“The Republic doesn’t exist out here,” Shmi responded, a bit too shortly, but then she wasn’t wrong.

Lee and Obito were the closest thing they’d seen to any law enforcement out here, and they weren’t even from the Republic.

“But it’s gotten better, since Obito can work for me sometimes.”

“Right, how does…” Padme started and Anakin brightened as he filled her in.

“Oh, Obito sometimes helps me get days off so I can spend more time training by having one of his clones henge into me. It doesn’t work all the time, since shadow clones take up a lot of chakra, and Obito doesn’t really know any technical Basic or any Huttesse at all, but it’s nice every once in a while.”
Anakin then leaned in closer, trying to see all the shades of warm brown in her eyes, “Are you an angel?”

“What?”

“An angel. I’ve heard the deep space pilots talk about them, Lee too. They live on the Moons of Iego, I think, also maybe on this planet called Earth. They’re the most beautiful creatures in the universe, and good and kind, and they’re so pretty they make even space pirates cry.”

She blushed, looked down at her own cup of tea, and then said, “I’ve never heard of angels.”

“You must be one… Maybe you just don’t know it.”

Lee eyed Padme with speculation and said, “I’d expect more chakra from a divine messenger of God.”

Before Anakin could angrily retort Obito beat him to it, stating blithely, “And I’d expect the Shinigami to be taller and more masculine,”

“Touché,”

“Don’t mind them,” Anakin said, flushing as he continued to stare across at Padme, “They don’t always know what they’re talking about. They’d never even heard of the Republic before coming to Tatooine.”

She was smiling though, looking at him softly even as she said, “You’re a funny little boy,”

“And Obito, he can make himself look like you?” Qui-Gon Jinn, the man, asked, his eyes locked on Obito’s rather than Anakin’s.

Obito’s hands, gripping his cup of tea, tightened slightly.
“Oh, yeah, that’s easy stuff. I’m working on it too and I almost have it, I just have so much chakra that it makes it hard to do stuff like that, but once I get it I’ll be able to do more impressive jutsus too!”

That was the wrong thing to say.

The room seemed to grow colder somehow, and there was an undercurrent of tension in the room as Obito, Lee, and Qui-Gon all engaged in a silent conversation. Anakin felt his own smile dropping and his eyes darted back to Padme, before they slid almost unwillingly back to Qui-Gon.

“Hm, yes, I think we’ll cut off this adorable prepubescent flirting here and cut straight to the point.” Lee interwove her fingers together and looked across at Qui-Gon, leaning forward slightly, ignoring Anakin’s own desperate flush along with Padme’s, “Jinn, you appear to be a jedi, Anakin was pretty damned convinced that you weren’t coming.”

“I…” Anakin started, only to be cut off by an equally surprised Qui-Gon.

“I wasn’t aware I was expected,”

“Well Obito’s been expecting you for about half of a year now, but Obito’s a pessimist, I on the other hand find myself pleasantly surprised.” Lee offered the man one of her more jaggedly amused grins, the kind Anakin had always found slightly unnerving.

“Obito and Lee are jedi too, well they call it shinobi, but they’re really jedi,” Anakin cut in once the silence seemed to stretch too long. “I’m training to be a jedi too, and then I’m going to help free all the slaves.”

Obito offered a rather thin, stretched, smile to Anakin, “Anakin, that is… That is a very broad definition of shinobi given I have no idea what a jedi is or does… Except that they apparently have chakra and are very into laser kenjutsu.”

Lee spared Obito a glance, one that said quite a bit, a message that Anakin couldn’t quite understand, and then said, “Either they’re shinobi or they’re not, that’s not really all that important for the moment. Right now it’s just important to reassure Jinn here that we’re not enemy nin, not going to slit his throat in his sleep, and are on a wholly diplomatic mission with strict instructions not to start any trouble of any kind. So… rest assured Jinn, you and your friends are safe with us.”
“Oh… Thank you,” Qui-Gon said after a slight pause, clearly alarmed by this.

“They wouldn’t anyways! They’re just… There’s a lot of different kinds of Jedi where they come from, and you have to be really careful because a lot of them aren’t nice,” Anakin hadn’t heard too much of it but apparently there were different hidden villages in Lee’s home world, and that they had often been at war in the past, so being from a different village or being an outlander Jedi was a serious concern.

Qui-Gon offered Anakin a small smile, “Well, in the Republic there is only one Jedi order.”

“Wait, there’s only one hidden village? Really?” Obito asked, leaning forward with wide eyes and a look of blatant curiosity on his face, “How does your kage manage the village across all of those planets?”

“The Jedi order is located on Coruscant and is governed by a council, even though the members of the order come from all over the Republic,”

“That must be nice, inter-village politics can be quite the drag,” Lee said, before eyeing Qui-Gon with more speculation, “But then, what’s your missing nin situation like? I imagine having a village that large you must have some fall through the cracks,”

“Missing nin?” Qui-Gon repeated.

“Defectors, people who leave the village, or the order, or whatever you call it,”

That tension was back, for a moment, and Qui-Gon seemed almost careful as he answered, “If you are speaking of the Sith then they haven’t been seen in centuries.”

Obito and Lee stared at him blankly, and Lee slowly said, “You have no missing nin and no other hidden villages.”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“What kind of a surreal paradise world are you living in?” Obito finally asked.
“I think we’ve finally reached it Obito, this must be Madara’s paradise *genjutsu,*” Lee said slowly before taking a large swig of tea, “I admit, I expected less space *shinobi* when I heard that whole thing… and a lot more plant Senju Hashirama harems,“

Obito spewed out his tea, “Why did you remind me of that?”

“How’d you manage to forget about it?” Lee asked, apparently rhetorically as Obito continued to splutter tea, and shudder, only interrupted by the sound of Jar-Jar now gagging and trying to regurgitate the cup that was lodged in his throat.

Finally, Lee seemed to get a hold of herself, and said, “Right, well, back to business. If you’re apparently not here because of Anakin’s ungodly amount of *chakra* then what brings a man like you to a desert wasteland like this?”

Here, finally, Anakin chimed back in, “You’re here to free the slaves, free me and my mom, right?”

Qui-Gon hesitated for a moment, and then said, “I’m sorry Anakin but no…”

Anakin faltered, hesitated for a moment, but the chakra was still singing and there was still that sense of being right, of freedom and, “You must be, why else would you be here?”

Qui-Gon hesitated for a moment, and had that look Obito often wore, the one where it was clear he was debating whether to tell Anakin something or not, or, as his eyes flickered to Lee and Obito, them, “You must not tell anyone about this, but we’re on our way to Coruscant, actually, on a very important and secret mission.”

“Wow, an S-ranked mission, then?” Anakin asked, because it certainly sounded like one, as those were usually the ones that were labeled ‘top-secret’ by Lee and Obito, Lee and Obito apparently were on one right now while they were here in Tatooine, “But how did you end up all the way in the outer rim then?”

“Our ship was damaged and we’re stranded here until we can repair it.” Padme said, and from the look on her face she thought that might take some time.
But Anakin just grinned harder, “I can help! I can fix anything! And if I can’t then I know Lee can!”

“Well, Anakin, we still need parts…”

“Lee can just make the parts…”

Anakin was immediately cut off by Lee, “Well, cats out of that bag. Anakin, in the future, please don’t go spreading around Eru Lee’s super, secret, alarming blood limits to foreign ninja.”

“Oh, right, sorry… But you can help them, you can just make the parts!” Anakin said to which Lee shrugged.

“Well, yes, I can but it’s better if I know what I’m doing, and while I have been studying ships and blueprints for months I’d hardly call myself and expert. They’re probably better off buying from Watto.”

Which left them back with being stranded and having nothing to trade for the parts.

“The junk dealers must have some weakness,” Padme said, and here Shmi finally spoke, with a sigh.

“Gambling. Everything here revolves around betting on those awful pod races.”

And it was all coming together, how Anakin was supposed to help them, why they’d come today instead of yesterday or even tomorrow, “I’ve built a racer, just finished it! And there’s a big race tomorrow, on Boonta Eve. You could enter my pod and make Watto think it’s yours and get him to let me pilot for you!”

Anakin tried not to see how his mother paled, how upset she looked, because he was supposed to do this. He knew it, and even though she was upset, even though Lee would probably insist on sticking Obito inside the cockpit instead, he knew he had to do this.

It felt… It felt like destiny, like everything important in his life coming together in one final perfect
moment.

(And outside the storm still raged.)
He must have been almost fifteen then.

A song, unfamiliar English music played, neither fast nor slow, rather a tempo that almost seemed to swing and oscillate. The strings plucked beneath it and the drums played not quite unsteady or teetering but not symmetric either, and a man’s smooth clear voice singing in a language that Obito was only just starting to become fluent in, “Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars…”

Obito stood hesitantly outside the door of Eru Lee’s, Lee-shishou’s, apartment, his hand poised to knock yet not daring to touch the wood.

Stepping back, he could see the lights on through the window, and more he could see Minato-sensei standing there, his kage hat discarded on the couch along with the kage robe and a thick red scarf, holding onto Lee, and the two of them stepping rhythmically and slowly together, dancing…

Neither of them appeared to be speaking, just slowly dancing, Lee-shishou with her head resting on his shoulder and Minato-sensei staring out and forward.

“Let me see what Spring is like on Jupiter and Mars.”

It was cold out, starting to snow even, thick flakes just descending from the sky and obscuring the streetlamps from sight. Even so, despite his rapidly paling fingers and the sight of his breath like smoke in front of him, he stayed outside the window and just… watched.

And then, then Minato was speaking, and only narrowed eyes and intense staring allowed Obito to lip read through the glass, “Do you remember, in England, all those dance lessons they made us take?”

Lee’s head was facing away from him, so Obito couldn’t see her response, only her overwhelming red hair, whatever she said though brought a soft smile to Minato-sensei’s face, and he said, “English civilians always seemed to have the strangest priorities…”

Lee asked something then, tilting her head upwards to look Minato in the eye, and for a moment there was hesitation in his step and tightening of his arms on her shoulder and waist, but he only said, “I told Kushina I wanted to come and see you, she knows I’ll be late.”
“In other words, hold my hand. In other words, darling, kiss me.”

Lee offered him a look, and although Obito could only really make out half of her face, he could see enough to know that there was something deeper in her expression, something barren and weathered and resigned. Then she placed her head back onto his chest, near his shoulder, and said nothing.

“I never did thank you, Lee, for bringing Obito home.” Minato-sensei said then, and outside Obito stiffened at the unexpected mention of his own name, suddenly reminded of how cold it was outside, the scarred half of his body was aching more than it usually did.

They turned then, or Lee turned, just enough for Obito to make out her lips.

“You thanked me.”

“As the hokage, Lee, but not as his teacher and not as your friend… I just couldn’t find the time until now,” a strangely fatigued look passed over Minato’s face then, and he added, “Being hokage, somehow, I never imagined it’d be so time consuming.”

A slight pause, weighted, then, “You shouldn’t have to, Minato.”

“All the same… You went after him, after a body even, and I didn’t.”

They stopped dancing, drew apart, and although they really were standing only inches from each other there seemed to be some wider unbreechable gap between them.

“I had the time, you didn’t, that’s really all there is to it. Besides, I doubt you would have been thrilled to have a showdown with Madara and all of his zombie plant friends.” Lee sighed then, stretched slightly, and added, “Besides, you’re hokage now, it’s your job to leave such drudgery to your underlings.”

“Lee, just because I can send you on harrowing missions doesn’t mean I want to.” Minato said, pausing over the words, perhaps recognizing that someday he might have no choice, because when you were kage sometimes you had to make decisions you didn’t like and place old friendships to
the side for a time, “At any rate, you probably won’t be seeing a mission like that for some time, unless something distinctly English comes up.”

Lee offered him a rather self-deriding smile, “I see I’ve been placed on the retired kage roster without even having been a kage,”

Minato responded with a slower, softer smile than hers, “We are no longer at war, Lee, and can I help it that your reputation is such that, when you set foot near another village, all the old war sirens start wailing?”

Lee considered this for a moment, the strange situation where she was far more powerful than the significantly powerful yondaime hokage, in a time of strained peace, kept in check not only by politics, but also by the sheer overwhelming military strength of Konoha.

“Do you want me to teach then?”

Minato hesitated, then slowly said, “You mean beyond Obito?”

“He’ll be taking his jonin exams soon enough, or he should… He’s not bad, Minato, perhaps soon enough he’ll be great.”

Minato didn’t contradict this, considered slowly in that tired and methodical way of his, and then said, “I’m not sure how well you would teach, Lee, not the basics but… For a chunin apprentice, for someone like Obito, it seems to work. A genin though, you’ll have to teach them not only survival techniques and basic field techniques but also ninjutsu, genjutsu, the startings of any branches beyond the main three. You never did any of that though, not like Obito did, or even I did. You were always so advanced… I’m not sure how a group of ten or twelve year olds would respond to that.”

Minato sighed, raked a hand through his hair, and said, “You won’t want for work, you’ll have missions, and when you don’t… I need advisors, someone inside the village who I trust and who can see things from angles I can’t.”

He paused, then, “It won’t be like last time, Lee, I promise.”

The song finished then, the only sound the distant scratching of the needle on the record, and for a
while they just sat there in silence, staring at each other. Then, slowly and with an almost painful hesitance and lethargy, Minato gathered his robe, hat, and scarf, and then spared Lee what final look.

Obito wondered if he had seen so many words, so much feeling, ever expressed in just a glance before.

Lee walked over to him, wrapped her arms around him, and held him listlessly as he took his own arms and squeezed her far tighter. They stood there, in the soft glow of her apartment, for what seemed like forever.

Then, “Minato, you should probably go home now.”

Obito and Lee-shishou sat off to the side of Anakin's house, away from both Anakin, the civilian girl, and the demented frog, as well as the jedi and Skywalker Shmi. While Anakin worked on the steel death trap known as a pod racer, blatantly attempting to flirt with the girl and failing miserably, Obito and Lee took up an idle game of shogi which provided enough of a distraction so that they would not appear to be blatantly staring. At Anakin or at the jedi.

For Anakin, the story was simple enough. Although Anakin seemed to think all signs said go, in truth he was failing miserably. At any other age, five years was not too large of a gap, at nine and what looked like fourteen or fifteen, Anakin had been given the label of ‘adorable’ rather than ‘attractive’. Anakin, being only nine and receiving more attention from a pretty girl than he ever had in his life, had not yet realized this.

Which, in and of itself, was kind of adorable.

The jedi, Jinn Qui-Gon, sitting on the porch next to Shmi, speaking on his radio in rapid Basic to whoever was back on the ship, was decidedly less adorable. If only because Obito wasn’t quite sure what to make of him, and also the fact that he had to be older than the sannin yet still very much in the field.

“It’s your move, Obito,”

Obito turned to stare at the board, frowning, noting that Lee was actually going out of her way to
play well today when normally it was sort of up in the air where her skill level was at.

With a sigh, Obito considered the game, even as he said, “The jedi appears to be making quite the gamble. In Watto’s shop he bet his own ship against the needed parts.”

He’d said this not only in front of Anakin, standing there stuttering and having to explain why his pod-racer had crashed and how it wasn’t truly his fault (no matter that Lee-shishou had told him that a shinobi was only as good as his excuses), but also the hidden Obito who had been observing this all quietly from just outside of the shop.

Whether the man knew Obito was there was anyone’s guess, he’d apparently been able to tell a shadow clone apart from a human being with ease, which usually was the work of profound sensors, but he’d still said it.

More, he’d gone against the wishes of the girl who was in the service of a queen from a distant planet, who perhaps rightly felt the risks of relying on Anakin to win a race were too great.

Which meant that this man was at the end of his options.

Lee spared the man a sideways, casual, glance, “If Watto is the only one with the parts, and they have nothing to trade, I suppose he has no choice but to go in all or nothing. If he wants to get out of this sand trap anytime soon that is.”

“Which confirms his story,” Obito said, “He’s on a time sensitive mission and not here for Anakin.”

Anakin, how had everything come to revolve around him? True, had he not been there Obito and Lee-shishou probably would have kept their distance from the jedi, perhaps have one conversation, introduce themselves, and then travel to Coruscant to see the temple and covertly watch. And then, if signs were good, they would contact Minato-sensei and ask him to bring in more formal diplomats.

Anakin though, he’d made everything more complicated.

Lee considered this and brought up the true question, “Clearly he didn’t come here with Skywalker Anakin in mind, but, that said, now that he’s seen him and his overwhelming potential, does he
want him?"

And that was the strange thing, Obito didn’t know what the man wanted.

In Fire Country, finding someone like Anakin at the edge of your border, whose life was miserable enough that he would sign into the life of a shinobi without thinking twice, even wanted to be a shinobi, there’d be no question of bringing him back to Konoha.

There would be no pretense of not taking him back to Konoha, perhaps with the mother, if she was truly adamant against it (and even then that depended on what kind of a shinobi you were and your own moral code). But Shmi wasn’t, at this point to have any sort of life was better than the one Anakin had now. They were slaves on a desert planet, employed to an uncaring master, but always with the possibility of having a far worse master should Watto sell them.

Skywalker Anakin had no future, his mother knew this, and even life as an assassin was preferable to that.

And even though Shmi had no idea where he and Lee had come from, had frowned at their descriptions of shinobi, teaching Anakin how to fight and manipulate chakra, she had never indicated that she would rather him stay.

She’d done the opposite, even, after a few months of working Shmi had asked him if they were serious, if they would truly take them back, and she’d made him promise that even if she herself could not go for whatever reason, they must take Anakin.

Granted, if there’d been other, completely foreign shinobi involved, who had stuck a claim on the boy… No, even then, it was well within his rights to say that the boy was in jedi territory and therefore belonged to the jedi.

But this man hadn’t done that, certainly his eyes lingered on Anakin, but he’d made no offers, made no demands, hadn’t even truly confronted Lee or Obito. He just… watched, saying all the while that his only goal was to fix the ship. He’d gone out of his way to tell Anakin and his mother that they were not here to free them.

Which left Obito wondering, “He didn’t say much about his village.”
And what he had said described either a paradise or something far worse. A world in which there were no competing hidden villages, in which there were no missing nin, either the shinobi of his village were content and none chose to leave or… Or those that did leave were dealt with more efficiently and painfully than any of the missing nin of the five great hidden villages.

“We didn’t exactly hand out details of Konoha either,” Lee said with a shrug, fingers now tapping as she eyed the board, and Obito’s unmoving hands, rather critically.

“Yes but… He’s experienced, more, he’s… warm. He reminds me of Kakashi’s father, your own shishou,” Hatake Sakumo was around this man’s age, or soon would be, and like him this man had not only a fair amount of chakra, but a sense of experience to him, of having seen conflict and battle, which had tempered a great and kind patience in him.

There were few shinobi like Hatake Sakumo, so when you met one, even if it was only for a moment, you recognized them for what they were.

“For a man like that not to seek out Anakin… It makes me wonder just what kind of village he’s from. For all we know it could be the bloody mist,” Obito finally played his hand, pushing a piece forward, watching Lee’s eyes light up and a smile stole across her face, pleased by whatever subtle mistake Obito had made this time.

“The bloody void, you mean. After all, there is no mist in space.”

“Well, there’s asteroids, aren’t there. Or space dust at the very least,”

Lee frowned, pondering this, then said, “The bloody space dust or bloody space rock just doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Obito frowned, because no, it really didn’t. Actually, tacking the word ‘space’ onto anything somehow made it less legitimate.

They fell silent, Lee considering the board again, this time for her own turn, and as she did so Jinn began to speak to Shmi, “You should be proud of your son. He gives without any thought of reward.”

Shmi smiled softly, staring at Anakin, grinning at the girl, “He knows nothing of greed.”
For a moment, they fell into silence, then Jinn’s eyes flickered to his, they were a faded blue, not quite as intense as Minato-sensei’s, but certainly there was power in them, “And now he is being trained as a jedi…”

“By Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha, yes,” Shmi said, and then frowned before adding, “They’re not… They’ve never said they were jedi though. The boy, Obito, actually gets quite upset when Anakin says that, he always insists on correcting him. I believe their word for it, for whatever they are, is shinobi.”

Lee was less insistent about that, seeing it as something of a lost cause, which given the fact that Anakin still hadn’t caught on maybe she had a point. None the less, it did make Obito uncomfortable, or perhaps apprehensive was a better word. Because god knew that equating one thing to another, without cause or true justification, could lead to some messy situations.

As Minato-sensei would often say, the wizards had taught them many lessons, that had simply been one of them.

“Did they say where they were from?”

“A village called Konoha on a planet called Earth, they said that it’s very far from here, I certainly have never heard of it.” Shmi paused, and then said, “They’ve offered to take us there, to train Anakin.”

“The Force is unusually strong with him, I can see why they would wish to train him, if that is their people’s way…” The man trailed off, finally turning his eyes from Obito to Anakin again, tracing his form.

“They are truly not jedi then?”

“No, a pair like them, I would have heard of them. The woman, Lee, forgive my metaphor but it’s almost like staring into the face of the sun, her power is that blinding.” Qui-Gon paused, “Considering where they say they are from, and that this planet is not in the Republic, they are likely from a primitive planet that has only just discovered space travel. Sometimes, on primitive worlds, force users will band together and form orders that are somewhat similar to the jedi. This is likely the case with those two,”
Lee played her hand silently, pushing her own piece forward, and Obito glanced down to note that he was truly in dangerous territory now. If he didn’t think of something quickly he was sure to lose the game within half a dozen moves.

Shmi considered this slowly, seemed to sag almost with both relief and disappointment for not having their story truly confirmed, then said, “He deserves better than a slave’s life. I don’t know what a shinobi’s life is but… surely, if he is free, it will be better than my own life has been.”

Shmi gave Jinn a rather weighty look, the question pounding in her eyes before she even said it, and she asked what Obito had been thinking for almost a day now, “Can you help him?”

Jinn Qui-Gon hesitated, and although he didn’t look at Lee or Obito, kept his eyes firmly on Anakin with a distant look of regret, Obito felt his attention all the same. Because the man wanted them to hear this, to hear this entire conversation, he knew that they were listening and he said it anyways, “I’m afraid not. Had he been born in the Republic, we would have identified him early, and he would have become a jedi… But it’s too late now, he’s too old.”

Too old, in England the boy would have been two years too young, but here he was too old… Even in Konoha, while he would be behind, he certainly would not be considered too old of all things.

And even as he processed the words he wondered if they weren’t hiding something else, if that was simply the excuse Jinn would give this woman, rather than speak of the politics and intricacies of his own village. After all, how did a mist-nin describe the blood-soaked rice paddies that constituted their village without seeming like a monster?

There were things civilians simply did not understand.

Regardless, the man’s message had been heard loud and clear.

Obito set down his piece, fully aware that he had just spelled his doom in the game, shared a look with Lee-shishou, and said with a growing smile, “Well, shishou, I guess that means all systems are go,”

Anakin was in the starting grid, his hands on the controls, feeling a great overpowering nervousness and excitement coiling in his stomach. This was it after all, his first real test, people,
Padme and Mr. Jinn, were counting on him for this. It wasn’t training anymore, not even just for Watto, this was his first time out in the field, his first real mission. And more, it’d be for her, for Padme, the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen in his life.

In the distance, he could hear the announcers in both Huttesse and Basic, the roaring of the crowd, he saw Sebulba waving to his adoring fans, a sneer on his lips, and Anakin sat there just waiting for it to start, closing his eyes and trying to focus.

Lee said something about fear, a quote from a very old story from England, about a desert planet and a man who could see the future like Anakin could, and used that power to take back the planet from the evil family that controlled it. And as he sat there, eyes closed, he whispered it to himself, letting his chakra flow and thinking only of what he had to do, “I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

Only Anakin would remain… Yes, and then he would win, and Padme would leave, and he would… He would be freed by Obito and Lee, and before he went to Konoha with his mother he would go and see her on Naboo. Yes, that was how it would happen.

“Annie,”

Anakin looked up to see his mother looking at him, that painfully sad expression on her face again. She pulled him forward into a hug, kissed his forehead, then drew back and said, “Be safe, Annie.”

Anakin could only nod dimly and say, “I will be, I promise, mom.”

Anakin was introduced by the announcers, he stood up almost in a daze, waved and sat back down. Padme came over, looked at him fondly, Anakin blushing in response, then she leaned over and kissed him on the cheek and said, “You carry all of our hopes now, Anakin.”

Then she too was gone, taking Jar-Jar Binks with her, walking back into the audience, leaving Lee, Obito, and Qui-Gon behind. Anakin’s eyes darted to Sebulba, who offered him a leering grin and the promise of death in his eyes.

Anakin was no stranger to violence, he was a slave after all, but for perhaps the first time he realized that Sebulba wouldn’t simply not hesitate to kill him, he would actively seek it.
And then there was Qui-Gon Jinn, smiling at him, stepping past Obito and Lee and offering them only a glance, “Remember, concentrate on the moment. Feel. Don’t think… Trust your instincts.”

Anakin nodded, grinning, and said, “I know, that’s… That’s what jedi train for, isn’t it?”

The man nodded, that kind smile growing, and said, “Yes, yes it is… May the Force be with you, Anakin.”

At that point Anakin expected Qui-Gon to leave, all of them to leave, because the race was set to start, but then Lee spoke in that calm, authoritative, and insultingly casual tone of hers, “Nope, we’re not doing this.”

Anakin started, as did Obito, except while Anakin was shocked and hurt, Obito looked legitimately apprehensive. And given Lee’s narrow eyed look to her apprentice, he might have had good reason for that.

“Obito…”

Obito cut her off, waving his hands desperately in front of him as if to ward off whatever his master was thinking, “No, no, plus, you can’t, Anakin has to be the pilot, remember! That was the deal with Watto, why he would even agree to gamble these stakes. So even if you want to, you can’t just switch me for him…”

Obito paled then, seemed to come to some realization, “And you can’t just have me henge into him either because I have no idea how to fly this thing!”

“Are you finished?” Lee asked, eyebrows lowered.

“No, I am not finished! That is a death trap, shishou! I am too young and pretty to die!” Obito said, looking for once way younger than he normally did, even going so far as to stomp his foot on the ground, much to Anakin and apparently Qui-Gon’s surprise.

“Well, I think you’re finished,” Lee said before going onto explain, “Given that Anakin’s last attempt at racing ended in fiery disaster, and I’d be rather put out if I had to scrape his fried
intestines from the cockpit, not even mentioning what Shmi would do,” Anakin grimaced and blushed, she wasn’t supposed to say that, she wasn’t supposed to undermine him like that, he needed to do this, she’d even said so the night before, “You’re going in there with him.”

Anakin’s head lifted, his shame and nervousness suddenly forgotten, because she’d said ‘with’ and not ‘instead of’, “With me?”

Obito motioned to the pod racer, “With him?! Where?! Where am I supposed to fit in that, and why?”

“If he gets engine trouble, or if Sebulba tries to make him explode again, I’m going to need you to pull him out. Plus, it can’t hurt to have you flinging *kunai* at anyone who looks at you funnily,” Lee explained sagely, arms crossed, looking very pleased with herself.

“That doesn’t explain where I’m supposed to sit!”

Lee inspected the one-man pod critically then pointed to the back of Anakin’s seat, “You can sit on that,”

“I can sit on the hood, the hood of the fiery death trap,” Obito repeated.

“Think of it as a training exercise,” Lee said before smiling, “Yes, I’m much more comfortable with this arrangement.”

“Well, I’m not!” Obito balked but Lee said nothing, just kept grinning.

When Lee gave no reaction Obito angrily said, “Hey, shishou, here’s an idea, why don’t you ride on the hood of the fiery death trap, and I go and watch from the stands!”

But Lee was already walking away, grabbing Qui-Gon with her as she went, and offering a single casual wave as if to salute them. Leaving Obito and Anakin behind. Obito then turned to Anakin, and without a word climbed onto the back of Anakin’s seat between the engines, displacing chakra to one of his hands as well as his feet.
Anakin turned to look at him, and Obito’s sober expression transformed into a stretched and rather stupid looking grin, and he said as a final encouragement before the race began, “In the words of my best friend and eternal roommate, Hatake ‘Bakashi’ Kakashi, let’s show these bitches how it’s done.”

Anakin grinned back, faced forward, and lowered his goggles.

Qui-Gon said nothing as the elevator rose to the viewing platform, stared forward instead, keeping his eyes on Anakin Skywalker and Obito Uchiha until they faded from view. Next to him Shmi’s eyes also fell onto her son, visibly nervous, even with the presence of the older boy. And the handmaiden, Padme, too kept her eyes locked on them. Only Lee Eru, the strange red-headed woman, whose presence in the Force was more powerful than anything Qui-Gon had ever felt, even compared to Anakin Skywalker’s, looked at ease.

Shmi spoke first, softly, her eyes darting to his, “Is he nervous?”

“He’s fine.” Qui-Gon started, a weak smile on his own lips, but before he could elaborate the woman, Lee spoke. She had a young voice, high and clear, but somehow commanding all the same, as if the Force was somehow inherently laced into every word she said.

“Obito will ensure nothing happens to him, and if he doesn’t then he’s a complete failure of an apprentice and I will be very put out… Obito does his best to avoid my being put out,”

Apprentice, did she truly mean that word? Sith had apprentices as jedi had padawans, and the distinction of the terms was extremely weighted. He’d wondered about these two for some time, almost more than he’d wondered about the boy.

For all that they used the Force, and how they used the Force, with such ease and practice, the woman manipulating the strings of reality itself, and for all that they held their emotions in check they were not jedi and made no pretenses of being jedi.

The boy, there was darkness in him, pain, laced into the scars on his face, and true there was joy and love, too much love and attachment, but he was filled with such emotion. Every action he took, every look he had, was driven by these underlying emotions, and in his shadow the pain of his past would always linger.
The woman, she was harder to read, indeed Qui-Gon wasn’t certain he could read her at all. At
times, all he could feel was the sheer power, like staring into a star, there was nothing sentient or
feeling within her. But then there were times when he sensed something, something he couldn’t
quite put into words, only it was a feeling that a jedi would never allow himself for its sheer
strength.

And there was a great attachment between the two of them, beyond the attachment Qui-Gon had
with Obi-Wan, which had already gotten him into trouble with the council more than once. When
they looked at each other…

Jedi did not allow themselves that sort of feeling, but then, Sith rarely allowed themselves any
feeling at all beyond hatred and rage.

“But will he win?” This was Padme, looking at the woman with narrowed eyes.

“Well, that’s an entirely different question, isn’t it?” Lee responded, her lips twisting into a strange
grin, devoid of any true pleasure or happiness, “I’d say that if Anakin wants to win, then he will, if
he doesn’t, he won’t.”

Now that, that Qui-Gon believed. On his own the boy glowed with the Force, when not standing in
the shadow of the woman. His mother had confessed that the boy had no father, had been
conceived by the Force itself…

That boy could, with the aid of the Force, do anything he put his mind to.

And for that, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but wonder, no, was certain after having tested his blood, that
this was the chosen one the prophecies had spoken of. The one to bring balance to the Force.

Unless, he thought as his eyes slid over to the woman, it was Lee Eru.

But the woman was not a jedi, perhaps was not a Sith, but she wasn’t a jedi either. She was foreign,
something unknown, with strange abilities he had never heard of developed on a primitive planet
outside of the republic, but surely nothing a prophecy would speak of.

Had she been younger, the boy’s age, and in this desert, then perhaps he would have thought it was
her. But she was too old, too set in her ways, and for that it could not possibly be her.
So, it must be the boy, whose midi-chlorian count had been beyond imagining.

And with that in mind Qui-Gon had made another gamble with Watto, prompted last minute by the Force itself, for the boy’s freedom as well, and he would then take the boy to the order and train him as his padawan when Obi-Wan faced his trials to become a knight.

The other two, Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha, he would deal with in time, allowing the Force to guide his decisions.

Padme was evidently not reassured by Lee or Qui-Gon, as she scowled and said, “This is too reckless, you jedi are far too reckless, the queen would…”

Here Qui-Gon cut her off, “The queen trusts my judgement, young handmaiden. You should as well.”

Padme opened her mouth to retort this, then closed it, closing her eyes and saying tersely, “You assume too much, Master Jinn.”

Qui-Gon planned to leave it at that, but surprisingly, Lee Eru spoke for him, her grin gone and in its place a rather sober and assessing look pinned onto Padme, “Jinn is making the only move he can,” those green eyes, too green for any human’s eyes, turned to Qui-Gon, “Your ship is broken, you are stranded on a backwater planet, there is only one part shop with what you need and you will have to pay through the nose to get it, and you have nothing to trade. Anakin’s race is your only choice. Reckless it may be but too conservative and you risk losing everything. It’s not about assumptions, Padme-chan, it’s about options and the lack of them.”

The girl then turned her eyes back to Padme, and looked down on the hand maiden as if she was a bug beneath her shoes, and then muttered something in her strange native language, and although Qui-Gon didn’t know what she said he had a feeling that it was not a compliment.

Suddenly, the grin was back, full of blinding confidence and a positively inhuman amount of cheer for a woman her age, “However, all that said, I have confidence in the pair of them. After all, despite crashing, Anakin has thus far avoided major injury and painful death.”

Of course, when the race began, and Anakin’s engine stalled, to the complete dismay of Padme, Lee Eru’s confidence in the pair of them was summarized with her single curse, “Goddammit,
Anakin,”

“Come on, come on, come on…”

Anakin was praying to every god he could think of and chakra itself, he wasn’t going to lose before he even started, he wasn’t going to disappoint Padme and fail everybody. He couldn’t, he couldn’t fail like this.

Obito looked over Anakin’s shoulders, “Anakin, is there something we should be doing?”

The engines weren’t starting, why weren’t the engines starting? They’d started the day before, he’d tested them, and true he’d only just finished the racer but…

“Come on, come on you piece of shit!”

He hit the control panel, tears gathering in his eyes, but the engines still didn’t start.

“Anakin, hang onto your controls, I’m going to try and fix it.”

Anakin glanced up and behind, saw that Obito had let go, was bringing his hands together somehow still stuck to the back, running through a series of handseals, so fast Anakin could hardly catch them.

Hastily Anakin turned back and at Obito’s foreign shout of, “Repairo!”, the racer came to life and they were off.

Anakin let out a whoop and grinned, “Thanks Obito!”

“Don’t thank me yet, we’ve given them one hell of a lead!”
Not with this racer though, Anakin grinned, set the controls into motion and began to pass the stragglers one by one. That is, until one of them, Gasgano, blocked him, swerving left with Anakin, and then right, refusing to let him by.

“He’s not letting me pass, Obito!” Anakin shouted over the wind, barely able to hear his own voice.

“Of course, he’s not letting you pass,” Obito shouted back, “They’re here to win, Anakin, not to play nice!”

No, they never were there to play nice, and that became just as apparent, when trying to go around the side of him, he found himself up against the edge of a cliff, Gasgano’s pod already inching towards him to fling Anakin off.

Before he could though Obito was bringing his hands back together, going through those rapid motions, and a giant fire ball sprung from his fingertips, striking into the other pod and sending it spinning leaving Anakin to dart ahead.

Anakin let out a great laugh once again, already coming up on the next racers.

And somehow, even passing those, he knew that he had it, he was going to win, no matter what cheap tricks Sebulba was going to pull, he was going to win. He passed racers left and right, leaving them behind in the great dunes and canyons, some of them veering to the side and some exploding even.

Soon enough lap two was beginning, with him in sixth place, and two laps to go.

He sped forward, dodging Sebulba’s falling debris, Obito getting rid of what Anakin couldn’t avoid with powerful blasts of fire, and then Anakin was right there in second place, inching towards first.

And he knew, he knew right then and there, he was going to win and there was nothing Sebulba could do about it!

Then though, with him neck and neck with Sebulba, that was when it happened.
He saw himself winning the pod race, lifted into the air by his friends and by Obito, Lee smiling at him, everyone cheering. Then, then he was freed, Qui-Gon Jinn had bought his freedom and promised to train him as a jedi on Courscant. More, he was going with Padme as well, was going to be able to talk to her and see her and not have to say goodbye…

But his mother wasn’t freed, Qui-Gon couldn’t afford them both, and Lee bent down to him, hugged him, and whispered in his ear that she and Obito would buy his mother’s freedom once things with Watto had settled down.

Except… Except he never saw any of them again after that. Lee wasn’t assuring him, Lee was saying goodbye.

He left, a dark man chased them, a sith, and then they were flying through space to Coruscant where… Where they said no, that Anakin was too old, but they gave him a test and he went to Naboo.

And then, suddenly, overwhelming, was a sense of death and desolation.

Qui-Gon Jinn was going to die, a light saber through his chest, leaving him to tumble into a great abyss. His mother was going to die, torn apart by sand people, Anakin never fast enough, not there when she needed him. Padme, dead in childbirth. And more, deaths of people he didn’t even know yet somehow cared for, everyone dead, entire planets destroyed by a lifeless mechanical star. And himself… Something that should have died.

“Anakin!”

Anakin looked over, too late he noticed Sebulba cutting through his engine, the same trick he’d used before in the last race. Before Anakin could pull back or pull forward, move out of the way, Obito’s arms were wrapped around him, screaming at the top of his lungs, “Shunshin!”

And then they were hurled forward through time and space, just as Anakin’s pod racer, his beautiful pod racer, exploded.

And Anakin lost the pod race.
Lee Eru’s eyes met Qui-Gon’s for a moment, and slowly, consolingly, she patted him on the back and over Padme’s cry of despair she said, “Well, looks like you’ll be staying with us for a while, jedi.”

“…It seems so.”

“Welcome to the sticks, Jinn-san.”
Chapter 4

“If you’re going to be my apprentice, Obito, then there’s a few things you should know.”

Strangely, there’d been no ifs about it. Even though Eru Lee had plainly said that he could turn her down, even though she’d even suggested him getting into contact with the shodaime, it’d been pretty clear that for whatever reason she was set and determined that Uchiha Obito, the disowned one-eyed Uchiha and recent science experiment, was going to be her apprentice.

And, even at the age of fourteen when he’d barely known anything about her, he’d had the strong feeling that Eru Lee usually got what she wanted. That and Kakashi had kind of warned him in a roundabout way, and then Minato-sensei had warned him in a less roundabout way, and by the time Jiraiya-sama stopped in for a short word Obito had kind of gotten the idea.

They were sitting on the grounds of the Hatake clan compound, Lee having pulled Obito out of his new bedroom at some ungodly hour without warning, cheerfully waving to Kakashi as he poked his head out of his own room blinked blearily with a sleep heavy eye, and then to Sakumo who was sipping tea and watching their progress with a fond and rather nostalgic smile.

So there Obito was, for his first official day as an apprentice under Eru Lee, in his pajamas, still feeling like he was dreaming, and beginning to think that he’d just made a huge mistake.

“First, pretty much everything I’m about to disclose to you is considered an S-ranked secret. Now, since they’re technically my own goddamn secrets, I have no idea why the sandaime and now Minato have to be in such a snit about it, but I am a law-abiding citizen who abides laws. Except for when I don’t, like now, because there’s some things you need to know.”

“Oh… Alright,” What Obito really wanted to ask is if they were done yet and he could go to sleep, but, he’d learned how to have some tact over the years.

“Yes, well, just know that you can’t go around talking about this to just anyone. As far as I know only Uzumaki Kushina, Uchiha Mikoto, Nara Shikaku, Yamanaka Inoichi, Akimichi Choza, Minato of course, Jiraiya-sensei, Senju Tsunade, Orochimaru, the nidaime, the shodaime, the sandaime for obvious reasons, Sakumo-shishou, Kakashi, the English ninja I think figured most of it out on his own sort of, maybe the Jashinists if you believe half the crazy shit they say, oh wait Dead Last figured it out at some point after basically everyone else knew already, and now you, know all about this stuff.”
“…Was that supposed to be a shorter list?”

Lee blinked, and said in a blank sort of tone, “Yes, well, for completely unavoidable reasons the cat has left the bag multiple times… They’re very dumb S-ranked secrets.”

“Alright,” Obito repeated, again really wanting to ask if he could just go back to bed instead, but it didn’t seem like that was an option.

“Extremely dumb S-ranked secrets, almost impossible to keep really, I mean even the people who don’t know have probably guessed, you know, if it was a guessing sort of secret. And it doesn’t really mean anything at the end of things, it’s just a word after all, I am that I am and have always been that I’ve always been. It makes difference to me or to them, really…”

“Lee-shishou,” Obito interrupted with a rather put upon expression, his eyes aching, his entire body aching.

“Oh, right, sorry, got distracted. It’s just… This conversation never goes particularly well. Well, it did with Minato, sort of, but even then there was certainly a bit of parsing things out that we had to do. Plus, he’d probably known deep down for years…”

“Lee-shishou,” Obito interrupted a bit more forcefully this time.

“Right, the secret, well, there’s no easy way to put this but… Well, I’m a god.”

Obito had nothing to say to that, he wasn’t even sure it was parsing correctly, so he just repeated, “Okay.”

“… You took that surprisingly well.” Lee said, “I don’t think anyone has took it that well, even Minato.”

“I’m very unflappable,” Of course, at that moment, Obito probably wasn’t really processing that correctly. Bakashi could come up to him and declare his divinity or else that he’d gone time travelling and been abducted by aliens and gotten to meet some guy named Presley Elvis and Obito probably wouldn’t have even blinked.
“I kind of expected more questions, honestly, don’t you want to know which god I am?”

When it was clear that Obito was supposed to say something he asked, “Which god are you?”

“The Shinigami.”

“Oh… cool.”

Now she was giving him a very odd look, raised eyebrows as if she was doubting his sanity when she was the one who had dragged him out of bed to tell him that she was the god of death, “You’re very desensitized, it’s almost impressive, if it weren’t so alarming… I think this bodes well for your apprenticeship.”

“Was that it?”

“Well… yes, I guess details will come up as they come up so… Yeah, that’s it…”

Obito stood, brushed the dew from his pants, and trudged back into the house to where his warm bed waited.

And it wouldn’t really sink in, what she’d said, until much later. Because words are words, but the meaning behind them is far greater, and even as he’d left Konoha Obito would not yet realize what she’d truly meant or what it meant to be a god living among mortal men.

He’d make jokes about it, smile at her references, drop it casually in conversation but they were only words, only a dim understanding of what they could possibly mean…

But at the time there was only his half-dreaming sense of relief of being allowed to rest a few more hours before she put him through whatever trials she felt were necessary. And perhaps, perhaps there was the distant memory, of Lee entering Madara’s cave, and how it’d seemed like the rising of a second sun.
Perhaps naturally, Obi-Wan refused to speak with him. As they watched Watto leer and smirk, shouting at Anakin in Huttese as the boy dutifully took inventory of the ship and its equipment with an expression of miserable guilt, Obi-Wan refused to even so much as meet his eyes.

Instead he settled for staring at him when he thought his master wasn’t paying attention, not glaring, but staring with the look of a man who has been stabbed in the stomach and hasn’t quite realized what had happened yet.

And in the force Obi-Wan felt almost empty, as if all his emotions had not been released, but instead drained out of him leaving something bitter and haunting behind.

Of course, he was hardly alone in this. Padme had raged, then sobbed, then had become silent and cold, as if her planet had already been lost to war and starvation in that one moment. Panaka now glared sullenly, but had first proposed that they sell Qui-Gon and his padawan into slavery and buy back the ship and the parts.

He had been driven by anger more than thought, but all the same, Qui-Gon could feel through the force, for that blind instant Panaka had truly meant those words.

No, strangest of all, the only ones who seemed remotely comfortable in his presence, was the young woman Lee Eru and her apprentice Obito Uchiha.

Lee sat atop a great mahogany chest that had been pulled from the queen’s apartments while her apprentice sat with crossed legs on her throne. Strewn about them were the queen’s garments and anything deemed of worth, jewelry and golden embroidery glittering in the suns while Watto continued to furtively glance in its direction.

Greed was there, certainly, greed seemed omnipresent for the toydarian, but so too was a new nervousness, as if seeing the handmaidens and the queen, the clothing and jewels, along with the crew of the ship and Obi-Wan, he was beginning to realize just what trouble he might have bought for himself.

He had said nothing, no doubt having long ago seen the consequences of loose lips, but it was there in the twitch of his wings.

At this point he would have reached out with the bond to Obi-Wan, to nudge him into paying attention to the toydarian, but then he glanced at the stiff back of his padawan once again, and felt
the desire slip away from him.

“It’s good to see some things remain the same no matter where you end up. Whining civilians are always such a bother.”

He looked up to find Lee staring down at him in contemplation, a strangely rueful smile on her face, and when he caught her eye she nodded to the others, huddled together and casting anger filled glances at Qui-Gon every now and then.

“They have good reason to be upset, I have lost our ship, and I have lost them far more than that.” Qui-Gon, potentially, had lost them their entire world.

“You didn’t lose them anything, they’d already lost it to begin with or they wouldn’t be here, you’ve simply failed to produce a miracle.” Lee said before adding, “Besides, you’re hardly out of the running yet, there are other ships, and if not that then there are smugglers who can be bribed or blackmailed into taking a few of you at the very least.”

Yes, but not all of them, not likely at any rate. And to arrive smuggled in like a thief or a murderer, that, surely, would not aid the queen’s cause when she plead her case with the senate. Besides, in a worn-down smuggler’s ship, they would never reach Coruscant in time…

“I was reckless.” Qui-Gon said, “I trusted too much in a vision that was more hope than truth, and they’re the ones paying for it.”

Only, it had not felt false, even now there was a sense of something wrong, something shifted where it shouldn’t have moved at all, as if the force itself was thrown off balance and disoriented. Anakin was supposed to win the race, even now Qui-Gon was plagued by flashes of what might have been when he reached out to the force rather than what was.

Anakin was supposed to have won the race, there had been no doubt, except…

He hadn’t.

And the force itself, if it could be prescribed emotions, seemed to be in a state of shocked disbelief.
“I think what *shishou* is trying to say, is that it’s not your fault. You were dealt a bad hand, and you played, and sometimes that’s all you can do… The measure of a true *shinobi*, or *jedi* I imagine, is what you choose to do now.” There was something in the boy’s eyes, in his connection to the force, something that burned, as if Qui-Gon had revealed something about himself unintentionally that the boy… Felt strongly about.

Qui-Gon wasn’t sure what the feeling was, it was strangely hard to read him, not as difficult as his master Lee Eru, but difficult all the same. It was something strong, laced with pain and memory as he always seemed to be, but it wasn’t raw pain either…

Sometimes it felt as if Obito wasn’t reaching out to the force, or allowing the force to flow through him, so much as a small portion of the force lived inside of him, circulating through his blood, and only small miniscule amounts of it ever reaching back to join the whole.

“So, out of curiosity, Jinn-san, what do you plan to do now?”

And there it was, what did he plan to do? If he traded the garments he might be able to buy passage for himself, the queen, and Obi-Wan and perhaps another. He could use the force to buy passage on a ship, to commandeer it from a smuggler, but that could make them far too easy to track and would mark him clearly as a *jedi* bringing the wrath of the *hutt*s down on all of their heads…

No, what he really needed was the ship, the ship and the parts and…

How had Anakin lost the race?

“I don’t know.”

“Right, well, you’ll think of something I’m sure.” Lee said slowly, doubtfully and with raised eyebrows, as if he should have had some kind of backup plan for this already.

And perhaps he should have, but he had counted on the force to guide him, and now for whatever reason the path forward seemed hazy and unclear.

The boy said something, swifter and with far more confidence than his Basic tended to possess, and Lee’s expression turned into a strange grim sort of annoyance. Then, just as rapidly, she responded in the same language, meeting the boy’s gaze with an unusual intensity, one that seemed
to simmer with the force.

But the boy did not hesitate or blink or fold under his master’s eyes, he simply stared back, and responded again.

Finally, the woman looked back down at him, “Do you really have no ideas?”

She continued, her hands gesturing rapidly as she spoke, falling up and down with each turn of phrase like pale birds, “You and your apprentice could collect bounties… Extremely rapid bounty collecting that would no doubt have the hutt’s all over your ass but if your aim is to get out while the going is good then…”

Qui-Gon sighed, offered her a thin smile, and motioned to their surroundings, “The queen’s clothing may fetch us enough to trade for a few spots as passengers on a smuggling vessel but… We are being pursued, they will not pay our way under fire, and circumstances are such that arriving in such an unofficial capacity would be a great detriment.”

He glanced at Anakin Skywalker, finally walking out of the ship and speaking with Watto, met his blue eyes and read the shame there, “Anakin truly was our only hope,”

Lee let out a long, strained, sigh, and said under her breath, “Minato will not be pleased,”

“Shishou,” Obito started but Lee held up a single hand and he fell silent, a look of tight apprehension on his face.

“Jinn, can I trust your people?” She stared down at him now with that strange depth, the force seeming to rise within her very being so that he almost could not stare at her directly and yet had no choice to.

“I’m sorry?”

“I am not here to start a war, Jinn, no one wants a war. Can I trust that your people know when to keep their katana sheathed and let cooler heads prevail? Can I trust they are not consumed by greed and ambition and the desire to control all things? Can I trust that your people, Jinn?”
A war, why on earth would there be a war? He almost wanted to laugh. Clearly, if anything, this showed the woman for the outlander she was. She was almost speaking as if the jedi were a state unto themselves, as if they fought and survived for their own behalf, rather than as servants to the republic.

No, their wars had been with the Sith, but those days were gone now.

At the sight of her expression though he paused, “Yes, Lee, you can trust the jedi. We exist to serve the people and the will of the force, we have no need of wars.”

“That’s very convenient,” Obito said with a strange smile, one he had never seen on a boy so young, “After all, we too, exist to serve the will of fire.”

None the less the woman closed her eyes and was silent for a few moments, and in that silence the force seemed to reverberate around her, as if a string had been plucked. Obi-Wan looked up, staring over at them, at her with an alarmed expression, always so sensitive in the force, but then just as it began it was stopped, smothered by something, and the woman spoke seeming to have come to her decision, “Pod racing isn’t all that goes on during this fine day of Boonta Eve. I happen to be a part-time arena fighter and am set to be in the pit over the next several nights in a series of rather horrifying encounters I’m sure. Now, unfortunately, I have a bit of a reputation and can’t be counted on to be your dark horse like Anakin was. And if I throw the matches, well, they’ll probably try to kill me… That said, it’s a shot, for you, a very long shot, but take what advantage of it you can and you may be able to haggle enough funds out of outlander suckers to cover the cost of your ship and the parts.”

“This sounds like a long shot indeed,” Qui-Gon said.

“Well, it’s either that or try to round up enough smugglers with sizeable bounties without getting your head blown off or thrown into a death pit. So, your choice.” Lee said with a shrug.

“Yes, I will think on it… I’ve found gambling to be rather distasteful after today’s events, if you understand.”

She offered him a rather cheerful, if somehow shallow, smile, “Of course, Jinn.”
Shmi’s hut was getting crowded. Three extra had been more than enough the night before, but this entire crew, stranded on this planet without a place to stay. Needless to say, there seemed to be tension everywhere.

The apprentice, Kenobi Obi-wan, had been glaring daggers at Jinn since the morning when he’d first arrived, and while he’d spared some dubious looks towards Lee-shishou and Obito, and a rather contemptuous and unimpressed one for Anakin, he mostly seemed occupied in passive aggressively shaming his master for failing the mission. The girl, Padme, had gone cold and silent and didn’t seem to want to look at anything and when she did it was with the frigid dead eyes you saw in ANBU operatives rather than civilian little girls. And the rest, well, there certainly was an undercurrent of rage to them.

This, this was the after effects of an important mission that had all but imploded, the kind where the fate of a village itself might very well be on the line.

Anakin had quickly departed, head down and eyes staring at his feet in desperation as he made his way out the door citing some excuse of working on the leaf exercise, all the weight of their crushed hopes landing in his thin nine-year-old shoulders.

Which left Jinn Qui-Gon sitting with him and Lee, and Shmi staring at Lee with a mix of alarm, worry, and frustration as Lee refused to expand the hut any further with the jedi inside. In Shmi’s defense, Lee had done it before, creating rooms out of nothing for herself and Obito when they had moved in, but times had changed, or rather, there were jedi in the house now and it seemed that after a small internal debate Lee-shishou had decided to be reasonable and not show her hand just yet.

There had been a moment there where she’d flickered slightly, where Obito had been forced to picture himself bowing his head to Minato-sensei and saying that he’d tried, in vain, and explaining all the disasters that were sure as hell going to occur.

But whatever Jinn had said in his little speech had managed to solidify her doubts, or at the very least, not inspire ridiculous amounts of trust for a foreign shinobi.

It was probably how certain he’d sounded of that response, as if there should be no room to question the righteousness of his people, a people who he would not even deliver Anakin to. Because even in Konoha, arguably the brightest and most moral of all the hidden villages, certainly of the great ones, there were deep shadows where you did not dare to look.

In other words, Jinn’s words had sounded just a bit too nice for comfort.
Which really sucked for Jinn and his mission as it would take them a long time to build up the funds they needed to get off this rock. Even if they managed to round up bounties, bet on Lee’s fight, or whatever else they could manage to do in their fit of desperation.

But, well, as nice as he seemed that was hardly Lee or Obito’s problem, or Anakin’s for that matter.

Anakin, who no one had gotten a real chance to talk to yet and somebody really should.

Obito spared a glance for Lee and quickly rethought that, certainly Lee had inspired him on occasion, but that was on the very rare occasion and only because he’d come to know her so well. Lee and pep talks in general, on a day to day basis, were rather iffy things that depended entirely on her mood.

That, and she had a tendency to be blunt and brutally honest, which Obito doubted Anakin needed at the moment.

Obito sighed, stood, “Hey, shishou, I’m going to head outside for a bit, help Anakin out.”

Unstated was that Lee should probably stay and keep an eye on their jedi friends and find out what information she could while they were all stuck here. Lee was notoriously bad at infiltration, there were a number of stories of seduction missions gone hilariously wrong, but that said it wasn’t like they were going anywhere and it wasn’t like Obito himself was much better at fishing out information.

Lee offered him a small nod as she sipped at her tea, pouring another cup for Jinn who took it with quiet thanks, and Obito made his own way out of the overcrowded hut (only barely managing to avoid tripping over the orange frog summons thing which had again started flailing much to the apparent irritation of Jinn’s apprentice) and outside.

He walked for a few minutes, past the huts, until he reached the edge of the desert.

And there Anakin was, sitting curled into a ball, head on his knees as he stared out into the afternoon sunlight.
Obito walked over, sat next to him without a word, and stared out into the endless desert that served as the horizon, waiting for Anakin to talk first.

Finally, after a strangely long silence, as Anakin normally was such a chatterbox, the boy said, “I failed, Obito.”

“Failure is a very strong word,” Obito remarked but Anakin didn’t appear moved by this.

“I didn’t win the race, I lost, and they’ve lost everything and… I failed.”

“You lived,” Obito said quietly, “Your mother, shishou, Jinn, and I at least are grateful for that. And I think the others will be too, when they’ve calmed down enough to see reason. There were risks, Anakin, we all knew that.”

“But I lost…”

“Yes, you lost, but sometimes you lose. That’s part of what being a shinobi means, coping with failure and setbacks. There’s no shame when the fates are against you.” Obito paused, started again, and said, “The worst mission I have ever been on was one I didn’t fail. Sometimes I wish we had failed it, or that it was never given to us in the first place…”

The Kannabi bridge mission, more than three years ago now. Yes, that was when he had learned that there were fates far worse than mere failure of a mission. He still wondered if he had considered it worth it, if they had failed the mission, or if things hadn’t gone the way they had, if Rin hadn’t been kidnapped…

What would he have been then? How different would that Obito have been than the one he was now, whose scars had almost started to feel natural, and who no longer stared at his mismatched reflection?

Obito was startled out of his thoughts by Anakin’s voice.

“It’s… It was my fault, I… I was supposed to win. I was going to win, I know it. But I… I saw what would happen if I won, Obito.” Anakin turned to him, and in his eyes there was that miserable guilt, but something else, a sharp, jagged fear, “I saw my future, all of it, and… I saw stars reduced to nothing, entire planets gone, I saw a universe filled with darkness and hatred and
everyone I ever cared about was dead… And you left, you and Lee left, and my mother died and… And I didn’t want it, any of it! And I, I decided not to win. I lost, Obito, because I wanted to lose! Just… For a second, you understand, for that single second I didn’t want to win!”

Anakin moved towards him, wrapped his arms around Obito’s shoulders, buried his head in Obito’s shoulder, and began sobbing, “And now I’ve ruined everything! But I… I know what I saw! I couldn’t do it, Obito! I couldn’t…”

Obito held him for a moment, wondering how he himself was once that small, not so long ago. They’d all been that small, once, him, Kakashi, Rin… Lee-shishou and Minato-sensei, not so long ago themselves, had been this young.

Obito’s mouth felt dry, and he hesitated for a moment, before swallowing to begin, “Lee’s shishou, Sakumo Hatake, Kakashi’s father and a man who would become like a father to me, once failed a mission, years ago now.”

They’d told him about Sakumo, it was hard for him not to come up, whether talking about Kakashi or just Lee’s own experience as a young chunin then jonin but he’d mostly played a peripheral role in their tales. Still, at the name the sobbing became somewhat quieter as Obito grabbed his interest.

“And it was a mission the village could not afford to fail.”

Closing his eyes he could almost picture it, it was a time where he had been in the academy, running around the Uchiha compound, the disappointment of the entire clan, boasting of how he was someday going to be hokage, and blissfully unaware of the true state of the village, of the world.

“See, the second war had never truly ended, nor the first for that matter, and everyone was waiting for the hammer to fall. For years tensions had been rising, villages rebuilt themselves, alliances were negotiated, and Hatake’s mission proved to be the breaking point. Failure meant a third war between the five great villages once again and everyone caught in the crosshairs.”

Obito had not known Kakashi then, or rather, he’d known of him. Kakashi had been in the academy only a year at that point, had already managed to graduate, and Obito remembered having been annoyed by that, because why couldn’t that have been him instead?

But there were flashes of the younger Kakashi that still resonated, he remembered… He
remembered how small he’d been, how serious and stoic, so much so that it was hard to correlate him with the passive aggressive idiot savant demon that he would become by eleven.

“The trouble was that Sakumo could have succeeded, but he would have had to sacrifice the life of every member of his team to do so. In the blink of an eye he’d had to make a decision, and he decided that the lives of his teammates were worth more than the mission. And as such, when he returned, he was put on probation and blamed for the breakout of the third war. Some people still won’t talk to him, stores bar him and Kakashi entry, and many more hold at least some grudge, believing either that the war could have been avoided or at least put off for a few more years… But I have always believed he made the correct choice, the only choice any human can and should make, and it seems you’ve made the same one.”

And it had almost destroyed him, and Kakashi with him, and perhaps even Lee herself…

Anakin looked up, wiping at his tears, staring at Obito in awed confusion that was only just beginning to morph into understanding. So Obito reached over to wipe the stray tears that Anakin had missed out of the way. “Sometimes failure is our only option, and there’s no shame in that, because there are times when succeeding simply isn’t worth it. I don’t understand your visions, but I trust you, and if you believe that winning was worse then you have to trust that too, no matter what any of these people might say.”

Anakin shook his head slowly, a grim smile on his face, tears still welling at the corners of his eyes, “…They won’t understand. Padme, she won’t understand.”

“Then she won’t understand,” Obito said, wishing he could say more but… But he couldn’t, because the boy could be right, she didn’t blame him now but to her Anakin was the boy who lost, the boy they never should have bet on in the first place, sweet, pure, innocent, but nothing to be taken seriously.

And what did Obito know of childhood love working out? After all, Rin had never looked at him twice, before or after the bridge mission. For Anakin though there might be other girls, girls from Konoha that would tie him to the foreign village, a girl who would understand the decisions and sacrifices that shinobi must make, and in that there was something to be grateful for.

Obito would only ever have Rin.

“But this is all unbelievably serious, chunin aren’t supposed to give these kinds of life talks, this is best left to those poor jonin sensei bastards,” Obito said, his lips twisting themselves into a forced grin, and then stood hauling Anakin up with him, “Besides, you’ve been staring out into the desert
long enough, and while Shmi may be distracted she isn’t stupid and it would be best for us all if you came back before she notices you’re not in your room or something.”

Anakin offered a weak smile in response as Obito pulled him back towards the hut.

“You think maybe we could practice jutsus instead, since we’re already out here?” Anakin asked, looking up at Obito with a far too hopeful expression.

Especially since Obito’s kneejerk reaction was no, not with jedi hanging around taking down notes on everything Obito or Lee said or did. That was the trouble with these foreign almost shinobi, you couldn’t even go about the basics with them around, because Obito had no guarantee they even knew the basics.

To show them henges, basic clones, anything really was to in some way reveal their hands long before Obito was comfortable with it.

They were all still walking on eggshells around each other.

“Maybe later, Anakin, now’s not really a great time for…” Something glinted out of the corner of his eye, Obito turned threw a kunai, and was met with the smell of something burning and the sight of blue sparks.

“Obito?”

Obito rushed forward to behind one of the huts and held up a small circular droid with a great red lens that served as most of its body. The lens was contracting and dilating rapidly, the kunai sticking out from the middle and cracks spreading out from it, spinning this way and that, giving the impression of a spasm.

Without a word Obito drove the kunai in further and what artificial life there was in the eye burned out and the droid fell to the earth like any other piece of metal.

“Obito, what’s that?”
Obito stared at it, it didn’t look like any droid he’d ever seen on Tatooine, not that Obito was an expert on such things. For one thing, it was far too well kept and didn’t show any of the strain that the desert winds had on the local droids, and the metal seemed expensive. But that eye, well, Obito could take a stab in the dark as well as anyone else and guessed that someone had decided to get some useful intelligence.

Whether it was after him and Lee or their new guests, whether it was from their new guests, was anyone’s guess at this point.

Of course, he could be being paranoid, but then, a shinboi’s lifespan was generally measured by his paranoia. And Obito had already had one too many brushes with death for his comfort.

“I have no idea,” Obito said gravely, before opening a scroll featuring the ever useful storage seal and stuffing the droid inside, “But I have a feeling our new friends might.”

“So, Kenobi Obi-Wan, you’re Jinn’s apprentice,”

Master Qui-Gon was still sitting at the table, now speaking softly with a sympathetic if worn looking Shmi Skywalker, not that his master looked much better. There was a weight to him that hadn’t been there earlier, even in the difficulties they’d faced thus far, a feeling of failure that Obi-Wan had never seen in him before, not even with Xanatos (because that had been something different, something more desperate and raw and pained, this was muted and bleak and something altogether different).

He deserved it.

Sometimes Obi-Wan’s master was an idiot, he defied the council, picked up strays from all over the galaxy, and would mistake his hunches for the force whispering in his ear (of course, that he happened to be right most of the time was not something Obi-Wan cared to admit).

This time though, this time he had not been right, and now they were trapped on this backwater sandpit of a planet with someone in pursuit and no easy way to return Coruscant and the jedi temple.

They were on the outer rim, even with hyper speed it would take far too long for a ship from
Coruscant to come and retrieve them, and that was if the jedi temple had a ship to spare (which seemed more than highly unlikely given that Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were somewhat short staffed to stop an invasion to begin with).

Other than that their only choice appeared to be even more gambling, with almost nothing for collateral, or else turning in bounties and hoping the local population didn’t form into an angry mob before they could buy back the ship and parts.

It was more than that though, there was something in the force, something not necessarily malevolent but weighted as if every second they spent here counted towards something. As if Obi-Wan’s life would soon unravel entirely and be replaced with something else.

Something centered around that boy Qui-Gon had taken to, Anakin Skywalker.

The boy, he was strong in the force, Obi-Wan hadn’t needed to run the tests to feel it. It was in the very air around him, that confidence and strength, but all the same that number kept reverberating through his mind. Twenty-three thousand, more than Master Yoda, more than any jedi’s count since they had begun recording them for the archives.

It was almost too bad that he was so old, he would have made a fine jedi, had he been taken in when younger.

And if circumstances were different Obi-Wan might look on him kindly, but like or not Qui-Gon had pinned his hopes on that boy and he had faltered, and now they were all reaping the consequences.

But the boy had also stepped out some time ago, and in his absence, and in the absence of her own apprentice, the woman Lee Eru, who was neither jedi nor anything else familiar, made her way over to where Obi-Wan skulked in a corner and offered him a shallow emotionless grin and a cup of tea.

“The term is padawan, we don’t use the word apprentice,” Obi-Wan replied, hesitantly taking the tea from her hand, finding it almost difficult to look directly at her. There wasn’t anything physical about it, it was all through the force, but none the less there seemed to almost be too much of her, as if she was a lantern where the force acted as the flame, but instead of a small flame to light the path someone had placed a star inside of her to cast light on the universe itself.
She drowned out Anakin Skywalker, that’s how overwhelming she was.

“Semantics,” the woman said, brushing her pale hand to the side as if to sweep his thoughts away, “Although you don’t seem all that pleased with him at the moment.”

There were many things he could say to that, few he wanted to say to this stranger whose very presence set his nerves on edge, so instead he admitted, “…He made a poor decision which has made our task that much more difficult,”

“He made the only decision I believe he could but you’re opinions are your own. Regardless, you are sort of trapped here for the foreseeable future with little prospects. I imagine that’s quite difficult,” the woman said before casually adding, or what desperately was attempting to be casual, “So, I don’t know much about these jedi and decided I might as well get some information from you while you’re conveniently trapped here. How long have you been Jinn’s apprentice?”

“Padawan,” Obi-Wan corrected, “A very long time now, since I was a child, I will be ready for my trials soon.”

“Your trials?”

“To become a jedi knight,” Obi-Wan finished for her, to which she nodded as if she had some inkling of what this meant when she clearly had none at all.

“I see, I see, Obito’s the same. Well, in truth he’s been ready for the jonin exams for some time now, but then where’s the fun in that?”

Considering Obi-wan didn’t know what that meant he couldn’t possibly say where the fun was in that, “Obito is your… apprentice, then?”

“Yes, for almost two years now,” the woman said with a more nostalgic smile this time, a softer thing laced with memories, “Time does seem to fly, it seems like just yesterday he was Minato’s student.”

“That’s not very long,” Obi-Wan pointed out, a sinking feeling of something lurking in his gut, that wariness back at the reminder that these people were not jedi. Qui-Gon did not seem to think they were Sith, and neither did Obi-Wan for that matter (as if there could be Sith when they were dead
for centuries).

No, Obi-Wan believed the theory Qui-Gon had presented to him, that they were from some primitive world outside the republic, where force users had banded into something resembling the jedi order but not quite the same.

One that clearly had no hesitations towards attachment, anger, or uncertainty, no matter the paths they created to the dark side.

“Hm, well, in Konoha it depends a bit on your skill level, but all the same usually you spend your first few years as a genin with one general instructor, and then if you show a certain amount of promise and pass your chunin exams you train under a jonin as an apprentice to hone more specific abilities. Obito spent a few more years as a genin than he has as a chunin so we haven’t spent quite as much quality time together as he did with Minato,” the woman explained before raising her eyebrows as she looked at him, “Is it more of a set course for you, spend a certain amount of years training under a master and then face your trials regardless of aptitude?”

“No, no, it… It depends on your master,”

It depended on quite a few things, the age you were brought to the temple, your connection with the force, but perhaps greatest of all your emotional fortitude and ability to resist the dark side of the force and all paths leading to it.

Obi-Wan… He had once had grave problems with his temper and with attachment.

“And Obito is…” Obi-Wan’s question died on his lips as the boy in question slammed open the door, dragging in Anakin Skywalker behind him, while holding a scroll made of flimsy with his other hand.

Obito was… Strange looking, he’d caught Obi-Wan off guard the first time he’d seen him. It was the scars, Obi-Wan thought, thousands of scars taking up more than half of his body, memory laced into each and every one, that made him so very off-putting. Such that it was hard for Obi-Wan to remember that this boy was younger than him, years younger even, barely out of adolescence.

Obito barked out something in his native language that had Lee Eru looking at him with interest, completely turning her attention away from Obi-Wan to the boy. He threw the scroll at her which
she caught without hesitation, with a grace that only users of the force could demonstrate.

Without a word she opened it to reveal nothing but a strange unfamiliar character, one not from the Basic alphabet, which shuddered then glowed as Lee reached through the flimsy and pulled out what looked like a broken probe droid.

“So, rain check on the jedi conversation. Kenobi, you wouldn’t happen to know what this is, would you?”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth but his master beat him to it, walking over from his own side of the room with a narrowed and intense gaze, “This is a probe droid, but none that I’ve ever seen before…”

But it was not a usual make or model of probe droid, this was customized, sleeker than the mass-produced versions and clearly with adjustments created by an expert mechanic. This, Obi-Wan had never seen a probe droid like this, and glancing at his master neither had Qui-Gon Jinn.

That was when it clicked together, as Qui-Gon’s eyes widened, Obi-Wan looked over at Obito Uchiha and hissed, “You fool, you’ve led him straight to us!”

“Nani?”

Already Qui-Gon was ushering out Shmi, Anakin, and the others, telling them to run quickly, although where they would go from there was beyond Obi-Wan’s guess with the ship destroyed. Still out in the open was better than trapped in this hut with nowhere to turn.

Obi-Wan stood, shoved at Obito’s chest, stared into those bizarre mismatched eyes that by all rights should have picked one color or the other, “This is a probe droid, tracking devices are built inside of them! You have led them straight to us!”

The boy’s eyes widened, he looked down at the droid then back at Obi-Wan, and let out a loud curse that Obi-Wan was all too ready to match with his own. But Obi-Wan wasn’t waiting for him, without a word he was sprinting out of the small hut, after his master and the rest of them, releasing his anger into the force even as he fingered his light saber to prepare for whoever was in pursuit.
“No missing nins or enemy villages my ass!” Obito cried as he and Lee tore off after the rest of them, not that it was hard to keep up, given that they all were civilians except for the two jedi and Anakin (who was still more of a quasi-civilian being at academy level at the moment).

Really, they were sort of shuffling towards the center of town, the men towards the front and the women and children lagging while the jedi remained on the periphery, eyes darting everywhere searching for the enemy nin.

Although what they imagined they were going to do in the direction of Watto’s shop Obito had no idea, if it was stealing back their ship then Obito wished them luck, because if Watto had any brains at all (which he did) then he’d have removed the engine to prevent exactly this kind of thing.

“Funny,” Lee remarked in her usual blasé manner even as her hand drifted to the hilt of her katana, “Jinn didn’t seem like he was lying when he said that,”

“A shinobi who lies, why, I never,” Obito said, practically spitting, not only pissed that they had been played like this, but because this was exactly the sort of bad luck he was expecting, and they couldn’t just leave them to it because they had to get Anakin and Shmi out of that mob.

“I thought you said they’re not shinobi,” Lee said.

“They’re close enough!”

And there it was, behind them, coming from the desert there was the sound of a revving engine as dark cloaked death in the form of an enemy ninja rode down upon them on a speeder bike with a red glowing, double bladed laser katana, in one hand.

And all Obito could think to say, as he pushed more chakra into his legs was, “That is the most ridiculous looking sword I’ve ever seen!”

“It is certainly ostentatious,” Lee replied as she kept pace with him, beginning to draw her own katana out of its hilt, “But that said it does give off that nastily lethal sort of vibe.”

With that much chakra pumping out of a sword Obito was inclined to agree. And the man’s killer
intent, Obito had felt those levels of killing intent before, but not outside of massacres, and even then not from anyone truly sane.

“Let’s see how he does without the bike,” Lee said, and with a wave of her hand the front wheel of the bike exploded, tipping the man forward, however this didn’t seem to slow him down at all as he hurtled himself over the bike and began sprinting towards them, still holding that sword.

“Oh, well, he does pretty well without the bike,” Lee said frowning, then glanced up ahead at the running civilians and jedi, “Hm, I’d prefer keeping collateral damage to a minimum here. Obito, do you mind catching up to the herd while I take care of this?”

She didn’t wait for his response, instead she came to an immediate halt, leaving Obito to keep sprinting ahead as she fully unsheathed her katana to block the man’s swing. And his blade stopped for a single moment against her own, her own chakra filling the seals of the katana and clashing against the red of his, but then as if cutting through butter the light sword cut through her own completely forcing Lee to drop back with it and somersault backwards.

Over his shoulder, Obito saw Lee examine her broken sword, then look back up at the tall cloaked figure, “…Well, shit.”

Obito in the meantime caught up to the group, Anakin calling out to him, “Obito!”

“Hey, where exactly are we headed?”

Jinn spoke quickly, still ushering them forwards, “To the shop, Watto will not have had much time to dismantle the ship, if we can get the parts together while your friend stalls…”

Obito glanced back, Lee wasn’t doing so well stalling him. The man had apparently rather swiftly realized that taking on Lee was time consuming and likely to lead to his death and so was now doing his best to move towards the rest of them instead. Lee had encased his feet in earth but he was quickly cutting through that with his own sword and flinging his chakra outwards to throw her into a nearby hut, causing her again to have to roll out of the way and delay her own response.

Obito turned, brought his hands together and began to move his chakra in familiar patterns as he went through hand seals that were more instinct than memory at this point.
Anakin watched over his shoulder as a great tree sprouted underneath the dark man’s feet, catching him inside of its branches as it grew at an impossible rate, towering over all the huts in the slave quarter within seconds.

And the tree wasn’t a tree at all but life itself, the universe singing through it, chakra formed into the flesh of plants.

Beside him he heard Obi-Wan gasp and Qui-Gon stop entirely and they all seemed to stop and stare at both Obito and the tree until Obito cursed and yelled at them, “Don’t you idiots have somewhere to be?!"

And then they were moving again, Anakin sprinting, trying to remember how to move chakra through his legs even though he was so tired already and it was far from instinct. Padme was slower though, she was the fastest of the handmaidens and the queen, but still not fast enough, Anakin wasn’t even fast enough.

There was that buzzing noise and Anakin didn’t need to glance behind him to know that the man had cut himself down with his red light saber.

Especially when Obito shouted, “I hate that goddamn sword!”

There was a rush of flame and a quick glance behind showed Anakin a great fireball headed towards the man, which he managed to dodge partly, most of his cloak burning in the process, but despite whatever pain he was in he kept running without hesitation.

Running straight towards them.

Inside Anakin’s head all thoughts he’d had before, of losing, of the future, were drowned out by the pounding of his own heart and the harshness of his breathing. But the visions still danced before his eyes, so that instead of the street he saw himself winning the race he hadn’t won, running into the desert with this same man behind them (filled with nothing but rage, hatred, and anguish), except instead of fighting Lee he was fighting Qui-Gon Jinn while Anakin was jumping onto a silver ship that wasn’t there, a ship that had been sold to Watto…

“This is getting irritating,” Suddenly, out of nowhere there was a great flash in the air’s chakra, and Lee was right next to him, her face contorted into an annoyed grimace as her eyes darted back
towards the dark man.

Before he could say anything before any of them could, there was a feeling of focus, as if some great force were magnified upon them, almost crushing them. Lee closed her eyes, her face perfectly calm, and then, without a word, without any warning, space and time were wrenched away entirely and Anakin was standing in the middle of the desert, Mos Espa nowhere in sight.
Chapter 5

“Goddammit, shishou, why do you keep doing that?!”

Obito, fourteen years old and already more battle scarred than most shinobi ever would be, rubbed at his extremely bruised ribs after Lee had gone in for the kill with her wooden blade for what seemed like the twentieth time that morning. Kenjutsu, Obito had quickly learned, was not as effortless as Bakashi made it look (although since everything Kakashi did seemed effortless maybe that shouldn’t have been surprising), and didn’t seem like anything Obito had any innate talent for (although as far as Obito was concerned, he didn’t have an innate talent for anything).

That didn’t stop Eru Lee though, oh no, it only seemed to encourage her.

“Because, Obito, I keep getting in hits.” Lee said calmly, observing him with those calculating green eyes which Obito had quickly learned meant pain and suffering was coming in fast. Although, at this point, Obito could really use a change up in the pain and suffering, because his ribs were starting to get really sore after she’d hit them in the same goddamn place at least ten times.

 Couldn’t she at least try hitting him somewhere else on his body? Once? Would that kill her?

“I know you keep getting hits! I’m perfectly aware that you’re getting in hits!” Obito shouted back, trying to stretch out the ache but still feeling nothing but the bruise, no doubt black underneath his shirt (and it was his good side too, or, well, the non-plant side).

“I keep getting hits on the same side,” Lee corrected, like Obito somehow hadn’t realized she kept whacking him in the same spot, then pointed to his face, to the headband covering his missing eye, “Your depth perception and peripheral vision are shit, apprentice.”

Obito blushed, clutching at his side, looking anywhere but at her and willing himself to be calm cool and collected about all of this (which seemed like an impossible and rather pointless task), and the words tumbled out, “Believe me, shishou, I’d noticed that too.”

But Lee didn’t seem to care, instead leaned on her wooden practice blade, tilted her head, and observed him with a sort of musing expression, “Kakashi compensates pretty well with his missing eye.”
Of course he did, because Bakashi was a genius. He always had been, even missing one of his eyes…

Of course, missing wasn’t the right word. Obito hadn’t foreseen some of the consequences of his dying gift. True, Kakashi now had the sharingan (as well as the hatred of the entire Uchiha clan), but he would always have the sharingan, as in that son of a bitch didn’t turn off. As a result, Kakashi had about half of the chakra available that he used to and had to walk around half blind, and as soon as he uncovered it, well, Kakashi had maybe a minute or so to finish whatever battle he was in before he was rushed off to the hospital.

Already Obito had visited him there more than once, watching as Kakashi tried to hobble his way out the doors without Senju Tsunade noticing, and he always looked so much thinner and younger in those moments than he should have…

Still, he’d never complained once to Obito, and Obito doubted he ever complained in private either that wasn’t…. That wasn’t how Kakashi operated. And so Obito couldn’t really complain on his behalf either, not without somehow, in a weird roundabout Kakashi type way, disrespecting Obito’s own final sacrifice.

Still, he’d thought with a new teacher he might get away with constantly being compared to the genius Hatake, “Yeah, well, I’m not Kakashi, am I?”

“Yes, but this might be what kills you, and that’s a rather sad way to go,” Lee said and then she closed her eyes, let out a deep breath, and said in an exasperated and somehow resigned manner, “It seems it can’t be helped, we need to get you another eye.”

He reached up to the headband, that empty hole where his eye should have been still aching after all those months, and felt a thrill of fear and panic pass through him as he insisted, “No, no I don’t need another eye, I’ll get better I…”

“You haven’t gotten better though. Believe me, I’ve waited. But eye or no eye you’re going to be sent back into the field and that lack of vision is going to be the first thing they notice,” Lee said before walking over and whacking him on the head, “Don’t be proud, you can’t afford to be, yet.”

Pride, was it weird that Obito had so much of it? He really shouldn’t, considering how, well, talentless he was. But all the same there were times that it just burned inside him, whenever Kakashi just effortlessly showed him up, whenever Rin just seemed entirely indifferent to his successes, whenever Minato offered some meaningless kind words about how Obito was sure to get it next time if he just kept trying.
Obito knew that he was proud, it really was one of the few Uchiha traits he did manage to inherit, but he’d also learned when to push pride out of the way for more important things.

This, this wasn’t about pride, it would never be about pride, and it was one of the few things Obito would never compromise on, “I don’t want another eye, shishou.”

Obito had gone into that cave with two eyes, had been carried out with one, and that’s all there was to it.

She stared at him then, into his one remaining eye, and reached down towards his face with those pale thin fingers. Her hands were… not cold but not warm either, there was a strangeness to them, even though they were just as calloused as his were. They seemed like her hands, if that made any sense at all, as if these fingers could never quite belong to anyone else.

Finally, Lee spoke, and it was as if she had skipped all the unnecessary coaxing words, the harsh arguments, the probing questions, everything Minato-sensei probably would have had to say but Lee could somehow skip entirely, and cut straight to the heart of Uchiha Obito without even seeming to try.

“I never said anything about your scars, did I?”

Obito blinked, “What?”

A small, strange, smile appeared on her lips but her eyes, terrible green eyes, just kept boring into his single remaining eye, “Even if you gain another eye, even if it’s the same color, even if it’s the sharingan, it can’t take back what happened. Even if time itself was rewritten and you found yourself in your old body, on the day of the Kannabi bridge mission, you could never go back to what you were. That’s not how these things work.”

“You say that like I wouldn’t want that,” Obito said, with his own rather bitter smile, but that didn’t seem to faze Lee-shishou at all.

“You don’t,” she responded simply, “That Uchiha Obito doesn’t exist anymore; going back and pretending he does would just be painful and probably somewhat embarrassing when you inevitably fail to impersonate yourself. Really, the eye has almost nothing to do with it.”
She grinned down at him then, pausing for a moment, before continuing in a strangely cheerful manner (that really didn’t fit her pale, finely carved, exotic features), “You gave your eye to Kakashi to see the future for you. Take mine to see the present for me. It’s not a replacement, Obito, it’s a gift, and one that I’m afraid you can’t afford to refuse.”

She placed one hand over his eye, the other still cupping the scarred half of his face, pushed up the headband and covering his empty socket with the palm of her hand, and even though he could have moved, he didn’t, just staying there and watching as bright white light emitted from her hand (only barely in his line of vision) and the feeling of burning all through the other side of his face as a new eye formed itself right there in his head.

And just like that, standing in the middle of a training field, covered in bruises, Obito gained his soon to be infamous, mismatched, bright green eye.

(Of course, Lee-shishou immediately ruined the moment by demanding a rematch, and still obliterating him by giving him the same death blow to the same exact spot on his ribcage. With the mildly confused remark of, “Well, I guess it wasn’t your depth perception after all.”)

Anakin had never been very far into the desert; no sane person had.

Tatooine was a world of scattered towns, small feudally run smuggling villages that with generosity might be called cities, surviving through sheer will and stubbornness alone, while the desert threatened to engulf them from all sides.

Anakin had never left Mos Espa, or at least, not very far beyond its borders. Sometimes Watto would send him to get supplies from traders, a few miles out on a beaten speeder, but always Mos Espa glittered behind him in the suns whenever he looked over his shoulder.

Anakin had always been in the shadow of Mos Espa.

Really, if he weren’t so optimistic, if Lee and Obito hadn’t come, and if he hadn’t dreamed of all the worlds beyond Tatooine ever since he could remember, then he could probably have expected to stay in Mos Espa until he died.
Even sand people, who lived in the desert further than anyone, who had been on Tatooine longer than anyone, always stayed on the outskirts of villages, raiding the unwary travelers or those huts too close to the desert.

So, Anakin had never really been in the desert before, not really, and now staring out towards the great red dunes that spread out in every possible direction, he couldn’t help but feel… something.

Insignificance, that was what he wanted to call it, only… It was also different, like staring into the distant past or the distant future, all remnant of civilization wiped away from the earth, only leaving the endless grains of sand.

Tatooine was where all worlds came from and where all worlds would end up some day.

(And one day those flickering little cities of life, Mos Espa and the others, would be snuffed out like candles, and the sand would be that thin trail of smoke that signaled all that was left of them.)

Somewhere to his left, Lee Eru stated in a calm and collected voice, “Well, that could have gone… better.”

Anakin was hurtled back into the present, looking over and realizing that he wasn’t alone here, or that he wasn’t dreaming, that he was out in the middle of the desert (away from Mos Espa, too far away, what if Watto thought he’d run away, what if he activated the chip…), but that he wasn’t alone.

Standing with him was everyone, his mother, Jar-Jar, Padme, the other girls, the tall men, as well as Obi-Wan, and Qui-Gon Jinn. Only the man in black, the one pursuing them, seemed to have been left behind.

They looked just as disoriented as he did, the jedi maybe more so, like they’d only just realized that reality was solid again, that they weren’t in some surreal dream world but in real true life, and that somehow, they weren’t in Mos Espa anymore.

In fact, looking closer at Obi-Wan Kenobi, he looked a bit nauseous, his face a worrying shade of green.

Finally, Anakin glanced up and saw the other two.
Lee sat cross legged on the top of the nearest dune with Obito sitting in the same position across from her, Lee’s clay tea set was between them, two cups of green tea already poured out with Lee blowing on one with a somewhat familiar expression of resigned annoyance (Anakin had seen it on Lee’s face more than once), while Obito stared at her with a far sharper look that was… less familiar to Anakin.

“No, really, you think?” Obito asked, jerking his tea towards her, a few droplets spilling onto her clothing, “Was that really necessary, shishou?”

Basic, that was… Normally Obito switched to his native tongue whenever he argued with Lee. And they argued, well, a lot. It never really was arguing though, most of the time it was bickering, but all the same there’d be rapid fire barely understandable insults traded in their native language on any given day. All sorts of idioms, cultural references, and things Anakin just couldn’t get as they verbally sparred with one another.

Sure, sometimes Obito would throw in Basic, or make comments here and there, but that was usually for Anakin’s or his mother’s benefit. Not… He never said anything serious, truly serious to Lee, in Basic.

Somehow though, the Basic felt more biting, rawer. As if Obito’s stilted accented words, his broadcasting everything to anyone who would listen, just made it that much sharper than usual.

“Yes, well, he was faster than I expected him to be,” Lee said with a dismissive shrug and a wave of her hand, a slight disturbance in the chakra surrounding her, removing the drops of tea from her clothes.

“That’s your excuse?” Obito scoffed, taking a swig of the tea before pointing at her and accusing, “You are the destroyer of worlds, flee on sight written in every bingo book ever published since the third war, you are more feared than the yellow flash, the yondai hokage who decimated Iwa for an entire generation!”

Something… hardened, in the air, the wind rose, the sand suddenly seemed coarser as it might during a storm, and Lee stared unflinchingly at her apprentice (who stared unflinchingly back at her).

Lee’s voice was cold, almost emotionless, the voice of someone who was not afraid to sacrifice just about anything for their goal, “Destroying worlds is easier when one isn’t concerned with
collateral damage or a herd of fleeing civilians,” she paused then, appeared to stare through to his very soul, and asked almost casually, “Or would you rather I left them to die?”

Through gritted teeth Obito responded, hands shaking with suppressed anger even as he said it, the very air around him seeming to burn, “They are not our business, shishou, that man is not our missing nin, leave these people to the enemies they’d like to pretend don’t even exist. They are jedi, aren’t they, isn’t this what they’ve been training for?”

Then just as coldly as Lee had sounded, with a bitter smile on his lips, Obito spat, “And besides, I can’t help but notice you had no qualms leaving the rest of Mos Espa to burn.”

It was Anakin who interrupted, with a quiet desperation as he stepped forward towards them, “What are you talking about?”

It was like only just then did Obito and Lee remember that the rest of them were there, they looked down at the rest of them, at their wide disbelieving eyes, at the fear and uncertainty, and the anger dripped away from them both, leaving distant regret for Lee and something sharper and far more vulnerable in Obito.

Obito opened his mouth, looked at Lee, then closed it and said nothing.

So, it was Lee who said, as if she was explaining the weather or telling Anakin why the sky was blue or just correcting a slight flaw in his stance, “There are few people who can routinely pump out that sort of killing intent for someone they’re more or less indifferent to. That sort of hatred, that’s reserved for someone who killed and tortured your mother right in front of you, it’s the kind of hatred, frankly, that drives you mad. The most infamous, dangerous, and bloodthirsty of shinobi, Sasori of Suna comes to mind, mostly feel… ruthless indifference, if anything at all, towards their victims du jour. This one though, he’s anything but indifferent, he cares very much about each and every unfortunate person who crosses his path… He’s not going to leave a job half-finished, that village is going to burn, quickly, in the most painful manner he can conceive, while he eliminates any avenue of escape for our friends here. And I also imagine he’ll do it because he finds this sort of thing fun. And without any local shinobi there to stop him… Well, it’s only a matter of time.”

“We have to stop him!” Anakin cried out, turning, searching out and trying to sense where Mos Espa was.

“No, I only just pulled you out of that death trap,” Lee muttered, “Besides, with the way he moves it’s no doubt already too late.”
“But what about Jira and Kirstin and…” And wasn’t it strange how Anakin couldn’t see it? Like, like it wasn’t true, like they were all still there behind him, and even reality itself couldn’t picture them all dead like Lee and Obito were saying.

“I’m sorry, Anakin,” Obito said quietly, just staring down at the sand in front of him, not even looking Anakin in the eye.

This was… If he’d won the race, if he’d just won the race, if he’d just looked past the vision and won the race then none of this would have happened! And maybe he was wrong, maybe that future wouldn’t have occurred, certainly this one wouldn’t have and…

A hand hesitantly came down on his shoulder, startled Anakin looked up to see Obi-Wan giving him a hesitant look, like he was unsure why he was even doing this or what he planned to do now but was acting all the same, finally Obi-Wan looked at Lee and Obito and asked, loudly, in a clear voice that didn’t at all match his pale and still green expression, “What is a shinobi, exactly?”

Lee and Obito exchanged a look, one that made it seem like they’d been waiting for someone to ask and were surprised and almost exasperated it had taken anyone this long, but neither said this out loud, instead Lee only commented drily, “Well, that’s certainly a vague question.”

Obi-Wan faltered, for a moment, and everyone turned to look at him, even his master as if he’d never seen Obi-Wan before, and finally Obi-Wan continued, like he was trying to wrap his head around his words even as he spoke them, “You teleport, you make… trees out of nothing but the force, you make shells of yourselves, glamours, you train with old fashioned metal blades and knives, you talk endlessly about war and violence and death… You have so many abilities we don’t, but at the end of the day, what is it all for?”

For a moment neither of them answered, looking at Obi-Wan as if he’d asked some other question entirely, some deeper harder question to understand.

Finally, Lee smiled, a soft nostalgic thing with only a touch of bitter sadness to it, “For the will of fire, of course.”

“Really shishou, must you?” Obito asked with a rather exasperated look on his face.

“If it wasn’t such an easy catch all answer I’d stop giving it.”
Obito didn’t respond for a moment, just continued to give Lee that same put out look as before, and then he focused on Obi-Wan and said, “For the eternal flame in all of us, the inextinguishable hope of humanity, for a world where children won’t die in battle, for friendship and family and honor, and a world without war…” Obito continued for Lee, a strange touch of… something in his voice. And it was with a strangely nostalgic smile that he concluded, “Or, at the very least, that’s why I’m a shinobi.”

The answer seemed to be what Obi-Wan was looking for, or at least what he had expected, as he continued without faltering and asked, “Then can you really justify leaving all of those innocent people behind in the hands of the sith?”

“Innocent, are we talking about the same Mos Espa?” Lee asked drily, eyebrows raised, but Obi-Wan did not back down, and Qui-Gon even stepped beside him giving Lee an uncompromising look.

“You know very well that not everyone in Mos Espa is guilty, and even those who disregard the law don’t deserve the kind of death that man will give them.” Qui-Gon stated, his eyebrows raising in turn, “Is this the sort of impression you wish to leave the jedi? That your people are nothing more than ruthless mercenaries who never help those when it goes against their own self-interest?”

“That’s nice, Jinn-san, but, dead is still dead. Every second we spend here is another second he has to cut through buildings with his laser katana. And like shishou here already explained, that man wasn’t exactly slow,” Obito responded, his eyes curiously dull as he looked down at them, and with the sun high overhead it was hard to tell the green one even from the black one, “Do you think we enjoy this sort of thing? If you cared so much about this then why didn’t you take care of him when you had the chance. Don’t pin this on us, jedi, he’s your missing nin!”

“He’s a sith,” Qui-Gon said, “The sith haven’t existed for centuries, believe me when I say I am just as surprised as you.”

Obito raked a hand through his hair, his voice derisive as he responded, “Oh, wonderful, so you want us to dump you all back into an ambush with an enemy we’re all unfamiliar with. That sounds like a great plan, Jinn-san.”

Qui-Gon just smiled at them, his eyes twinkling, somehow looking at them as if he knew he’d already won the argument, “Even so, I think you like my plan, even if it means danger or risk, because you’re not nearly as indifferent as you want us to think. I think you know how to make the right decisions; even when they’re difficult.”
“And besides,” Obi-Wan said, “Without our ship, the ship we left in Mos Espa, we’re just as trapped here as we were there.”

Obito and Lee spared a silent look, and for a moment neither of them had any expression at all, just those cold masks where their faces should have been, but then, they turned back and Lee stood brushing off her clothing and sighing as she handed her tea cup to Obito, “Well then, gentlemen, I vote we leave the civilians behind with Obito, while Jinn-san, me, and the pluckily moral apprentice Kenobi go back and see exactly what kind of damage our friend the missing nin has left behind.”

“Pluckily moral?” Obi-Wan asked, eyebrows lowered and looking more than a little insulted.

“You just tried to morally shame an S-ranked shinobi and her almost as frighteningly powerful apprentice into doing what you want, if that’s not pluckily moral I’m not quite sure what is,” Lee explained with a shrug.

“No, wait, I’m coming with you,” Padme said, dark eyes blazing, and at the sight of her standing there Anakin scrambled and said, “Me too, I’m training to be a jedi, I can help!”

Lee blinked as she jumped down from the dune, floating slightly before lightly touching the sand, much to the amazement of everyone around her except for Obito, “Oh, you kids are positively adorable, please, he would slice you in half with extreme prejudice.”

“I know how to handle a blaster,” Padme reiterated, not swayed in the slightest, “If we’re retrieving the queen’s ship then it’s my duty to go with you.”

Lee looked at Padme, only, it was a condescending look, one that took every part of her in (her height, her age, her lack of chakra), and dismissed it entirely, “I didn’t ask if you could handle a blaster. I take it you’ve never seen a shinobi in battle before. At the age of ten or twelve, a genin can kill a bandit with ease, at fifteen or maybe even thirteen a chunin can easily dispose of a group of bandits as well as one or two shinobi who have also been training since childhood, and at nineteen or even fifteen a jonin can decimate an entire civilian village without anyone posing a true threat. Now, Padme-chan, this man makes jedi sprint away from him. Tell me how scary you think that makes him and just how effective you think that blaster is going to be against him.”

Lee just smiled, not even giving Padme time to respond, just watching as the girl blushed and her eyes burned, “And Anakin, you’re not even a genin yet, and are hardly that much better than a
civilian yourself. So, no, I’m not taking either of you. Or the gun waving civilian who looks like he’d like nothing better than shooting me in the face.”

“How dare…” A tall man, dark eyes burning, and a hand his blaster started, only for Padme to raise a hand and cut him off.

“Captain,” Padme said, not even turning to look at him, and his eyes darted to her and then dropped his hand from his holster with clear hesitation.

But Lee seemed entirely indifferent to this.

Lee looped one arm through Obi-Wan’s then the other through Qui-Gon’s and continued smiling brightly, “Alright then, remember everyone, Obito’s in charge until we get back,” then she saluted them all and with a large crack they were gone, like they’d never been there in the first place.

Obito clapped his hands together, descending from the dune and into the shade with the rest of them, “So, while we’re all stuck here, who wants to learn how to play shogi?”

The village, as the woman and her apprentice had predicted, was already in flames. Or at the very least, the slave quarters they had just left behind were in ruins. Walls collapsed inward, scorch marks lined the crumbling stones, each home methodically pulled apart, and towards the center of the village was the scent of smoke and burning electronics.

And there was a heavy, oppressive, and unnatural silence in both the air and the force itself.

Looking down at one of the homes Obi-Wan caught sight of a child’s hand sticking out from the rubble, only the hand, stained with still wet blood…

“Oh yes, our friend does move quickly, doesn’t he?”

And the woman, while her face was colder and perhaps harder than it had been earlier, seemed entirely unmoved. She stared out with those eerie green eyes, taking in every detail of the land, but thinking nothing of it.
Eru Lee continued, eying the devastation around them with a look of mild confusion, “Although, I’m actually kind of surprised he bothered here, there are no ships here or way to leave the planet… This really is just a giant waste of his time… and kind of petty, to be honest. He must have really wanted these people dead for whatever reason.”

Moving her eyes forward towards the horizon, towards the center of the village, she continued in that same unfazed voice as before, as if there was nothing even worth blinking at, “Now, assuming he’s somewhat reasonable, for a mad unleashed dog, if I were him then I’d move to decimate all of the ships before anything else. I’d raid the space port, destroy all the ships as quickly as I possibly could, probably eliminate any pilot in the area, and then start methodically searching through the junk yards for more beaten down ships that could be used in a pinch. If we’re lucky then he’ll so busy doing that and we can head straight to Watto’s. Sound like a plan, jedi?”

“What is wrong with you?” Obi-Wan asked, and this wasn’t like him, he didn’t usually blurt what he was thinking, in fact prided himself on it, but this, her, he just couldn’t help but ask, “How can you be so… indifferent?”

And she just stared back, those burning green eyes impossible for him to read, her signature in the force blinding, and she said calmly, “I spent most of my adolescence in a war that was far more gruesome and cruel than this. Kusa, by the end of the third war, was a wasteland of burned down villages overrun with corpses. I’m afraid that these days I’m quite desensitized to violence. Now, do you like the plan or not?”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth again but before he could say anything Qui-Gon placed a hand on his shoulder, a calming wave of the force moving through him, one that urged patience and understood exactly what it was Obi-Wan was seeing.

“These people,” Qui-Gon’s voice whispered inside of his mind, “They are not like us.”

“Yes, Lee, your plan sounds fine.” Qui-Gon said out loud to which Lee gave a small nod, before taking off at a pace that could only be achieved by great mastery over the force, one that Obi-Wan himself had difficulty keeping up with. She jumped onto the unstable rooves of the huts, leaping from one to the next with ease, her eyes always scanning the horizon, as they zig-zagged their way through Mos Espa and towards Watto’s junkyard.

And everywhere around them were signs of devastation and desolation, distantly there were cries of children, screams of women and men, and the heat of the fires, which had seemed so distant at the edge of the village, only grew hotter against Obi-Wan’s skin.
He had seen violence, jedi were keepers of peace, it was almost inevitable that one would see violence even as a padawan, but he’d never seen something like this. This heartless, senseless, destruction.

And as Obi-Wan watched her, this Lee Eru, took in her indifference, her clear ease and perhaps even comfort with violence and death, he asked his master the question both had been avoiding since all this had started, “Master, is she a sith?”

“No, there can only be two,” Qui-Gon said, and while his tone was confident there were images of concern and doubt lurking just underneath it, “And the woman and her apprentice are no friends of the man we ran into. A man who surely cannot be anything other than a sith.”

“But she is not a jedi,” Obi-Wan countered.

“No, she is most assuredly not a jedi.”

On their way, they passed the great tree that Obito Uchiha had made earlier, somehow still standing even with several of its branches scattered on the ground, the force still flowed through it, from the roots and upward, circulating through it, making it into a great pillar of light in the force itself.

How had he, a boy filled with such anger and pain and attachment, someone who could seemingly shrug off the massacre of a village, make something like that?

Lee’s question startled both Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan out of their silent conversation and Obi-Wan’s musings, asked in a clear tone even as she jumped from one roof to the next, “So, this friend of yours, the missing nin, what exactly is he if he’s not from your village?”

“He’s a sith,” Obi-Wan responded, wondering how she could talk so easily, Obi-Wan certainly couldn’t.

Lee cast an impatient look over her shoulder even as she waited for them to jump and join her, “Yes, and what exactly is that supposed to be?”
“The sith are old enemies of the jedi order, they take their power from the dark side of the force where we draw ours from the light.” Qui-Gon finished for him as he took a bounding leap to the next roof, “But we haven’t seen signs of the sith for centuries now.”

“The dark side of the force?”

“They feed off hatred and rage and pain… great emotion…” his master trailed off as he took in Lee Eru’s complete lack of comprehension, “Surely, as a… shinobi, you must be aware of the two sides of the force. You have to have sensed it yourself!”

“There is only chakra,” Lee explained, still standing on the roof even while Obi-Wan made his own great leap to the other side, “Dangerous, yes, helpful, undoubtedly, but double sided, not really. Chakra doesn’t take sides, it is entirely indifferent to mortal affairs, whether you call that good or bad or anything in between doesn’t change what it is.”

“You don’t… believe in the dark side or light side of the force?” Obi-Wan asked with raised eyebrows, not even sure what to think of that, because surely even the least force sensitive of idiots knew the difference between the light and dark side of the force.

“No,” Lee said shortly, “Of course, people can do great and terrible things with chakra, if that’s what you’re on about. But chakra having, taking, sides like that, no that’s not it’s… thing. I’m not even sure the Yggdrasil is something that has concerns like that.”

Lee turned towards the horizon once again, readying herself to continue bounding across rooftops, “Well, that was far less interesting and informative than I’d hoped it’d be.”

“Wait! How do you… How can you not know about the dark or light sides of the force?!” Obi-Wan asked, Lee pausing with a look of complete and utter exasperation on her face.

“Because that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. Honestly, chakra taking sides,” Lee said, “You’re talking like the English wizards, they were always on about dark and light chakra too. Of course, for them it was mostly propaganda.”

“Propaganda?!” Obi-Wan spluttered.

“Sure, our enemies draw from evil spirits and eat dead children, while we draw our power from
sunshine and rainbows,” Lee explained, oh so casually, completely unconcerned by what she was saying, “It’s much easier to kill the other side if they’re hopelessly evil and set out to completely obliterate your way of life, it also makes it that much easier to believe in your own government, no matter how hopelessly incompetent or corrupt it happens to be. Hell, even Konoha has its propaganda, of course ours isn’t nearly as stupid as that.”

Obi-Wan responded almost without thinking, “The dark side of the force is not propaganda!”

“Of course, it’s not,” Lee said, as if she believed anything but, before sighing and asking in a rather exasperated tone, “Now, do you want to reach that ship of yours before he manages to blow up the entire village or not? Because really, you’re the one wasting time up here.”

“Yes, of course,” Qui-Gon responded, once again before Obi-Wan could even think of what to ask her, how to get to the bottom of his own distress and uncertainty, wondering how she could possibly reach out to the force without concern for either the light or dark side of it, and if she wasn’t so entrenched in the dark side already to not even feel the pull of one side or the other, to label the dark side of the force as mere propaganda.

“Later, padawan,” Qui-Gon reassured him, “When we have time we will thoroughly question her.”

And so, they continued, leaping after her, past the burning buildings, the sight of ships in the port on fire, the wailing children that Obi-Wan so desperately wanted to stop for, and finally they reached a deserted, burning, street and stopped in front of the partially obstructed entrance to a shop with a great junkyard behind it.

And staring at the darkened, silent, entrance it was Lee who asked, “Now, the real question is, do we feel lucky?”

Needless to say, no one had taken Obito up on his offer for impromptu shogi lessons.

Well, Anakin had looked tempted, for a minute there, but Anakin had never had the patience for the game all the times Obito had tried to teach him before. For all the hours he put into building his intricate metal puppets, he’d start twitching the first five minutes into any shogi match and seemed almost incapable of looking more than one step ahead in the game.
And today he was distracted not only by his own thoughts, the extremely probable destruction of his village and losing the pod race and everything in between, but also by the passionately angry Amidala Padme.

It seemed Anakin would much rather watch pretty girls than play strategy games. Which, to be fair, when Obito was his age and it was Rin right in front of him, he wouldn’t have had any interest in Minato-sensei and a shogi board either.

Unfortunately, this left Obito having to herd the grown men into a corner after two of them had stomped off into the desert and gotten themselves lost for twenty minutes in search of civilization, the little girls all gossiping around the serene if somewhat dazed looking queen, and Padme pacing back and forth with her hands bunched into fists while Anakin just watched, ready to breathe fire at Obito the moment he even looked at her.

Obito would tell her to sit down, but she didn’t seem like the type to listen, especially to someone who was only a few years older than her, and someone who she seemed to think had made the situation even worse.

Which, really, Obito had had nothing to do with it. It’d only been a matter of time before Lee started showing her hand, and while, if she’d been truly motivated, she probably could have crushed that man like an ant that would have raised far too many red flags for the jedi than Obito was comfortable with.

Still, it’d been the jedi’s initial actions that landed them into this mess, Lee’s impromptu teleportation was just a consequence, and even then Obito hadn’t been the one to make that decision (and wasn’t necessarily happy with the decision for all that it did get them out of a bind).

Still, it was a somewhat familiar if irritating situation, Obito being blamed for Lee’s actions by proxy. Not anything he couldn’t handle, but it did get trying every now and then.

Still, everything said, staring out at the setting of the fist sun, Obito didn’t envy Lee’s task either. If it was just her she could have been back far faster (hell, they probably would have just directly teleported to this other planet and left the ship to rust), but no doubt she was surveying the damage, trying to learn all she could about this missing nin of theirs, and trying to pump the jedi for information even while revealing as little about herself and Konoha as she could to both them and their missing nin friend.

It was probably going splendidly, especially since they’d cut straight to the heart of the age long civilian argument against shinobi. The one every shinobi would hear more than once in their life,
and would hear when they were only adorable baby faced genin escorting some pitiful civilian from point a to point b.

Shinobi are nothing more than mercenaries, cut throat assassins and seductresses who think only about money and nothing about morals, heartless tools of their villages without a shred of conscience between them.

And then the pity, especially when faced with some ten-year-old ninja, the pity rather than the fear, as if Obito could have been more than this in some other world.

No, Obito didn’t envy Lee right now, not at all.

So, if staying here and babysitting antsy civilians in the middle of the desert meant not receiving whatever moral lecture the jedi felt fit to bestow on them, then Obito was more than happy to take it.

Still, he thought to himself frowning, that was usually a civilian argument. The wizards had given it, but then, they essentially were civilians. There was the running joke that the English shinobi was the only true shinobi in England, and it had more than a grain of truth to it, very few of their people had seen real battle, and even less were trained for it.

But these jedi? Granted, they weren’t ringing all the shinobi alarm bells in his head, but there were similarities. They took missions, they had a village that acted on the behalf of a state with its own council, they had apprentices that they trained from an almost worryingly young age, they were swordsmen…

He sighed, glanced down at his board, and wondered if he was truly bored enough to start playing himself.

Unfortunately, the demented frog summons interrupted his thoughts, “Itsa getting late and theysa not back yet! Wesa doomed!”

He’d almost forgotten about that thing.

Obito had been keeping less of a close eye on the flailing orange monstrosity than the others, maybe subconsciously hoping it would wander off into the desert and forget to come back, but
every once in a while, he’d see it flailing here and there or trying to touch the civilian men’s blasters (well, perhaps civilian was the wrong term, they all looked like some sort of soldier for all their lack of chakra) or else tripping over nothing and loudly whining about it.

Sighing and willing himself to have more patience than he did, Obito responded, “They’re fine, Lee’s with them, they’ll come back in one piece and with your ship, I guarantee it.”

“You have that much faith in your master?” Padme scoffed, finally stopping her pacing to glare at him, looking like she’d been just waiting for him to say something like this just so that she could respond with this question.

“Yes, Amidala-san, I have that much faith in Lee-shishou,” he didn’t mean to sound derisive or contemptuous but with the sun overhead and a nasty sunburn starting to form on his cheeks, forehead, and nose, it came out perhaps shorter than it would have a few hours before, “Lee doesn’t fail missions, you’ll get your ship back.”

“Why should we trust that woman?” one of the men, the captain, asked bitterly, “She doesn’t seem capable of respecting anything.”

“Lee-shishou has great respect for many things,” Obito replied back, already feeling himself grow cold and brittle as the topic of Lee crept up on them, Lee and her reputation and just how much respect she herself was worth.

“Not us though,” Padme said, eyes narrowed, stepping towards him while Anakin just looked up with a tortured expression on his face, “And not the planet of Naboo either. She hasn’t made any move to understand our plight, the fact that my planet itself is at stake, and has absolutely no desire to either.”

And Obito was officially done, he smiled up at her, coldly, eyes narrowed, and asked so that every single one of them could hear, “Have you given her any reason to?”

“Given her a…” Padme repeated, outrage on her face as well as disbelief, but Obito didn’t even let her finish.

Obito motioned to Padme, to her crew, encompassing all of them in his broad hand sweep as if to show how significant they were in Lee’s eyes, “Lee doesn’t see your plight, when she looks at you, she just sees a civilian girl who goes and blames the shinobi when it’s already gone to hell and
back again. And why should she see anything else, Amidala?”

Anakin opened his mouth, a desperate warning, “Obito,” coming out, but Obito wasn’t about to stop now.

“Even now, when she, Jinn, and Kenobi are out there scouring a burned down village with a missing nin waiting inside, risking their necks for your ship and the success of your mission, you’re standing here blaming them because they’re not on time, because your ship was shot down, because Jinn failed to produce a miracle.” Obito let out a sardonic laugh, suddenly thinking this girl, for all her maturity and poise, really did seem so much younger than he himself did, “‘What else is Lee supposed to think of you when you insist on blaming the shinobi for a mission gone south?’”

“But even if she doesn’t like you, even if she doesn’t respect you or whatever you want to call it, she’ll still get your goddamn ship, because that’s what Lee does and has done for twenty years.” Obito said, “So, please, Amidala-san, a little patience and they’ll be back with your ship intact or I will eat my goddamn sandal!”

That… Was a bit more than he’d intended. The heat must be getting to him.

Obito sighed, raked a hand through his hair, and considered his board in the now oppressive silence as he tried to ignore all of them staring at him, the girl especially.

There was something about Lee though, questioning Lee’s actions as if she was trash, as if she was doing nothing for these people at all when she could have left them behind just as easily, that got to him more than most things did these days.

Still, seeing the proud Amidala Padme, now staring at him with a desolate expression on her face, an overwhelming grief (her home world itself seeming to rest upon this mission), he couldn’t help but regret it.

Not enough to apologize, he refused to apologize, but enough to regret having to say it.

“Obito, you should try to be nicer.”

Obito looked up and saw Anakin sitting down at the other side of the board, a pained expression on
his face, “It’s... been hard for everyone today. But, more for them, they’ve... They’ve lost everything, Obito.”

“I know,” Obito said quietly.

“And they don’t know Lee like you do,” Anakin continued, clenching and unclenching his hands, rolling the hem of his shirt into a ball with quiet distress.

“I know that too, brat.” Obito sighed, “It’s just... There are a few people you can never insult like that to my face. Kakashi’s one, Sakumo Hatake’s another, Rin, Minato-sensei, my grandmother, and finally Lee-shishou. And believe me, I know they each have their flaws, their eccentricities here and there, but that doesn’t matter. You just... can’t say things like that about them, any of them, and expect me to let it slide easily.”

“But Lee doesn’t like Padme,” Anakin said back quietly, but with confidence, knowing very well Lee’s feelings for their visitors. Lee, as a general rule, was perhaps blunt and honest to a fault when it came to expressing her opinions about anyone and anything. Padme was no exception.

“No, she doesn’t, but Lee has her own reasons not to, and for her they make sense,” Obito said before adding a hesitant, “She could still change her mind though, if it worries you that much.”

Not that Lee did this often, first impressions mattered to Lee, a lot, and it took an almost inconceivable amount of effort to get her to change her mind.

“Can’t she see how wonderful Padme is though? And how... how hard it is for them, how much is on the line?” Anakin asked, luckily Padme now out of earshot to hear this, having gone back to the other handmaidens with a dull look in her eyes.

Lee was not a nine-year-old boy seeing the first pretty girl he’d ever laid eyes on, and even then, Lee didn’t look out at the world through a normal person’s eyes, “Lee rarely sees what other people see.”

Which was why it was left to people like Minato-sensei, and now Obito himself, to see the world both from Lee’s point of view and everyone else’s, and do their best to translate one to the other.

And Obito couldn’t help but wonder, as he looked at Anakin and then at the rest of them, if
Namikaze Minato ever felt as tired as he did trying to play the part of the bridge for all of them.

The shop seemed relatively untouched when compared with the rest of Mos Espa, shelves had been knocked down, silver instruments and parts scattered haphazardly across the floor, Watto himself was nowhere to be seen, but it remained dark and structurally intact as they stepped inside.

However, the fact that it appeared to have mostly been left alone, when the path to the shop had been a trail of destruction, left a quiet sense of unease in Qui-Gon, and, looking at the woman, in Lee Eru as well.

She’d slowed as she’d entered the shop, eyes scanning ahead of her, one hand drifting to her waist, fingers poised, an action that spoke of years of training and instinctive preparation for battle.

She was burning in the force again, that constant, too bright, burning of energy that was neither light nor dark, but instead simply overpowering. Qui-Gon wondered if that was what she had meant, that to her there was no difference between the light and the dark, or that she herself could not tell the difference because to her, inconceivably, there was none.

Perhaps that was why her apprentice seemed so emotionally unbalanced for a jedi, perhaps that was not the norm, but simply that she did not know to look for and correct such attachments, did not see the path that so easily lead to the dark side.

Still, he did not believe she was a sith. For all her violence and her indifference, for all the signs she’d shown thus far, there was too much of a bond between her and the boy, and even Anakin Skywalker, for her to be what Qui-Gon could recognize as a sith.

But she certainly was no jedi.

They exited the back of the shop, into the junkyard, where a good portion had been cleared away to make room for the ship. And it seemed that the force was with them, for it looked mostly intact, no parts stripped from it yet as Watto had no doubt fled from the shop. All that remained was to locate the engine needed and they could leave Tatooine.

Then, well, they’d have to see. His bond with Obi-Wan had frayed this morning, and he’d no doubt have to spend time rebuilding the damage caused by his leap of faith, there was the matter of what
to do with Anakin Skywalker (because surely the boy could not stay here, and if he was leaving anyways, coming with them, then it was Qui-Gon’s duty to take him to the temple to be trained), the ongoing Naboo mission (which had turned into a disaster beyond anything Qui-Gon could have conceived), and of course Lee Eru and her own apprentice and what to do about them.

The council wouldn’t know what to make of them, certainly some would be leerier than others, but Qui-Gon had no idea how they would truly react to them if only because Qui-Gon had yet to fully make up his own mind.

A part of him wondered if the woman and her apprentice weren’t subtly testing him and Obi-Wan as well, poking at them with metaphorical sticks as if to see just how a jedi functioned and what they might expect from them.

Lee interrupted his thoughts, staring out into the junkyard with a musing expression, “Well, there’s the ship, all we need now is that part you were looking for. Jinn, you remember where it is and what it looks like?”

Qui-Gon nodded, pointing to the left, “Yes, it was over there.”

“Good, go out and get it, then I can teleport the ship and the engine back into the desert and we can get going while the going is good.” Lee said shortly.

“What about the rest of Mos Espa?” Obi-Wan asked, “Are we simply going to leave it…”

“If you leave atmosphere he’ll follow, that’s his mission, right?” Lee responded before Obi-Wan could even finish, “The best thing we can do for these people is get the hell out of dodge.”

Obi-Wan looked at him, no doubt for confirmation, but all Qui-Gon could do was nod because, for as heartless as it sounded, she had a point. Their pursuer was after the queen, these people had simply been unfortunate collateral, butchered by the man’s frustration at losing his prey.

If they left, if he realized they left for Coruscant, he would no doubt follow and leave Tatooine behind.

That was another thing, Lee Eru seemed unnaturally comfortable making heartless and brutal decisions.
Qui-Gon made to move out into the junk yard, Obi-Wan with him, when Lee suddenly appeared in front of him, a small metal throwing knife in one hand, without a word she threw it out into the junk yard only for it to be cut in half by the red lightsaber.

Qui-Gon, he hadn’t sensed him at all, just as he hadn’t earlier either. The sith were always difficult to detect in the force, always clouded and covered in shadow, but none the less he would have thought he’d feel something…

The cloaked man stalked forward, his lightsaber humming with energy, walking with a slow confident ease that spoke of anticipation for this moment.

“Well, he’s faster than I thought… Or he tracked us here,” Another knife appeared in Lee’s hand, summoned out of nowhere, and she spread her legs into a more stable fighting stance, “Alright, new plan, I’ll distract while you two grab the part and bring it back here, then we hightail it out of here. Jinn, your sword please.”

“Well, he’s faster than I thought… Or he tracked us here,” Another knife appeared in Lee’s hand, summoned out of nowhere, and she spread her legs into a more stable fighting stance, “Alright, new plan, I’ll distract while you two grab the part and bring it back here, then we hightail it out of here. Jinn, your sword please.”

“My lightsaber?”

“If you’ll remember, he cut my katana in half, it would be much easier to cut off his head if I had a laser sword that won’t break the moment he hits it.” Lee explained almost with exasperation, “If you’re that attached to yours then just throw me Kenobi’s.”

“You can’t just borrow a jedi’s lightsaber!” Obi-Wan cried out, clutching at his own lightsaber with a desperate possessiveness.

“Oh, trust me, you would like my other solutions to this problem much less.” Lee said, “Unless you want to try chopping off his head, Kenobi.”

Lee, after speaking, took a great breath and blew out a wall of fire towards the sith, one which he only just managed to avoid by dropping to lie flat against the ground, and even then gained significant burns on his back.

“No! No I…” Obi-Wan cried out, taking a step backwards, still holding his lightsaber and looking at Lee Eru as if he’d never seen anything like her before in his life. To be fair, neither had Qui-Gon.
“He does seem significantly beyond your power level,” Lee said, “Which, really, was why I asked for the laser sword, but since Jinn has to go find us our engine, and you won’t part with your sword, that sort of leaves you to fight him.”

“Obi-Wan, you know the part we need, yes?” Qui-Gon asked, igniting his own blade as he watched the man haul himself back up to his feet.

“Yes, master,” Obi-Wan said, and his eyes brightened as he realized what Qui-Gon must mean, and he took off sprinting in the direction Qui-Gon had originally pointed.

“Well played, Jinn-san,” Lee commented cheerfully as Obi-Wan disappeared around a corner, Qui-Gon and Lee blocking the man’s path to him and the ship.

“Thank you,” Qui-Gon responded, “I’ve learned many things in my years as Obi-Wan’s master.”

“Yes, let’s hope that age and wisdom translates to kenjutsu, because I’ll be honest Jinn, the man is no slouch.” Lee said, “He’d probably give the seven swordsmen of Mist a run for their money.”

“And you, Lee Eru, would he give you a run for your credits?” Jinn asked, and the woman offered him a wild and anticipatory grin as she raised her knives up to throw at the man.

“Of course not, Jinn-san, he’d have to be a god.”

And with those brash and perhaps overconfident words the man reached them and Qui-Gon brought up his sword to block one of the blades, stepping out of the reach of the other. A two-sided blade, that required years of dedication, and had fallen out of favor with the jedi centuries ago.

But the man was skilled with it, enough for Qui-Gon to realize that, if this fight persisted too long, he could very well lose his life here.

Luckily the man also had to dodge Lee Eru’s barrage of metal throwing knives, both with the force and his lightsaber.
“Jinn, duck!”

Qui-Gon ducked his head, feeling a great ball of heat flying overhead, and looked up in time to see the sith stumble backwards, tripping over a piece of earth that jut out beneath his feet. Except, instead of falling flat on his back, the man rolled backwards, and was just as soon standing on his feet, almost dancing away from the protrusions of earth that erupted around him.

Soon enough Qui-Gon was back into the fray, willing the force to guide him, except… The force still seemed somehow clouded, or at least disjointed, as if it was seeing some other fight instead of the one he was in now. It couldn’t seem to accept Lee’s interference, instead Qui-Gon saw images of himself in the desert, the ship flying overhead with Obi-Wan onboard, Qui-Gon throwing Anakin up onto the ship before jumping himself.

Lee Eru, for the force, didn’t seem to exist at all.

Lee began using the force to pull various ship parts towards the Sith, forcing him to duck, roll, and use the force to block them accordingly, all while Qui-Gon tried to force the man backwards.

“Jinn, I don’t mean to be rude, but what is taking your apprentice so long?” Lee asked, “He does realize we’re on something of a time schedule here, doesn’t he?”

“Patience, Lee, Obi-Wan is coming.” Qui-Gon grunted out as his green blade clashed with the red, gritting his teeth and willing himself to have the strength to hold his stance and not bend under this younger man’s pressure.

“Yes, but, and again no offense, I’m not sure you can hold out too much longer against this asshole.”

Qui-Gon dearly wanted to spare her a flabbergasted look, as it was he could only balk at his opponent, and ask, “Would you like to switch?”

“Oh, well, gladly, but close range I’d prefer a sword. And, as we went over earlier, apparently taking a jedi’s sword is a political no-no.” Lee responded, far too calmly, even as she continued to shape the environment around them with complete and utter ease, “So, I’m afraid you’re the one who has forced me to play distance in this game, Jinn.”
Somehow, as Qui-Gon ducked again as a ship engine flew over his head and into the sith, successfully knocking him back several feet, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but feel, that this was the most surreal fight of his existence.

Straightening up, feeling an ache growing in his back, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but plead, “Please, Lee, if you could improve your aim a little…”

Lee was entirely unapologetic as she watched the Sith struggle beneath the engine, using the force to push it off of himself, “You two are fighting pretty close together, it’s hard for me to hit him without somehow hitting you.”

“Yes, well, I would very much appreciate it.” Qui-Gon said, watching as Lee stacked another engine on top of the first, no doubt shattering a few of the sith’s bones under the combined weight of the two engines.

“You’re the one who said I should be the long-range fighter, you don’t get to complain about my methods,” Lee said, before stopping, adding a third metal wing on top of the sith, and saying, “And hey, here’s your incredibly tardy apprentice.”

“Master!” Obi-Wan appeared around a corner, dragging a large metal engine behind him, the very one Qui-Gon had looked at the day before.

Qui-Gon almost buckled with relief, still keeping his hands steady and eyes on the struggling sith, but he didn’t need to because he already felt the nauseating, wrenching, disorientation that signaled Lee’s teleportation.

And before he could even blink the junkyard and sith disappeared, replaced with the desert, and everything else they had left behind.

Finally, as the second sun drifted towards setting, there was a loud crack and out of nowhere a grinning Eru Lee, an incredibly sweaty and rather winded Jinn Qui-Gon, an equally sweaty although slightly less winded Kenobi Obi-Wan, the giant silver ship, and what must be the ship’s engine appeared out of nowhere.

And after far too long, Obito could finally stand up, give Padme and the rest of them a rather
pointed look, and grin back at Lee, “So, I’m guessing you ran into trouble.”

“If by trouble you mean an incredibly angry swordsman and a decimated village, then yes, although he didn’t give us too much trouble, considering.”

Considering the fact that Lee didn’t look all that ruffled this was probably true, she hardly looked like she put in any real effort at all, like she’d just spent the past few minutes mildly sparring. Although, judging by Jinn and Kenobi’s appearance, looks like she’d made them fight the bastard while she threw heavy rocks at his head from a safe distance.

“Is he dead?” Obito asked.

Lee sighed and waved away Obito’s question as if it wasn’t important, “Well, no, they refused to give me a laser sword and I refused to resort to drastic overpowered measures, but he didn’t manage cut off anyone’s hand.”

Drastic overpowered measures being Lee’s usual tactics of giant fires, earthquakes, floods, the dead rising, tearing the hearts out of people’s bodies, and all the gruesome things that had grown killers running at the mere mention of her name.

In other words, the usual tactics Lee resorted to when any fight took her too long and she wasn’t in foreign territory where even sneezing impolitely might cause the mission to go off the rails.

“So, he’s still alive?”

Lee shrugged as if this was ultimately unimportant, “And hot on our tail, yes, but as you said earlier, not our missing nin and not our problem.”

Obito’s eyes raised as he eyed the ship and then eyed her and then pointed back to Padme and the rest of the gang, “Aren’t we catching a ride with them?”

Lee simply stared at him for a moment, blankly, then concluded, “…That’s not important.”

“Catching a…” the captain started, looking incensed at the mere idea of transporting people like Obito and Lee, but Obito artfully cut him off.
“I’m sorry, captain, did shishou not just save your life and save your ship all in the same day? Are we to think the people of Naboo are so ungrateful that they would not even offer their saviors a lift?”

The man didn’t seem to take this well, but he didn’t say anything, instead bit down whatever he wanted to say and barked at one of the other men in basic to go and put the engine in already.

Which, Obito couldn’t help but think, was a rather beautiful sight. Clearly, he’d been stuck watching these people alone for too long.

“You realize, of course, that with our luck we’re going to run into the bastard again.” Obito couldn’t help but point out to Lee.

“You’re right,” Lee said with a shrug, “But then, that might be some time from now, and who knows, maybe by then it will be alright to really let loose.”

“Except not really.” Obito hastily put in, as technically, he was pretty sure Lee always held something back in any fight. After all, the earth still existed and wasn’t a desolate wasteland devoid of any sign of life.

There was a polite cough to their left, Obito and Lee both looked over to see Jinn Qui-Gon staring at them, politely, “I see you plan on coming with us to Coruscant.”

“It does seem like the place to be,” Lee said, “Besides, Tatooine was getting old anyways.”

“I imagine it would,” Obi-Wan said drily, earning a reprimanding glance from his master.

Qui-Gon continued, and here a glint of something entered his eye, “We would be greatly honored if you would come with us to the jedi temple when we arrive. I believe we have much to learn about each other and much to discuss.”

That didn’t sound like an invitation so much as a polite demand.
Still, they had planned on meeting the jedi at some point, perhaps receiving an invitation would be the best way to go about it. Although it could go poorly, incredibly poorly, Lee and Obito were no one’s first choice of diplomats.

Lee, apparently, agreed.

“Oh, I imagine this will be a disaster of a meeting,” Lee said with a grimace before nodding her consent. “Alright, Jinn-san, we’ll meet your leaders. Hopefully Minato won’t be too upset with us afterwards.”

“Minato?”

“The yondaime hokage.” Lee explained with a shrug, “The unquestioned leader of our village.”

Before Lee could explain this further, or get into Konoha’s politics and governing structure, her eyes lit up and she turned her attention from Jinn and Kenobi to Anakin and Shmi, “Oh, before I forget, consider yourselves freed. I’m pretty sure that Watto is either extremely dead or booking his way off the planet and wants nothing to do with you anymore for fear or our incredibly angry friend the missing nin, so, congratulations. Not that we can head to Konoha yet but, baby steps.”

Both appeared shocked, not quite sure how to take this, Anakin’s face slack and Shmi’s eyes glazed. In fact neither looked quite prepared to believe it, but Lee didn’t give them a chance to as she turned back to Jinn and Kenobi with a pleasant very Lee-esqe smile on her face.

“Right, well, that was all very fun and exciting… Obito, you want to come with me and check out the inside of the space ship, ten ryo says it looks like Star Trek.” Lee grinned at him, took Obito’s hand, and it was almost heartwarming to be reminded, for all of Lee’s overpowered terrifying weirdness, at her heart, she was really a giant nerd.

Obito squeezed her hand in his, offered her a smile, and responded, “You know what, shishou, I will take that bet, and I will double it.”

Needless to say, as they walked inside the gleaming silver ship, Obito’s intuition served him well, and it looked nothing like Star Trek. And somehow, even with an unknown swordsman missing nin on their tail, suspicious jedi and civilians all around, the haunting destruction of Mos Espa, and Anakin’s shaking uncertainty and world flipping itself on its head, Obito couldn’t help but feel more at ease than he had for months.
(Perhaps, with the memory of the third war ingrained in his soul, he would always be more at ease with uncertainty, bloodshed, death, and Eru Lee’s hand in his.)

That night, as they flew out of the desert, beyond the atmosphere, leaving everything Anakin had ever known behind, flying towards an uncertain future that held whisperings of jedi and wars and stars of death, he couldn’t help but wonder if the Obito’s tree was still standing there in what was left of Mos Espa. If its branches still reached towards the sky, and if, one day, it would sprout green leaves in the shape of Konoha’s insignia.

And if one day, Anakin might return to see it in bloom, and whether he would be wearing a shinobi’s headband or else a jedi’s lightsaber.
Chapter 6

There were certain habits and hobbies that lingered after the Kannabi bridge mission. Or, perhaps, more accurately, Obito forced them into lingering long after they should have faded.

There were some days that he’d show up to training with Lee-shishou, ready to have his ass handed to him once again, with that final unbroken pair of goggles tight over his eyes. She’d just raise an eyebrow at the sight of thin, scarred, fourteen-year-old Uchiha Obito trying to look like he was a scrappy and determined genin fresh out of the academy, tilt her head a bit, but would make no comment as she went about drilling him through various katas. Although, perhaps she didn’t need to, as somehow, despite all his own bruises and cuts, the goggles seemed unnaturally undamaged after every training session.

He still, sometimes, would insist to anyone who was willing to listen that he’d one day become hokage, except it didn’t have the same unwavering enthusiasm that it once did. He no longer looked at the sandaime or even Minato-sensei and saw only the glorious respect, that shot at proving himself to the entire village, instead he saw the great overbearing shadow of responsibility and all the terrible decisions that weighed on the shoulders of one man.

And he wondered if the man he was becoming was even capable of being a kage.

These, though, as the months wore on and he and Lee picked up a hodgepodge of missions all over the content as well as in England, faded until they stopped entirely. Obito left the goggles sitting on the desk in his room, his reflection always warped slightly in the glass. And slowly but surely, he found thoughts of hokage drifting from him and he just couldn’t force the words out anymore.

However, every week, whenever he had the chance, and often when he didn’t, he, Kakashi, and Rin would meet up for lunch, just like they had before the disastrous mission that had changed Obito’s life.

Kakashi he saw often enough, even with Kakashi’s grueling ANBU schedule and Obito’s somewhat unpredictable schedule training under Lee. Obito supposed that came with living in the same house. That, and Kakashi always made time for his nearly retired father, and if Obito happened to be there as well then the more the merrier. However, Rin…

Their paths didn’t seem to cross nearly as often as they once did.
She spent most of her time in the hospital these days, not necessarily removed from field duty, but with the end of the war field medics weren’t quite as necessary as they’d once been and most medics migrated back to the hospital. Her hair was growing longer, her face slightly thinner as she matured, but she still offered him the same smile.

That same kind, sweet, and heartbreaking smile, for all that it offered only friendship and would only ever offer friendship.

Obito… He knew what he looked like, by that point he had more than come to terms with what he looked like. It was hard to say if he would ever have been as attractive as some of his cousins, blessed by the Uchiha gene pool, but those were might have beens now, and the fact was that Obito was ugly. Or, perhaps not ugly, but scarred, a constant reminder of violence and the truth of a shinobi’s existence.

And he knew that didn’t matter to Rin, not really, not consciously, but he couldn’t help but look at her and sometimes wonder…

So, there they were, an overworked if brilliant rookie ANBU operative, a hassled medic-nin practically stalking Tsunade-sama for an apprenticeship, and Uchiha Obito apprentice to the great and ineffable Eru Lee, eating ramen on a clear summer day.

Each of them pretending the Kannabi bridge mission had never happened in the first place.

“Kakashi, would you please put that book down?” Rin hissed flushing with embarrassment as a mother across from them looked on in disapproval, shielding her young daughter from the wicked Bakashi, as Kakashi calmly flipped yet another page in Jiraiya-sama’s latest and greatest orange masterpiece.

Kakashi had picked up some interesting habits while Obito was being experimented on in a cave by Madara. One of them, perhaps the most blatant, was his hobby of reading pornography in public places at basically every given opportunity.

Which, really, Obito wasn’t even entirely sure that Kakashi liked women. He’d never lacked for attention from girls their age, but he’d never showed any interest, even with Rin whose attention hadn’t really waned over the years despite having a front row seat to the Bakashi show.

(There was a cruel irony that Bakashi, of all people, should be blessed with such classically
handsome features.)

Not to mention that Obito had always had the vaguely nagging and alarming suspicion that Kakashi was interested in him, and had been subtly trying to get into Obito’s pants since the age of eleven. Of course, Obito always rationalized, Kakashi didn’t usually do subtle, or at least, prolonged subtle. And even if he did, he could just be doing it to get into Obito’s head. Since he knew that Obito would never actually take him up on it, since Obito had only ever and would probably only ever have eyes for Rin. And why was Kakashi the only person still showing any sign of interest after Obito’s face had gotten crushed by a mountain and then turned into a plant? Surely, if there was a benevolent god in the universe, they would have traded Bakashi’s feelings for Rin’s.

Not that it was clear that Kakashi even had those types of feelings.

…This was why Obito tried not to contemplate what went on in Bakashi’s head.

“Kakashi!” Rin hissed, slightly louder this time, hand whipping out to slam the book onto the table but Kakashi proved too fast and deftly leaned backwards so that her fingers did not even graze the surface.

“Maa maa Rin, our brave space pirate hero is in the middle of rescuing the beautiful and bootylicious princess, how could I possibly stop now?”

Obito would have praised the gods that he hadn’t been eating at that moment, but unfortunately, he knew well enough to not eat anything whenever Kakashi opened his mouth, he’d long since learned that lesson. So Obito just said, flatly, channeling more of Lee-shishou than he ever had in his life, “Bootylicious?”

“Enough to inspire *sonnets,*” Kakashi said, not even glancing up from his book as he turned another page.

“Ugh, sometimes, I can’t believe I’m actually friends with you,” Rin said with an aggravated sigh, drawing a hand through her hair, but there was a warm, fond, familiar smile on her face as she took in Kakashi’s antics.

And it was more than clear that she wouldn’t change Bakashi for the world.
“Well, I can’t help it that you and Obito have terrible taste in literature,” Kakashi said with a shrug.

“You’re reading Icha Icha, Kakashi!” Rin whispered this, as if afraid to draw any more attention to the fact that Kakashi was reading this in public.

“I know, what have you two been reading?” Kakashi asked, single gray eye blinking at them as he gave them his custom nonplussed expression, one that Obito had begun to realize was lifted from none other than Eru Lee.

And with that thought, Obito decided to derail this train wreck before it led to Rin attempting to tear Kakashi’s beloved orange book in half, “Well, a lot of English science fiction and fantasy recently, shishou has a required reading list.”

“Ah, have you gotten to ‘The Princess Bride’ yet?” Kakashi asked only for Obito to shake his head.

“No, since I have to read it in English it’s pretty slow going, I’m still on the first book she handed me,” not that he’d had much time to really sit down and study, since, at the end of things, Lee really was the first and only choice when it came to sending shinobi to England.

Which… The English were an interesting people, and really, the English shinobi was not at all representative of them. Not that Obito had ever seen much of him either, since Obito had been a bit too young to pay attention when the man was confined to the village, and now that he was old enough to care the man was off in England terrorizing his own countrymen.

Still, it said a lot about them, that even though there were now several A to S rank shinobi who were fluent if not near fluent in English, and a handful more who were competent, they still insisted that Eru Lee be their bridge to Konoha.

“I think that one, perhaps, you’ll enjoy the most,” Kakashi said, before offering Obito a rather soft smile, which again had those distant alarm bells of ‘Kakashi displaying romantic interest in you’ ringing in the back of his head, “It’s quite romantic.”

“Romantic?” Obito asked, trying not to wince.

“Oh, it has everything,” Kakashi says with a wave of his hand, even while his lone eye still rested on the text of Icha Icha, “Kenjutsu, fighting, torture, poison, true love, hate, revenge, giants,
hunters, bad men, good men, beautiful ladies, snakes, spiders… Pain, death, brave men, cowardly men, strongest men, chases, escapes, lies, truths, passion, miracles…”

“And bountiful breasts?” Obito prompted with a raised eyebrow, the other on the scarred half of his face too stubborn to lift properly.

“Well, what kind of a friend would I be if I went and spoiled everything for you?” Kakashi asked with a pleasant smile, leaving Obito to wonder if there was any sex at all in the book, because with that kind of buildup it was just like Kakashi to leave Obito’s expectations to fall flat on their face.

That, and Lee didn’t seem the type to care about women’s breasts quite the way that the toad sage did.

“Don’t tell me Eru-sama writes porn too!” Rin cried, gripping her head in her hands, looking beyond dismayed. Which, she was probably just thinking about the fact that one of her beloved kunoichi role models was secretly a pervert, while Obito was trying to picture what pornography written by Eru Lee might even look like.

Somehow, he had the feeling that it’d be something along the lines of terrifying space sex androids, who’d have philosophical rants about the meaning of life as everyone died all around them, periodically interrupted by drastically short sex scenes put in there only for necessity’s sake.

Kakashi gave Rin a particularly dismayed look, “Rin, I’m shocked at you, you of all people should realize that graphic sex does not necessitate romance.”

“What do you mean me of all people?!?”

“I never said a word about sex in the book, did I? Here you are, slandering the glorious work of Jiraiya-sama, and you have the indecency to say that romance is born of sex rather than the heart,” Kakashi said, moving a hand over his own heart as he shook his head, “For shame, Rin.”

And Obito, looking at the two of them, couldn’t help but laugh at Rin’s mortified expression and the red flush on her cheeks and Kakashi’s sly, crooked, grin, as his poker face slipped at the first sign of sweet victory on the horizon in the long and endless game of life.

And even though she hadn’t glanced at him, had never glanced at him, he couldn’t help but feel it
was fine.

(And later, when he finally did manage to make his way through Lee’s transcribed English edition of “The Princess Bride” he couldn’t help but think that Kakashi was right, and he wondered if he’d ever love any story as much as he did this one.

Or if he’d ever imagine himself as anything other than the man in black only with a princess who had never once given him any sign of reciprocation.)

The interior of the ship was cold, stark, and silver. A wash of cool, alien, colors, sleek edges, all things almost clinically detached from life.

The ships Anakin had seen on Tatooine, those that he had worked on and dismantled, they were always weathered and beaten things. Stained and buffeted by the desert sand, scarred with black streaks from burned out equipment, held together by tape and sheer force of will, and piloted by equally gruff and weathered beings from all over the galaxy.

This ship was not like those, instead it seemed a part of space itself, cold and clear, eerily beautiful, and so very unfamiliar.

It only seemed more foreign with everyone sleeping.

Anakin, his mother, Obito, and Lee had all wound up sleeping in the same room, an out of the way place with only a few seats as well as a black monitor, the expensive kind you’d never see in Mos Espa. His mother had her arms around him even while sleeping, and even though he felt warm with her against him, he couldn’t help the strange sensation of cold, as if there was another Anakin just out of sight who wasn’t in his mother’s arms but instead alone on this ship with no idea where he was headed or what future waited for him.

Across from him, slumped against each other, looking like they were only dozing and at the drop of a pin would be flinging blades into the dark, were Lee and Obito. Obito’s face was still red from earlier, a stark burn on his pale cheeks, and with the scarred side of his face resting against Lee’s shoulder, he looked so much younger than Anakin had thought he was.

Like he was only a few years older than Padme.
Anakin wanted to sleep like the rest of them, or even think on everything yet to come, Coruscant and then Konoha but…

Whenever he closed his eyes he saw Mos Espaa burning, he saw Obito’s tree, and he saw himself in that crucial desperate moment where he’d betrayed Padme and Qui-Gon Jinn, where he’d decided to lose the race.

And it was so cold.

The door abruptly opened, Anakin’s head whipped up and he saw Obito and Lee’s eyes both crack open before closing again, and there was Padme walking towards the monitor, not even looking at Anakin as she pressed a button and turned it on.

A man’s face appeared on the screen, someone soft and pale and not looking at all like he’d come from Tatooine, and Anakin found that he couldn’t listen to the words, that all he could do was focus on the man’s battered face, his tired eyes as he stared ahead at the monitor, at whoever was watching, and begged…

And Padme just watched silently, blank faced, but tears gathering at the corners of her eyes like tiny little stars.

“Don’t…” Anakin didn’t get to finish, Padme turned abruptly, took in the sight of him and the others, and she looked… tired. She looked so very tired. Anakin swallowed tightly, something hot and heavy gripping his heart inside of him, and as carefully as he could he struggled out of his mother’s embrace and made his way over to sit next to her.

“Don’t cry, Padme,” Anakin said, “Please.”

Padme rubbed at her eyes, like she hadn’t even known she had been crying, and as she wiped any evidence away she said, “We’re still far from Coruscant, Annie, you should be sleeping.”

“I…” Anakin stopped, trailed off, not willing to say that he didn’t feel like sleeping, not wanting to admit that he couldn’t. Finally, he settled lamely on that pervasive feeling, there even when he hugged himself, “It’s too cold, I didn’t think it’d be this cold.”
Padme offered him a tender smile as well as her own jacket which she carefully placed over his shoulders, her skin burning where it touched the cloth of his shirt, “Yes, space is very cold, and you are from a very warm planet, too warm for me though. Naboo is never that warm, not even in the summer…”

Anakin wondered if the shadows of Naboo were dancing in her eyes then, as she looked away from him. Would the twin suns of Tatooine burn behind his eyes, would Mos Espa?

“You seem sad,” Anakin said then, if only to distract from that growing light of memory in Padmé’s expression, that bitter nostalgic fondness that seemed so terribly fragile, as if she was watching it crumble before her very eyes.

She paused for a moment, her tongue tracing the tips of her white teeth, the edge of her lips, then she said carefully, “The queen is… worried. Her people are suffering, dying, and every minute she fails to do something is another life lost. She must convince the senate to intervene or… or I’m not sure what will happen.”

She rubbed a hand against her face then, her thoughts far from Anakin and this ship, caught in an endless battle to free her planet that Anakin had only delayed further, those deaths on his head just as much as everyone in Mos Espa’s (Jira who would always give Anakin fruit and smile at him, Kirstin who always admired everything Anakin ever built, all of them gone, nothing more than sand and ashes…)

“I’m sorry!” It echoed in the room, bouncing off the unsympathetic silver ceiling and the harsh glow of the monitor, yet somehow failing to work his mother or disturb Lee and Obito.

“Annie, it’s not your fault,” Padme reached out and hugged him, and it was then that Anakin realized that he was shaking violently, repressing howling desperate sobs, “Believe me, none of this is your fault! It’s not your droids on that planet, and even when we had nowhere to go you helped us, you were willing to risk your life to win back our ship, people you’d never even met before who you’d never see again. And because of you and your friends we have our ship back anyways. No, Annie, you’ve done so much for us and I will always be grateful.”

Anakin tried to nod, it came out too stiff though, and in the end, he just stayed there, tried to remain still, and tried to get rid of all the overwhelming feelings festering up inside him. Eventually though the shaking subsided and he was left feeling loose and drained in Padme’s arms.

It was then, after a long silence, that she said, “Annie, do you truly want to train with them, the shinobi?”
He pulled back from her to stare into her eyes, those warm brown eyes, a color of brown like wood and trees and nothing at all like the desert. She brushed hair from his eyes even as she spoke, “You could stay on Coruscant, or move to Naboo even, if all of this… You’re not a slave anymore, Annie, you have a future, one that you can choose. You don’t have to become like them.”

“Like them?”

Padme turned to look at them, Obito and Lee, taking them in piece by piece, the worn green clothing, the silver headbands with the leaf inscribed on it, and she said, “All they talk about is war, Anakin, war, and violence, and death. They’re training you to fight people, to kill people, so that one day you’ll walk into a burned down village and think nothing about the people who lived there and what sort of a life they could have had if they’d survived.”

Anakin opened his mouth, but no words came out, only the thought of Mos Espa in flames, the screams of Anakin’s friends and neighbors in the air, and thick red blood staining the yellow, coarse, sand…

Padme gripped his hand, and then motioned to the pair of them, to Obito’s calloused pale fingers curled around the hilt of his katana, “Even now, Anakin, even when they’re sleeping, leaning against one another, he still has a hand on his blade.”

And Anakin thought about the race, thought about that single second and the terrible future he saw, and then the terrible future he invoked because of his fear of it.

He whispered then, slowly, in Lee and Obito’s tongue, “I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

He had said that once to himself already, but he had ignored it, and in ignoring it he had sacrificed Mos Espa and maybe Naboo too. And, looking at Obito and Lee, he wondered if he was ever supposed to become a shinobi at all. If, maybe, being a shinobi wasn’t somehow worse than being a jedi.

But Anakin didn’t say this, couldn’t say it even as he looked at them, all he could say was, “I don’t… I don’t know what will happen to me either. I don’t know if I’ll ever see you again…”
And somehow, that thought, the thought of never seeing Padme after leaving this ship, of never seeing the woman she’d become, never seeing her smile at him, or the warmth in her brown eyes ever again, hurt far worse than anything else.

Then, before he forgot or he lost his nerve, Anakin dug through his pocket and pulled out the wooden carving, desperately made earlier that day and the night before, “I made this for you, so that you’ll remember me when… I carved it out of wood, from a real tree, one of Obito’s actually, and Obito says that makes it luckier than any other kind of wood.”

She smiled, and when she did Anakin felt like his heart was expanding in every possible direction, and she took it and slipped it on, “It’s beautiful, but I don’t need it to remember you, Annie. Things will change when we reach the capital, but I’ll always care, remember that.”

Without warning, without any real reason, just sitting there and looking at Padme and the wooden pendant, Anakin began to cry.

“Annie, what’s wrong?”

He just shook his head, not able to explain, not able to put into words how he missed his mother despite the fact that she was sitting right there, that he missed Obito and Lee and Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi and all these people who were all on this ship with him. And that he missed Padme, more than anything in the world, he missed Padme Amidala.

And so, she just held him in silence, while he sat there and cried, in this cold and empty ship in the great vastness of space.

At some point, feeling restless or perhaps just ill at ease, the force nagging at his senses but providing nothing concrete, Obi-Wan walked into the small kitchen provided in the ship, only just large enough to sit the crew and its passengers, and found himself walking in on Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha holding cards of flimsy in their hands while they stared at one another, two small piles of white flimsy sitting next to both.

For a moment, as he stared at them, Obi-Wan wanted nothing more than to walk back out. He was tired, already drained by this mission, and with the flight to Coruscant having more time yet, even in hyperspeed, he was not in the mood to deal with the strange and alarming pair. Especially
without his master present.

Unfortunately, before he could quietly exit the woman raised a hand, not even glancing in his direction as she laid down a card, and waved him in, “Well, if it isn’t the dutiful apprentice Kenobi, you want to come in and learn how to play poker?”

He paused in the doorway, grimaced, and forced himself to smile politely and ask, “Ah… Is that what you two are playing?”

“No, unfortunately, poker requires far more than two players,” the woman said, looking thoroughly annoyed by this fact even as her eyes roved over her own cards, “As a result Obito and I have been forced into playing go fish.”

At this Obito asked with a narrowed eyed look of speculation as he took in her cards, “Speaking of which, shishou, do you have any sevens?”

“Of course not,” Lee dismissed casually, “Try fishing in some other pond.”

“Nice try,” But Obito made no move, instead set his cards flat on the table, gave his master a particularly flat look, and said, “Your seven is the second card from the left, fork it over, shishou.”

Lee took out the second card from the left in her hand, flipped it over, revealing a white surface with three diamonds on it, “Read it and weep, grasshopper.”

Obito, without a word, plucked the card that was furthest to the right in her hand, turned it to reveal one with seven black spades, “And thus, the apprentice became the master,”

“Goddammit!” Lee said, and in her hand, out of nowhere, a white slip of flimsy appeared, identical to those piled next to her and her apprentice. She then took an old-fashioned marker, the kind seen in museums these days, and began to write out foreign characters on the surface, “Let’s see, I owe you a new orange jacket…”

“Shishou, please, is that really the best you can come up with?” Obito said, “Besides, you already gave me one of those.”

Obito then reached over and held up one of Lee’s slips, waived it in her face, “I won’t accept
anything unless it’s of equal or greater value to, ‘get Orochimaru to make good on fourteen-year-old ramen debt.’

Lee blinked, grimaced, then with a sigh said, “Fine, I owe you, ‘distracting Kakashi for one morning.’”

“Two mornings,” Obito cut in quickly.

“One morning,” Lee countered just as quickly.

“Your life is not on the line, shishou,” Obito said, “You’re asking me to confront the most terrifying of the sannin on the subject that he probably hates the most out of anything in the world.”

“…Alright, two mornings,” Lee agreed with a short nod before handing over her finished slip to Obito, who took it with a particularly smug smile on his lips.

Strangely enough, as Obi-Wan watched this, he felt a smile curving on his lips. It was almost like a show on the holos, one filled with witty rapid-fire banter, of verbal dancing between two who were very close to one another, and who were both rather sharp wits…

Lee took this opportunity to turn fully to face Obi-Wan, motioning to the table, “Well, Kenobi, do you want to play?”

“Well I don’t know the rules…” he started, eyes straying towards the hallway, instinctively feeling for his master, who was of course on the complete opposite side of the ship.

“Oh, don’t worry about that, you’ll pick it up,” Lee said, waving him in, and offering him an encouraging grin as Obi-Wan, against his own instincts, moved into the room to sit at the table with them, “Although, three still really isn’t enough for poker so we’re still stuck playing go fish.”

She then quickly explained the rules of what seemed like an incredibly simple game, one of probability and luck, designed to while away extra time rather than to expand any skill, they then shuffled the remaining deck and handed him a few cards, and with a final instruction to be reasonable in his bets the game was on once again.
Only, while Obi-Wan was unfamiliar with the deck and the patterns, within a few rounds of favors traded back and forth between the three of them (Obi-Wan desperately flushing as he was forced to promise things such as, ‘introduce Obito and Lee to the best restaurant on Coruscant’, ‘explain the light and dark side of the force’, and ‘talk about jedi’ on white slips of paper) he noticed that cards that should appear didn’t and those that should not did.

Namely, within a rather short amount of time, he realized, “You’re both cheating!”

They both looked at him with raised, dubious, eyebrows even as he exclaimed, “You’re both cheating like mad!”

Indeed, they hid cards up their sleeves, used sleight of hand, and even went so far as to employ illusions in the force and make use of mind tricks to fool the other into failing to pick the correct card.

“One should never gamble with a ninja and expect to profit from it,” Lee finally said with that air of casual authority she so often wore, “Any fool knows that a competent ninja will cheat like the very devil.”

“Except for Tsunade-sama, who would still lose, even when she cheats,” Obito chimed in.

And Obi-Wan couldn’t help but think, that not only were shinobi stone-hearted killers, but they were also liars, swindlers and thieves. However, he only offered a simple and polite, “That’s an interesting philosophy.”

“Not a jedi one then?” Obito asked.

“No, no, we do not believe in gambling at all for that matter,” Obi-Wan said even as he watched Lee reach for another card from the pile in the middle, “We strive to be unattached to such materialistic things.”

“Ah, like monks,” Lee said, “Not that shinobi are particularly materialistic either.”

“You gamble,” Obi-Wan noted, nodding towards their winnings on either side, not credits true, but winnings all the same.
“As you do as well, when the situation calls for it,” Lee responded with a strange crooked smile, “After all, Jinn did not hesitate when the time came to roll the die with Watto.”

“That’s far different than indulging in cards,” Obi-Wan said.

“Well then, oh righteous jedi, what hobbies does a jedi have?” Obito asked, peering at Obi-Wan with a speculative expression that he really was too young to be wearing.

“Hobbies?”

“Sure, I assume you aren’t on mission all the time. What is it you do when you aren’t rescuing princesses?”

Queens, Obi-Wan desperately wanted to correct, only just stopping himself as he flushed, and said, “Well, I train, mostly, study, meditate…”

For a moment, they just stared at him, their eyes dull, expressions slack, and finally it was Obito who concluded, “Dear god, jedi are boring.”

“You are not alone in that opinion,” Obi-Wan said stiffly, wondering why he was flushing, it wasn’t the first time he’d heard this and certainly wouldn’t be the last, and mostly was a display of their ignorance rather than Obi-Wan’s values.

Perhaps it was the thought of the great wonders this boy had produced in the force, creating living growing life from nothing, and thinking that he did not have to train as Obi-Wan had trained or connect with the light side of the force as Obi-Wan had spent years learning how to do.

“Now, now, Obito, we can’t all have Kakashi’s diverse and questionable hobbies.” Lee said, which, oddly enough, caused Obito to groan in irritation and shake his head as if to avoid the very thought of this Kakashi and whatever strange hobbies he had.

“Right, at any rate, since you owe us an explanation of this whole jedi business anyways, what is the deal with the whole jedi thing? Actually, let’s start with chakra, or, the force, you said something to Lee-shishou about a dark side and light side?” Obito said, waving one of the slips in the air, the one in Obi-Wan’s hand writing, which promised an explanation of what he knew as the force.
“Well… I would hardly think you would need a lecture on the force, being shinobi,” Obi-Wan said pleasantly.

“Ah, you would be very disappointed, we’ve found that different cultures have very different understandings of chakra and its inner workings,” Lee contradicted with a small shrug, even as she set down her cards to give him her full attention, “Besides, what with our mad dash through Mos Espa, we didn’t really have much of a chance to talk about it.”

Obi-Wan nodded slowly, gathered his whirling thoughts, and started, “The force is… within all of us, it’s the life blood of the universe, tying all of us together in one great river. By reaching through to the force, allowing it to guide our movements and flow through us, a jedi can gain many abilities…”

“Like what?” Lee prompted.

“The ability to glimpse the future, to choose the right path, to manipulate physical objects, alter perception and thought…” Obi-Wan trailed off, unnerved by the rapt attention in both of their force signatures, not on their faces, not even in their body position, but in the force they burned as they listened to him.

They did not seem particularly surprised by these abilities, whether that was because shinobi knew of them already, or because they were adept at hiding their reactions was hard to say.

“And what about it having two edges?” Obito prompted, “The light and dark side?”

Two edges, like a metal blade, it was a strange analogy and one that wasn’t apt, highlighted their lack of understanding even. And again, he wondered, how these two great beacons in the force, this woman and her apprentice, were so very ignorant of the nature of the force when they were so strong in it.

How could neither feel the constant thrumming call of the dark side?

Carefully, Obi-Wan explained, “Jedi, we train to reach out to the light side of the force, but as I told your master earlier the force has two sides. The sith, the man we ran into earlier, focus on the dark side of the force. It’s fueled by powerful emotions, rage, hatred, despair, even love for that matter, and grants them different abilities… Dangerous and terrible abilities as legend has it.”
“Love?” Obito prompted.

“Love, attachment, is a very strong path to the dark side of the force along with fear and anger. It is why we are so careful in what we feel, in serenity there is the force, and nothing else.” Obi-Wan said, and as he did so he looked at them, truly looked at them and the bond between them, stronger than any Obi-Wan had ever seen in a master and their padawan.

Finally, Obi-Wan asked his own question, “Do your people not fear attachment?”

For a moment the boy, Obito, looked truly insulted, his eyes narrowed and a great shadow of anger stole over his features as he said coldly, “Whatever you may think of shinobi, whatever you may think you see when you look at us, we are not heartless mercenaries.”

Obi-Wan shook his head, still so baffled that they didn’t understand, that they hadn’t been told this over and over again since they were younglings, “Surely though, you understand that love can be dangerous for us, can lead us further than those who aren’t force sensitive can walk. If you had to choose between your order and your lover, your brother, your child, could you make that choice?”

“I live for a world where I won’t have to make that choice,” Obito stated, still with that strange cool severity.

“But could you? Many sith have their beginnings in these sorts of questions, this attachment, searching for ways to make their lovers immortal, to bring their children back from the dead. Love… Love is dangerous for us, surely you’ve seen that.”

For a moment neither spoke, they both just stared at them, and it was almost as if there was white noise in the force, as if something was screaming at him but at a pitch that made it inaudible, flashes of images moving too fast for his eyes to catch.

Finally, slowly, Obito said, “There are some, in Konoha, who would agree with you full-heartedly. But, these people tend to die young and bitter, or else they have a nasty tendency to turn into monsters… I had always assumed it was the opposite, you know, that those who don’t feel anything for anyone are more easily lead into a path of terrible darkness.”

“The English shinobi, you mean?” Lee asked and Obito nodded.
“Well, him and Danzo.” Obito agreed, “Of course, he fits maybe even more than Danzo. The English shinobi isn’t attached to anyone or anything, he isn’t consumed by fear, and he’s not particularly angry either. Yet, somehow, it’s him that’s ruling as English kage with an iron and tyrannical fist, so feared they will not even speak his name.”

“And here he was, a light wizard this whole time… He’ll be very surprised to hear it whenever we end up in England again,” Lee commented, an odd look on her face, as if she couldn’t quite believe what she was saying.

“Not as surprised as the English,” Obito countered, sharing her look, and then staring at each other, without warning, the pair burst into laughter.

And somehow, Obi-Wan felt he was the butt of this joke he didn’t understand. And there was his own anger, bubbling with him, struggling to grab hold of him even as Obi-Wan released it into the force.

All the same, he couldn’t help but say, as he looked at Obito Uchiha, at the emotions that clung to his every action and reaction, that boundless and overpowering love, “You know, Obito, you have several dangerous signs of turning towards the dark side.”

They fell silent, and as Obito looked at him with those mismatched eyes, he wondered if the boy was staring into his very soul, and what it was he saw there that made him look so very worn. There was some image unspoken hanging in the air, something the force could not quite reveal, an orange mask where a face should be, a man cloaked in black forever playing the fool as countries burned beneath his fingertips, and Obito Uchiha with the body of a young girl in his arms and a scream of rage and despair forever engrained in what was left of his soul.

And then it was gone and only Obito Uchiha, Lee Eru, and Obi-Wan Kenobi remained.

Slowly, Obito said, his voice strangely rough, “Really? Well, that’s… interesting, Kenobi.”

And he said nothing more on the subject, even as he turned back to his cards, clearing his throat, and asking, “Shishou, do you have any threes?”
“There is a fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a vast dimension as vast as space and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science and superstition, and it lies between the pit of man’s fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination…” Lee trailed off even as she looked out of the small window in the corridor of the ship, out into the endless black horizon, interrupted now and then by distant suns, moons, and planets, each no brighter or larger than a distant flickering candle.

And as he stared out into it, into that cold and frozen wasteland, filled with dark and light and entirely unhospitable to humankind, Obito thought how he would never quite be able to describe this to his earthbound companions; those who had never glanced upwards even once and wondered what it might be like to voyage the heavens in a boat made of silver.

But others would come, should come, he and Lee were only ever meant to be that first expeditionary force, those who came, saw, and judged what to do from there. And with that Obito found himself sighing, thinking back on everything they’d heard and saw so far and trying to fit it all together.

Finally, breaking the companionable silence, he asked, “Shishou, do you think we should pull in the nidaime?”

She turned her face from the window, the starlight casting a pale glow on her features, her eyes seeming to burn from within, “The nidaime?”

“We’ll have to translate for him, but he’s very good with languages, or did well enough with English,” Obito paused, brow furrowing as his thoughts whirled, “He’s a better diplomat than either of us, most of his life has been spent doing this sort of thing, he was there at the founding of Konoha for god’s sake and basically made the village what it is today. If we’re going to be meeting the jedi I’d prefer someone who knows what they’re doing to be with us.”

And Obito was starting to think that they were going to need a more formal diplomat than he or Lee were capable of being.

Already they’d alienated the civilians, the ruler of an entire planet, and cast themselves into the roles of cutthroat mercenaries and assassins (which was just too rich considering they hadn’t even done anything yet, had gone out of their way to help these people, which Obito thought was pretty damn selfless of him and Lee). Granted, the bridges weren’t completely burned, but he didn’t doubt that Amidala Padme would be all too glad to see the back of them.

More concerning than that though, and closer to the actual bounds of their mission, was Kenobi
and Jinn’s reactions and just what they might expect from the jedi. Strong bonds, more than the blood, more than the death and the weapons and the blood limits, it was Obito’s bond with Lee and Obito’s… something, that was completely wigging Kenobi out. He’d said as much but he didn’t even have to say it, it was in his eyes when he looked at them, when he talked about this mysterious dark side of the force.

Which, anyone who had ever met the English shinobi, Ren the flight of death and the only true English ninja, would know that it was not attachment that was the problem. Lee once remarked, casually, that had the man been born in Konoha he could have perhaps ended up closer to being like the nidaime or else Orochimaru. Proud, frighteningly brilliant and deadly in the field, but loyal to his village which appreciated and fed his ambitions and close to his teammates and sensei.

But in England there had never been friends or comrades for that man; only disposable pawns and obstacles standing in his path. And England burned for it.

But what was his bond with Lee anyway? He’d admit that it was strong, that she had quickly become one of his few precious people in the world but… It wasn’t like what he had with Minato-sensei or Hatake Sakumo either, and it wasn’t what he’d expect from a sibling, and not really from a friend either. It had its own unique flavor to it, one Obito could never quite put his finger on, but whatever it was it was unnerved Kenobi beyond all reasoning…

“Tobirama loves his brother,” Lee said, jarring Obito from his thoughts, “He has a deep and undying love for his older brother, a visceral hatred for Uchiha Madara, and many deep regrets. Attachment, is the key, and once they peel back his typical pragmatism and terseness we’ll be right back where we started.”

Obito paused, considered this, breathed out a long sigh as he acknowledged her point and then asked, “Orochimaru, then?”

“Loves his teammates and the sandaime, also has a chronic fear of death,” Lee said with a shrug, “And Uchiha Itachi was way too young for anyone to take seriously, and also, underneath his stoicism, is worryingly devoted to his baby brother.”

“Itachi? Seriously, shishou?” Obito couldn’t help but balk, thinking of eight-year-old genius little cousin clan heir Uchiha Itachi, sitting in front of bearded kenjitsu specialist monks, introducing himself as the ambassador to Konoha.

“I’m not the one who suggested Orochimaru,” Lee pointed out, “Besides, if we’re not going to go into recovering root operatives then we have pretty slim pickings. Unless we really do want to call
in a favor from the *English* nin.”

“Somehow, I’m very uncomfortable with that idea,” Obito said, mostly because he didn’t exactly like the idea of unleashing that man on these people, or him somehow colonizing the galaxy and becoming a space kage.

That would be the last thing anyone needed.

Lee sighed, “Given that we’re not entirely sure what these people want, and have really only had contact with them for a few days, it’s hard to think of who exactly would be a good point of contact. Besides, I like Jinn, and I don’t dislike Kenobi, and while I think we might alarm them I think they like us… more or less. So, given that, we should probably let them try to deal with what they have and Minato will just have to accept that whenever we manage to check in again.”

Oh, he would just love that, Obito was sure.

Which, they weren’t quite late, not yet, but they were edging it. But if things kept moving at this pace, and if the jedi started keeping a closer eye on them, then Obito wondered if they’d miss it and just how much explaining they’d have to do when they did show up again.

Although, given that there was a missing nin somewhere out there tailing their ass with more killing intent than Orochimaru after being shown up by Lee, they might actually run into legitimate problems.

“Lee, that missing nin, why exactly didn’t you kill him when you had the chance?”

It was something of a non-sequitur, but it’d been bothering Obito, or rather, the lame excuse she’d given in public had been eating at him. Granted, it was probably true to an extent, but it was the sort of answer she felt fine giving to someone like Kenobi and even to Anakin for that matter.

Because even without resorting to drastic measures, against someone like Lee, the man should have died. Had they been in Konoha or even England, the man would be unquestionably dead, Lee had learned long ago not to let your enemies linger in the world of the living.

“They weren’t ready, the jedi,” Lee said, face strangely stoic as she looked at him, “They could barely contemplate the idea of fighting him, or my ability to overlook the burning village and get
the job done. If I killed him then we very well could have found ourselves at war someday.”

“War?” Obito asked, “Surely, that’s a bit much, shishou.”

“You didn’t see them inside the village,” Lee scoffed, “And you didn’t see the English in their prime. I was a messiah, to them, Obito, and the minute I showed the slightest inclination towards violence they were calling me a blood-guzzling murderess who sacrificed dead babies in dark rituals in my basement.”

“These people,” Lee said mockingly, “Have been at peace too long, they’ve forgotten what war tastes like, and their swords are just decoration these days.”

And anyone who didn’t use their sword for decoration, anyone who gave no pretenses about the violence of their work, would be treated with fear and trepidation.

“The light and the dark,” Obito mused, “That is surprisingly English, isn’t it?”

“And just as tiresome here as it was there,” Lee said before sighing, “If I never have to hear about light chakra or dark chakra or any color of chakra it will only be too soon.”

“Come on, shishou, it can’t possibly be that bad,” Obito said with a smile even as Lee shuddered.

“Oh, ye of little faith, I’m sure they’re only just getting started,” Lee said, before pausing, and adding, “You know, in ‘Dune’, it’s never about sides. There is only prescience, the benefits of it, but also the great dangers that come with having that much power; the overwhelming burden that comes with seeing the true face of god. The universe inside of it is cruel and indifferent but not light and not dark either…”

And as she turned to stare out into the endless night, she mused, “I wonder, what will it be that causes their empire to collapse, the jedi? Will it be a great shadow, a path unforeseen, or will it be the path they forced onto themselves for fear of other, more horrible, options?”

The stars didn’t answer Lee, neither did Obito for that matter, they just stared and watched, while Obito wondered just how badly this meeting with the jedi council was going to go.
Qui-Gon couldn’t help the smile that formed on his lips as Obi-Wan approached to stand next to him in a quiet secluded corner of the ship, away from the shinobi as well as the queen and her entourage, meditating in these final hours before they touched down on Coruscant. Oh, it wasn’t quite forgiveness, that wouldn’t come for some time, but it was sooner than Qui-Gon had expected.

In the beginning, when Qui-Gon had first passed Obi-Wan over as a padawan, his cold silences had been far weightier than they were now. This, this was something resigned, something able to be set aside by an older and far more pragmatic Obi-Wan Kenobi.

“I haven’t forgiven you, master,” Obi-Wan started, but this did nothing to dampen Qui-Gon’s mood even as his padawan scowled at him, “What you did was reckless, irresponsible, and could very well have ended in disaster. But… It is not the jedi way to hold onto one’s anger, however righteous, and there are things we must discuss.”

“Oh,” Qui-Gon said as he turned to look at Obi-Wan’s almost petulant expression, his serious blue eyes that brooked no argument, and couldn’t help but think that he had grown into a man somehow over the years and Qui-Gon almost hadn’t noticed, “How very wise of you, my young apprentice.”

Obi-Wan exhaled sharply, his patience wavering, closing his eyes as he released his irritation into the force before opening them again, “What exactly are we planning to do about the boy and the shinobi?”

Ah, Qui-Gon had wondered when Obi-Wan might approach him about that. The boy, perhaps, Qui-Gon had thought he might overlook. Qui-Gon could not recall if he’d mentioned his plans to Obi-Wan, that the boy was the chosen one and must be trained, regardless of what the council would think… Obi-Wan would not take well to that, he’d never been comfortable with Qui-Gon’s chronic irritation with the council, and he wouldn’t understand the need to train a boy who was years too old to be trained as a jedi.

In fact, Qui-Gon was surprised that Obi-Wan had surmised him having plans at all.

“Do? What is it, Obi-Wan, that you think should be done?”

Obi-Wan paused, an intense look of thought on his face, and finally he said, “I don’t know. They’re not like us, and the apprentice, Obito Uchiha, he’s on the path to the dark side or at the
very least closer to it than any jedi should be truly comfortable with, and neither of them even seem to understand the problem. They’re not like the man from earlier… The sith, but… But I don’t like the idea of them running around unsupervised either.”

At Qui-Gon’s thoughtful silence, thinking of the strange boy, scarred and twisted on one half of his body, and so very emotional, Obi-Wan continued, “He’s powerful enough too that if he falls to the dark side… It would be bad, master, very bad. And they plan on training the boy, Skywalker, and he’s almost as strong in the force as the woman and already dangerously old to become a jedi.”

“A shinobi, you mean,” Qui-Gon interrupted and at that Obi-Wan’s eyes widened and he realized the full extent of his master’s plans.

For a moment, there was a look of hurt on his face, a pang in the bond between them, but then it faded and that tried patience, a fierce anxiety, was back again, “The boy will not pass the council’s tests, Master, and you know it. He’s too old, far too old.”

“You would rather see him as a shinobi?”

“It is not an either-or situation, master, he has an option of being neither,” Obi-Wan spat, his anger bubbling beneath the surface of his skin, trickling into the force at a rate far too slow to deplete all of it.

“Would they believe that?” Qui-Gon asked, before continuing, “Regardless, there is something special about him, something beyond extraordinary, such that I wonder if he is not the prophesied being to bring balance to the force. Anakin will become a jedi, I promise you.”

“If he passes the tests,” Obi-Wan stressed before adding, “Don’t defy the council, master, not again!”

Qui-Gon couldn’t help the quirk to his lips as he thought of the council and the great joy he was sure to have meeting with them, “Yes, well, needs must.”

“Needs must,” Obi-Wan repeated flatly, he rubbed at the bridge of his nose, shaking his head, “If your needs were ever less pressing you could have had a seat on the council years ago. All you had to do was follow the code and you would have… They won’t tolerate it this time, not in this.”
“Have they ever?” Qui-Gon couldn’t help but ask, chuckling slightly at Obi-Wan’s groan of frustration, “You still have much to learn, my young apprentice.”

Obi-Wan threw his hands in the air, almost ready to give up completely, before sighing and looking Qui-Gon straight in the eye and stating, “All the same I still have… I have… a terrible feeling, master, that same one from earlier, and it’s only growing worse. The force… it is muddled.”

Qui-Gon frowned, taking in the seriousness of Obi-Wan’s expression, and repeated softly what he had said early in their mission, “And perhaps, with the return of the sith, your connection to the force has proven you right. Nonetheless, one cannot forsake the living force for the lure of the future.”

Obi-Wan threw his hands in the air, motioning around them, as if to address the present moment, “And it is the present that has me concerned, master. That man, the sith, is still alive and following us. We’re traveling with two incredibly powerful force sensitive warriors who are likely well on their way to becoming sith themselves if they aren’t already. And now this boy, who you think is this prophesized jedi, who you think must be trained despite it going against all precedent.”

Not to mention that sith, true sith, always came in pairs, a master and an apprentice. They had met the one, where was the other?

But concerns bundled like that were overwhelming, and it was best to focus where one could and leave the rest for later, “Regardless, Anakin Skywalker must be trained. As the chosen one, and I am certain, Obi-Wan, that he is the chosen one, he cannot be left in the hands of our shinobi friends, regardless of their intentions.”

“And what of his choices? I’m sure he has some opinion about all of this. Master, you may have to face the fact that the boy won’t want to be a jedi.”

“In a world no one has ever heard of? Outside of the republic and everything he’s ever known? A place where they don’t even speak Basic?” Qui-Gon questioned, and although jedi were not meant to condone attachment, it was not so terrible to be attached to one’s own galaxy.

“And even if he says yes,” Obi-Wan continued as if Qui-Gon hadn’t said anything at all, that well of bitterness growing inside of him, clawing at the bond between them with images of Xanatos and Qui-Gon’s hesitation in front of a youngling Obi-Wan Kenobi, “You can’t substitute one padawan for another. I’m not finished training yet, master, and you can’t train him while you train me.”
“No, I can’t, and I wouldn’t, but you’re ready for your trials, Obi-Wan.”

Obi-Wan let out a harsh laugh, “Really, master, you’ve said more than once, quite recently, that there is much for me to learn.”

“One does not cease learning as a jedi knight, my young apprentice, and you have grown well over the years,” and it showed even now, even in this strained moment, in the way that Obi-Wan could so diplomatically face his concerns when as a child they might very well have consumed him.

“You know, Lee Eru, she stated that she believes her own apprentice has long since been ready for his own version of the trials. And yet, they put it off, just so that he could learn more from her now… Strange, that before this mission there wasn’t a word of me taking the trials, and now when it is most needed I’m suddenly more than ready. Am I truly ready, master, or is it just a matter of convenience?”

“Let go of your rage, padawan, and you’ll see the truth for yourself,” Qui-Gon stated softly, watching as Obi-Wan seemed to wilt in on himself, letting out his breath.

Finally, he wearily stated, “Surely, master, with the force muddled, floundering, now is the time for caution.”

The council, Qui-Gon was sure, would be inclined to think much the same. Still, staring at the face of his padawan, nearing the end of his training, Qui-Gon smiled softly and said that which he had always believed, “Ah, but Obi-Wan, with the force in disarray, perhaps that is the greatest sign that action must be taken.”

Anakin was on the bridge, an hour before their final descent onto Coruscant, Anakin asking the pilot anything and everything about the ship and flying and everywhere he’d been and everywhere he hadn’t. Before them the stars stretched out into infinity, now that bright twinkling things, steady and true now that they had exited hyperspeed.

Lee and Obito were somewhere else with his mom, probably making an attempt at not so covertly checking out the space ship and keeping her busy, and Anakin had decided to enter the bridge early, just so that he couldn’t possibly miss the planet coming into view.
And that was where Qui-Gon found him.

“Oh, Mr. Qui-Gon,” Anakin said brightly when the man came onto the bridge, and he offered Anakin a warm smile one that had no bitterness at all in it, and with it Anakin felt his own expression fall and flush, “I’m… I’m sorry about the race,”

Qui-Gon waved it off, “The force has its ways. You see, we are still on this ship, even now.”

“Yes but…” Anakin trailed off, not quite sure he wanted to say it out loud, admit it to Qui-Gon Jinn. It was one thing to admit it to Obito, but to say it to Qui-Gon, one of the people he’d let down and the one who’d believed he could do it… He flushed, looked down, and tried to recover his good spirits, “The pilot’s helping me to learn how to fly. You know, I want to be a pilot someday.”

“I thought you intended to become a shinobi,” Qui-Gon said.

“Sure, but you can be a shinobi and do lots of cool stuff,” Anakin said brightly, his grin returning as he thought back to everything Lee and Obito had ever told him about Konoha, “They have a lot of people who just research things, plenty of medics, some who work only with droids, Obito and the shodaime make furniture in their free time, there are seals masters too, and I can be the first then! The first shinobi pilot!”

But then… Then Anakin recalled what he’d decided the night before with Padme, or rather, that seed of doubt that had begun to grow. He couldn’t see himself as a shinobi, he’d never had visions of himself in Konoha, not really, and never as a shinobi even though there had been a few of him as a pilot and even a jedi…

“Anakin?”

“Oh, sorry, I got a little distracted,” Anakin stopped when he noted Qui-Gon giving him a rather intent look, “Was there something you needed, Mr. Qui-Gon?”

Qui-Gon spared a look to the pilot who simply waved him and Anakin off with a fond smile. Anakin smiled back, taking the hint, “Oh, right, thank you very much, I won’t distract you anymore!”
Anakin scrambled to his feet and walked after Qui-Gon, through to just outside of the bridge, and once there the jedi just looked at him, and it was almost like how Lee looked at him sometimes, that piercing glance that seemed to look through him entirely.

“Mr. Qui-Gon?” Anakin asked uncertainly.

Qui-Gon placed weathered hands on Anakin’s shoulders and looked him directly in the eye, “Anakin, our meeting was not a coincidence, and nothing happens by accident. I know Lee and her apprentice have already made an offer to train you, that you are free now to do what you like and live with your mother, but I could also take you with me to become a jedi.”

And Anakin had known he would ask, somehow, before he’d even seen Qui-Gon Jinn’s face Anakin had known that someone would offer him the opportunity to become a jedi someday, “A jedi?”

“The council may not accept you, and training is very difficult, and even if you succeed the life is not an easy one,” He paused then, caught himself, and offered a soft amused smile, “Of course, I’m sure Lee Eru has told you much the same.”

“I’ve had dreams where I’m a jedi…” Anakin said, and then blinking, for the first time it seemed to click inside his head, “Jedi and shinobi aren’t the same thing, are they? If I become a jedi then I can’t train with Lee.”

“No,” Qui-Gon agreed solemnly, “But you will live in the republic, in the same galaxy as your mother, Padme, and myself. And you will not be trained to kill other living beings as they clearly were.”

“They’re not… They’re not bad people,” Anakin said.

“No, I am sure they are quite good, they did, after all, help us when they had little reason to do so,” Qui-Gon said with a smile, “But all the same, they have struggled for peace, I think, and the life you’d live there would be a constant struggle for serenity.”

Qui-Gon paused for a final time, brushing hair away from Anakin’s eyes, “This path has been placed for you, Annie; the choice to take it is yours alone.”
“And if bad things happen?” Anakin asked, “If bad things can happen, if I take it?”

And he said the words that had been ringing, paraphrased, in Anakin’s own mind the whole trip, “A jedi, Anakin, must not be ruled by his fear. Because that, more than anything else in this world, paves the path to suffering.”

And so, closing his eyes, Mos-Espa burning along with those twin suns of Tatooine, Anakin nodded, and said, “Then I want to try, being a jedi I mean.”

And even as Qui-Gon smiled at him, Anakin tried not to think of Lee, her arms around him, her eyes staring into his and seeing all that he ever was and could be, and her promise that she would free him and his mother and train him as a shinobi.

And he had no idea how to tell her that he didn’t want that future anymore.
By the time Obito was her apprentice, Lee’s missions were hardly anything at all, highly ranked but only through technicality. Well, there were the few odd jobs here and there where she, and subsequently he’d, be sent out to some far corner of the elemental nations, usually hunting down rumors of rogue Zetsu or any other imminent alien invasion (which Konoha now took with a severity which would have been hilarious if the threat weren’t so very real), but for the most part Lee was relatively villagebound. Unless, of course, she was in England.

The trouble was, Eru Lee loathed England.

According to Minato-sensei, she’d always disliked her childhood home, for ample reason given what he’d known then and learned later but when England had reentered the fray years later they had taken that disliked and honed it into something sharp and only barely restrained by the sandaime hokage’s and then the yondaime hokage’s will.

Obito doubted the English knew it, but at the slightest command, or even hint of a command from Minato, the entire country would burn and their children taken to Konoha to become a new generation of Konoha shinobi.

Of course, Lee-shishou was routinely willing to do terrifying things on Minato-sensei’s behalf, so perhaps that wasn’t a good example. A better one, perhaps, would be if someone like Orochimaru-sama had gotten the hat, where Lee-shishou would probably be incredibly dubious of any order passed down to her and might even go out of her way to incite civil war if pushed hard enough, she’d still go out, without question, and raze England.

But cooler heads had gotten the hat and so Lee gritted her teeth and England stayed standing. And after the first few trips, certainly by the time he was fifteen, well, Obito was beginning to come around to her side of things.

“Are they always this…” Obito trailed off, standing as it were inside of their auror building, which he’d come to see as something of a watered down ANBU, attached to the ministry of magic, the English equivalent of the hokage tower.

He and Lee were leaning against a column, dressed in a bizarre mix of the English auror red and Konoha greens, which, honestly, what kind of an idiot decided that bright red was the best color for their military, and were being absolutely ignored by everyone. Well, the English were trying to look like they were ignoring them, but they were god awful at it. Probably because the ignoring consisted of staring at Lee, whispering to one another, faces shifting from awed to wary to some
bizarre mix of the two, and then looking in horror at Obito’s own half mutilated face.

(Which, really, he had to give them the small smidgeon of credit that the English civilians, were usually far far worse about it. One of them, the first time Obito and Lee had shown up, having the nerve to actually start screaming when Obito smiled.

He’d bet his ass if someone truly terrifying (versus Obito who was now at the level of ‘sort-of-vaguely-has-potential-to-be-terrifying’), like Sasori of the red sand, showed his face that they wouldn’t even twitch.)

“Yes,” Lee answered shortly, staring dully forward, sipping English tea from a disposable cup with a look of complete and utter irritation, “And don’t expect to be doing anything soon, either, they’re going to leave us standing here for at least an hour.”

“An hour?” Obito asked, “How long have we been here?”

“Ten minutes,” Lee answered, and from the way she said it, it was more than clear that she’d been counting every second.

“They ask us to come all this way, for their missing nin, and then they have us stand here for an hour?” he asked.

“It’s their form of a power play,” Lee explained with a sigh and a look of utter exasperation, “They think, being cold merciless killers, that we’re dark wizards and that ultimately, we’ll come down on Ren’s, the English shinobi’s, side of things.”

It was worth mentioning that England had been embroiled in its own civil war for years now, and that they were currently at a standstill. The death of Dumbledore Albus had nearly won the war for the English nin but he had been miraculously fought back by a scrappy, if young, still in the English academy young, resistance and what was left of the loyal auror force.

Having once briefly taken over the ministry years ago, the English shinobi had been beaten back and forced into the hills, but now he was once again creeping forward from the countryside.

Time was running out, and everyone knew it.
“Of course, they’re right, for all the wrong reasons,” Lee expanded as she stretched against the wall, “Ultimately, I do like Ren more than I like these people even if he is a weirdly sociopathic version of the nidaime, and in any other circumstance would wish him the best of luck on his bloody path to becoming English kage.”

“But?” Obito prompted with raised eyebrows.

“But Minato says we should play nice with the English,” Lee said with a sigh, “A not small percentage of my money is kept here, I have two seats in the Wizengamot, and I’m the closest thing these people have to a messiah (even if they’re horrified by my profession), all of this meaning that Konoha has a damn large amount of influence in this country for all of us being a foreign power that they don’t really trust. We have access to their books, their shops, their politics, and even their sacred academy for the most part. If we start siding with Ren, before he actually wins the government, we lose all of that.”

“So, we’re humoring them, then?” Obito asked to which Lee shrugged and then nodded.

“Well, close, they actually do need our help,” Lee said then nodded towards a man dressed in red, only a little younger than Lee herself, who was practically tripping over himself as he walked down the hall, “This, Obito, is the closest thing these people have to a jonin. The English shinobi may suck at taijutsu, but man, he does not have any competition.”

“Oh, that’s unfair, shishou,” Obito said as he turned his head to watch the man walk down the hall, “Surely, you’ve picked a bad example.”

“Alright, they have a few, a solid few, who are decent at English styled ninjutsu. I’ll give them that,” Lee said grudgingly, “But generally if they’re here it means they suck ass at any other discipline besides that ninjutsu, and ultimately, are long range fighters. This would be fine, I suppose, if their opponents are always long range ninjutsu fighters like they are… Which they are, for the most part… But then Ren went and picked up basic taijutsu and really polished up his genjutsu and fuinjutsu. And now they’re totally screwed.”

For a moment they contemplated their situation, staring out in silence at the people around them, still waiting to be called upon to be debriefed for whatever particular nuke nin they were supposed to be hunting down today. Obito watched as they stared at his face, paled, and then looked away again…

The English did have their scarred veterans, Obito wouldn’t see them (the famous Madeye Moody) until later, but all the same they never would get used to Obito’s scars. In the end, Obito thought it
was his age that did it, the fact that he looked, by their standards, like he should still be a schoolboy, yet his face looked like he’d gotten pummeled by a mountain.

“That said, don’t expect any real action on this thing, they’re going to keep us in the back,” Lee’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“What?”

“There are two reasons we could possibly be here,” Lee said counting them off on her fingers, “One, they actually do want our help in tracking this bastard down and subduing him. Two, it’s another publicity stunt.”

“You mean like…” Obito trailed off, thinking of his first few strange times in England, where they hadn’t particularly done anything but instead he’d watched Lee suffer through a variety of interviews and photograph sessions, do public signings of her English biography, and shake hands multiple times with the minister and be quoted saying that she respected the minister’s stance on security and the gloriousness of England.

“Yes, except us being photographed going into glorious combat or returning victorious,” Lee said, “In the elemental nations my name is so feared that Minato can’t even send me near another village without a kage screaming in his ear, here, I’m a public relations exercise.”

There was a certain irony in that, Obito found himself thinking, which was almost inconceivable. Well, the idea of these newspapers in and of themselves had taken a fair amount of getting used to, and the idea that any Englishman could possibly take them seriously.

“Besides, they don’t actually want us fighting, especially if there’s even the slightest chance we’ll kill their target,” Lee said, “The English are very squeamish about that sort of thing. They just want us in their line of vision, to help boost morale, and maybe even to prevent us from reaching out to the English shinobi.”

“How would this prevent us from reaching out to the English shinobi?” Obito asked.

“I have no idea,” Lee said, “These people are part of a multifaceted genjutsu that has never bothered to be logical. Trying to make sense of it would just give me a headache.”
As it turned out, forty minutes later when they were approached by a young captain offering them a tight smile, Lee was more or less right and the mission featured Obito and Lee, hanging out in the back of the squad, orders to keep to themselves, while the rest of them tried and failed to capture their missing nin, and, on the way back, they were met by a horde of reporters for the Daily Prophet, one of whom would write an article the next day featuring an expose on Lee’s latest scandalous love affair with her apprentice Obito Uchiha.

And that, in a nutshell, was England.

Anakin was sure, that even had he left Tatooine before this, even if he’d been a pilot and had been all over the galaxy, that he’d still find himself breathless in awe at the sight of Coruscant, the lights of it so bright that it could almost be a star itself.

“Wow, it’s so huge!” he cried as he leaned forward, trying to get a view out the cockpit window.

“Capital of the republic,” The pilot, Ric Olie, supplied with a smile even as they made their descent, “The entire planet is one big city.”

“Policing that thing must be a nightmare,” Anakin heard Obito mutter to Lee, and, turning back, Anakin caught them both staring at the planet with varying looks of disbelief, like they really weren’t sure what to make of it.

“Oh, it’s not so terrible as one might imagine,” Qui-Gon said genially, loitering behind the pair and looking somewhat amused by their reaction, “With a population that large there’s no lack of people willing to help… police it.”

“I don’t know, I think I’m with Obito on this,” Lee mused as she stared out the windshield with an almost musing expression, “You’d never have a real lay of the land, your own village, if the entire city is the whole goddamn planet. But then, perhaps that isn’t necessary for your people, particularly if you have no enemy nin.”

This last bit was said with a sly glance and that foxlike devilish smile sent Qui-Gon, who, for a moment looked somewhat taken aback, before apparently deciding to take it in good humor and just smiling again.
It was just the four of them here, his mother helping Padme and the others with the queen, preparing to disembark, but Anakin had been waiting to see Coruscant and apparently Lee and Obito had too.

For the first time, he wondered how they’d gotten to Tatooine’s desert in the first place. It had to have been from far away but he never ever saw their ship, and the pair routinely went back and forth to give reports on their progress…

Of course, he realized now, that Lee probably somehow teleported them back and forth. He wondered if they’d ever really seen any planet from the outside like this before, or, if like him, staring at Coruscant now was their first time.

Everyone had fallen silent, and Anakin took a moment to stare out as they flew through the city itself, at all the different sleek ships and buildings and everything so different from anything he’d ever seen before. Idly, before he could stop himself, he wondered what Konoha looked like, if it wasn’t like this?

And then, then he remembered what he’d decided, and he felt himself pale slightly.

He still hadn’t told them.

Eventually the craft came close to landing pad and Anakin was ushered back towards the back of the ship where the ramp would lower and they’d exit. There he stood, lost in his own thoughts, standing between Lee and Qui-Gon, his mother behind him and squeezing his shoulder, as Padme, Obi-Wan, Captain Panaka, and all the rest of them assembled to exit until finally the ship touched down and the ramp began to lower.

“It’s time to go, Anakin,” Qui-Gon whispered in his ear, pushing Anakin slightly forward, and then stating, “Remember to bow before the chancellor and senator.”

And they did, or well, Anakin, his mom, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Jar-Jar all bowed. Obito and Lee, who exited with them, didn’t.

“Oh,” Obito said in his own native tongue and looking up from his bow Anakin saw that Obito’s pale hand had drifted towards the hilt of his sword, “You’ve got to be kidding me.”
“It’s a verifiable flood of blood thirsty missing nin,” Lee said lightly, her own fingers moving into that motion Anakin had grown familiar with, where a kunai might appear inside of her fingertips at any moment… And for a horrifying moment he imagined that her fingers must have looked like that when she fought the dark man in Mos Espa and that she’d focused on him the way she was focused now, not even paying attention to Jira or Kirstin or anyone that Anakin had known, “Although this one has the decency to pose as a kindly grandfather rather than tattooed hell spawn.”

“I don’t know, shishou, I think I might prefer tattooed hellspawn,” Obito commented, almost lightly, but with an unmistakable intensity about him, and his hand now tightening on the hilt of his blade.

(There was… Almost like an overbearing pounding of a heart, there was a feeling of imminent violence in the air, a fear that had Anakin squeezing his eyes shut and grabbing his mother’s hand in any attempt not to see what was happening…)

The senator and chancellor’s guards trained their laser guns on Obito and Lee, shouting at them to stand down and raise their hands, but neither Lee nor Obito looked even slightly concerned by the guns, instead their eyes were locked on the older man in dark elegant robes.

Qui-Gon immediately stepped between Lee, Obito, and the guards, holding his arms out in a gesture of peace as his eyes darted warily between both groups, “Calm yourselves! There seems to have been some sort of misunderstanding.”

“Jinn,” Lee’s voice was cold and more it was tight, as if it was on the precipice of snapping entirely, and never the less still in her poised and combat ready position, “You’re not telling me this asshole is one of yours.”

Qui-Gon blinked, seemed almost stunned, while Obi-Wan gaped in horror and everyone else in shocked disbelief.

“Lee, this is Chancellor Valorum and Senator Palpatine, respected members of the republic’s elected government,” Qui-Gon said motioning to the pair, but Lee’s eyebrow merely raised at Qui-Gon dubiously.

For a moment, she and Obito simply looked at each other, a sort of ‘what are you going to do’ thought passing between then, then appeared to come to a silent decision and relaxed from their battle position, with utter disbelief Lee turned her attention to Qui-Gon and waved her hand towards the senator, “You elected that?”
“The people of Naboo did, actually,” the senator replied with a kindly smile, one that Anakin couldn’t help but be relieved by, not really wanting his first day on Coruscant to be watching Lee and Obito get blasted to smithereens or Lee and Obito...

It was just nice that the senator apparently could forgive them.

“Yeah, I’ll bet they did,” Lee said, still mostly in disbelief, finally looking over at Qui-Gon, Lee said, “Jinn, I have to let you know, I really question your people’s judgement.”

“So long as you keep your sword sheathed you may question all you like,” Obi-Wan spat out.

“Let’s see you say that when he rips your heart out with his bare hands and eats it,” Obito muttered under his breath before shaking his head like this was all just entirely too tiresome, “Shishou, I think we may have just failed Diplomacy 101.”

For a moment Lee was stunned into silence, actually grimacing, then said, “…Minato will understand, when we give him context. This one can’t possibly be our fault.”

“Forgive us,” Lee then said with a deep bow towards the chancellor, senator, and their retinue, “My apprentice and I are from a hopelessly backwater planet that doesn’t even have the decency of being a part of this glorious republic. In our culture, it is considered polite to strike first and ask questions later.”

“You do this to your friends?” the supreme chancellor asked.

“Oh yes,” Obito replied with a winning grin, “It’s a time-honored tradition, we call it, ‘bait the politician’… It’s a great hit at parties.”

“Our friend Jinn has informed us of our hopelessly backward and savage nature,” Lee said, drawing Qui-Gon backward and throwing an arm around his shoulder, then, leaning forward towards her audience as if to impart a great secret, “We’ve been thinking of switching religions and subscribing to his pacifist newsletter.”

Qui-Gon spared Lee a heated chiding look before he said, “This is Lee Eru and her apprentice
Obito Uchiha, they are warriors from a distant planet called Earth, and have come to confer with the jedi. As you can see, they're not from the republic, and have a tendency to have… cultural misunderstandings. I deeply apologize, I should have briefed them more thoroughly before we landed.”

“Well,” Palpatine said still rather good-naturedly, “That’s certainly good news, it is certainly a sight to behold to find life outside of the republic these days. I trust that our jedi have been treating you well?”

“Aside from the cultural faux pas you just saw, I’d say Master Jinn and his padawan have done an excellent job,” Lee replied.

However, there was a flash of… something as both Lee and the senator stared at one another, something dark and cold in both of their eyes, an acknowledgement of some unspoken truth, but then it was gone and Lee was standing from her bow and the senator was just as kindly as ever.

Before Anakin could remark on it though the queen’s guards began to exit the ship and Anakin stepped over to the side of the platform along with Jar-Jar, his mom, Obito, and Lee so that he could look out over the great city. The city, which he realized now, was going to be his home for the rest of his life.

“It is a great gift to see you alive, your majesty,” the senator said before his eyes flickered over to Jar-Jar, Anakin, and the two shinobi once again, “And in such strange company, no less.”

Before the queen could make any comment, the man continued, “May I present Supreme Chancellor Valorum.”

Valorum stepped forward and offered the queen a slight bow, “Welcome, your highness. It is an honor to finally meet you in person. I must relay to you how distressed everyone is over the current situation. I’ve called for a special session of the senate to hear your position.”

Position? Anakin thought, what position? From what Anakin had heard her planet was being invaded, of course the senate should help them, that was what the senate was for…

The queen demurred, “I am grateful for your concern, chancellor.”
And that seemed to be a cue of some sort as the queen, the senator, and her retinue stepped off towards a floating silver car, a taxi of some sort, that waited for them.

“There is a question of procedure,” the chancellor stated as he walked alongside the queen, “But I feel confident we can overcome it…”

Anakin, his mother, and Jar-Jar started to follow everyone, then stopped, as Anakin looked back and realized that Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Lee, and Obito were all staying with the chancellor, but the queen waved for Anakin to follow, his mom squeezed his hand in hers again, Qui-Gon gave Anakin a small nod of permission… Lee though…

“Anakin,” Lee said, and for a moment he thought she’d tell him no, and that he’d…

Her eyes widened and a look of… of resignation passed over her features, she closed her eyes, and when she opened them there was something soft and almost sad inside of them. Then, raising a single hand she paused for a moment, her own apprentice watching her, and then signed a single word to Anakin, one that Obito had taught him ages and ages ago.

Caution.

(Except… Except there was something inside of this hand gesture, something that… Anakin thought, that maybe, this was Lee’s way of waving goodbye.)

Anakin nodded slowly then continued to follow, moving into the very back of the taxi ignoring the senator’s sceptical look.

“Da Queens- a bein grossly nice, mesa tinks,” Jar-Jar whispered, or attempted to whisper, into Anakin’s ear, “Pitty hot!”

But Anakin didn’t look at Jar-Jar, instead he stared out the back of the taxi, where the four left behind stared out after them, until they slid behind a building and were out of sight.

It was… It wasn’t really like anything he’d imagined.
After watching Anakin disappear, riding in the back of a small ship with a shinobi politician with the kind of killing intent that Obito hadn’t felt since Madara, somehow forcing his feet to remain planted as Lee just watched him disappear with such a resigned and drained expression…

Well, after all of that, Jinn and his apprentice had escorted them to the great jedi temple, which Obito supposed was the rough equivalent to their own hidden village. Though there was nothing hidden about this place, situated as it was across from the senate building.

It was beautiful, a great marble building with a domed golden roof, one that seemed impossibly large, almost as large as a small village itself…

Inside there were marble columns, fountains, and children everywhere. Not simply human children either but children of all different species, ushered along by older jedi instructors… Without sign of any mothers or fathers in sight.

And walking past them, into elevators and being taken to the highest floor of the building, Jinn and Kenobi disappeared into the council room hidden behind great carved doors while he and Lee waited in the hallway, watched, apparently, by Jinn’s old master a swordsman by the name of Dooku.

Which, Obito had thought Jinn was old for field work, this man was positively ancient for being out in the field, had to be around the age of the sandaime himself. But Obito was beginning to get the idea that the life expectancy of a jedi was much longer than your average shinobi.

Still, other than the gray hair, the man certainly didn’t show his age as he stood there, watching Lee and Obito with sharp dark eyes and an avidly curious expression, making no move to speak with them only to silently and eerily watch as the minutes ticked onwards…

Obito felt his lips quirk upwards, “This feels familiar, doesn’t it, shishou?”

“Hm?” Lee asked, inclining her head towards him and peering at him with those unnerving green eyes of hers.

“Don’t you remember how the *English* would always do this to us?” he asked, “They’d have us come here and stand for hours… The least they could do is offer some chairs.”
“I imagine it’d ruin the minimalist décor the *jedi* have going on,” Lee commented, her own lips twisting upwards in amusement.

“Oh, I have no problems with minimalism, but chairs… Surely, chairs are a necessity in life,” Obito said, “Or at least, a nice thing to provide if you’re going to leave people standing out here for an indeterminate amount of time.”

“To be fair, I’m sure Jinn is giving one hell of a debriefing session,” Lee said with a shrug but that still amused smile, “It may even rival some of mine.”

“Well, let’s see, he has a missing and or enemy nin which isn’t even supposed to exist, he has you and me showing up out of the woodworks... Oh, lost his ship, got back his ship, probably isn’t doing well on the mission itself. Does that rate plant zombie levels of debriefing?”

Instead of answering this Lee merely commented quietly, “You forgot about Skywalker Anakin.”

“Anakin?” Obito asked, “I thought we decided they didn’t want him.”

Or rather, that they’d both come to the inclusion that the jedi didn’t want him. Certainly, none of them had ever made any overt moves while in Lee or Obito’s presence...

“But Anakin wants them,” Lee said and then with a sigh, looking Obito in his mismatched eyes, she stated bluntly, “He’s decided to try and become a jedi.”

Obito found himself taken aback, looking directly at her and the solemn cast of her features, and demanding, “How do you…”

But he remembered then, Anakin, Anakin since Mos Espa and the missing nin, the way he’d paled and shaken, the overwhelming sense of guilt towards everyone and everything, and the way he’d looked at them on the rooftop like he didn’t even know what they really were.

And how he’d looked to Jinn Qui-Gon, when travelling with the queen and the deadliest grandpa the world had ever seen, before he’d looked to Lee.
“…I taught him our techniques, basic techniques but I taught him…” Obito said, stunned, but underneath that an undercurrent of… Of betrayal, of anger, because Anakin, young as he was, he’d had to have known what that meant. More, Lee had been there long before Jinn and his merry band of jedi had shown up, Lee had never faltered in his promise, and here Skywalker Anakin was spitting in her face for a people who couldn’t even seem to make up their minds if they wanted him or not.

“It’s Anakin’s decision,” Lee cut in, “And not one that either of us should make for him.”

Anakin’s decision… Obito wondered, if he’d told Lee he had wanted to stay with Madara, when she’d rescued him from that cave, would she have looked at him with the same expression and let him crawl his way back in there?

Obito for a moment said nothing, stared at the marble walls and the carved doorways, and thought of the dozens upon dozens of children they had passed already, and finally said, “Have you noticed, how eerily young these children are, and how pleasant this all seems? As if these are just happy sword wielding monks with some talent in ninjutsu… But where do the children come from? Are they donated generously to the hidden village, or do the *jedi* show up door to door, laser katana in hand and the other outstretched and waiting for the infant? There are shadows in Konoha, shishou, and our village has existed for only a few generations. This temple has stood for a thousand years, what kind of a snake pit are we letting him walk into, if we leave him here?”

“And there’s that man from earlier, the senator, to worry about,” Obito added with a dangerous grin almost wild grin stretching across his face, “Did you notice how they looked at us like we were insane? When the bastard wasn’t even bothering to hide the killing-intent leaking off him? And what did they say a senator was again? Something damned important, and if he’s there… This place, this republic, it’s on the edge, shishou. If we leave Anakin here there will be no saving him from the civil war.”

“I know, Obito,” Lee said quietly, and when she looked at him, in the shadows of her eyes there were all those futures he feared so deeply already written out, “But I won’t force him to choose us.”

“Tell him, shishou! All we have to do is…”

“He won’t believe us,” Lee interjected calmly, far too calmly, “He probably already knows, if he sat down and thought about it, but Anakin makes decisions based on his heart… And right now, you and I have betrayed that… We let Mos Espa burn, Jinn didn’t, and he won’t forget that.”
That was… That was not how he would have phrased that, but that would be how it looked to them, all of them, even Anakin. He’d forgotten for a moment, somehow, that Anakin wasn’t really an academy student or a genin. That Anakin wasn’t from Konoha, that he hadn’t seen war or insanity or bloodlust and he wouldn’t understand.

At his heart, Anakin was as much a civilian as the rest of them.

But all the same, all he could see was some other hypothetical Obito, shivering and starving, staring up at Lee and saying no… And Lee letting him.

“Besides, they may turn him down. He is, after all, too old,” Lee said with her own sly grin, jarring Obito from his own thoughts, “More worrying, for now, is what the hell we’re going to say when we get in here… I think we’re botching this even more than I usually botch dealing with the English.”

Lee sighed, grimaced, and admitted, “You might be right, we probably should have called the nidaime in.”

“Well,” Obito said, “It’s a bit late for that now… Besides, the worst I guess is we just go home empty handed, or start lurking at the edge of the galaxy and run the other direction whenever a jedi swings by.”

Lee said nothing to this, her eyes, instead, turning towards Jinn’s old master. For a moment they stared at each other, him raising his eyebrows in askance but making no move to start a conversation.

Finally, Lee spoke, “So, Jinn says you’re his old master from when he was an apprentice.”

“Padawan,” the man responded, his voice a deep and rather commanding one, “Apprentice is a bit of a charged term.”

“Right, Jinn said something about that… And you’re a sword master?” Lee asked, “I was taught by one myself, actually, and am fairly well versed in the field but my kenjutsu sadly pales in comparison to my ninjutsu and genjutsu abilities.”

The man said nothing to this, merely taking in the foreign terms with that strange patience all jedi
masters seemed to possess (or at least, Jinn possessed), and listened as Lee continued.

“I have to say; your swords are pretty cool… Not just because it broke my sword like a toothpick, which is too bad, as I really liked that katana… Even got Minato to inscribe seals into it. It’ll be a pain to get a new one forged. We don’t have any like yours though, how are they made?”

Well, that wasn’t blatant or anything, but Dooku didn’t seem to mind, or else it somehow wasn’t a village secret as he revealed, “There is a crystal which helps to conduct the force within the handle of the blade, that’s the true ingredient of the saber, the rest is simple enough that padawans are instructed to build their own.”

“Build their own?” Obito asked, somewhat surprised, as rarely was any ninja in charge of forging their own weapons. That took too much skill and time to focus on, as such there were usually only a couple black smiths in a hidden village, and usually only one or two that would cater to high ranking jonin with specialized demands.

“With guidance from jedi masters of course,” the man added, seeming amused more than anything, by Obito’s shock.

Lee then decided to get straight to the point of all this small talk, “Look, Dooku, you seem like a reasonable sort of jedi… How well do you think this council meeting is going to go?”

Now, now the man was actively grinning, as if he found Lee to be hilarious.

“Terribly,” seeing Obito and Lee’s shocked faces he explained, “The council is too set in their way and they’ll find you two to be horrifically alarming in your non-adherence to the code.”

“The code?” Obito questioned blandly.

“The jedi code,” Dooku explained still with that amused smile, “The interpretation of which has been in debate for thousands of years. Regardless, it is the code we all strive to live by, the council most of all… And it forbids attachment.”

Oh, the attachment thing, and judging by the way the man’s gaze pointedly lingered on both Lee and Obito they were miserably failing at the attachment standards again… Without even saying a word.
“Oh, that code,” Lee said dully, “We heard about that attachment thing…”

“You can rest assured though, the council will sit on their hands,” Dooku said and then with a hint of frustration that had boiled over for years, “They are experts at that, after all.”

Well, Obito would add in that Konoha’s council was much the same, except even Konoha’s council wasn’t quite as frustrating as the jedi council apparently was going to be. Obito was suddenly looking forward to this even less than he had been.

“Yeah,” Lee said, cringing and looking at Obito, “We really missed the boat on bringing in the nidaime.”

And with that overwhelming vote of confidence on the part of his master, the door swung open, and Lee and Obito were ushered inside the jedi council chamber.

Watching as the red-headed Lee, so terribly young even for a master, and her scarred even younger apprentice were ushered into the council room, their eyes darting everywhere (no doubt analyzing the situation for potential threats as apparently, they were wont to do), Obi-Wan couldn’t help but think that this was a disaster waiting to happen.

And judging by the ridiculous expression on the woman’s face, Lee Eru was thinking the exact same thing.

If he was being honest then Obi-Wan didn’t quite know what to make of these people, their tendency towards the dark side was unmistakable but his master, for whatever reason, while leery of them seemed more trusting of them than not. At any rate, there was no question that somehow, they were going to screw up this meeting since they hadn’t even managed to treat the chancellor and senator with respect.

All they had to do was bow, and what did they do? They started posturing and making unsubtle threats and forcing Obi-Wan’s master to intervene on their behalf before it turned into a blood bath.

Obi-Wan and his master had been on some doozies of missions before, but somehow, this one had
to be the absolute worst.

And it wasn’t even done yet, not with their new orders to stay with the queen whatever the outcome of her meeting with the senate, and their orders to keep an eye on their new shinobi friends.

For a moment, as Lee and Obito drew even with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan the pair gave them a look before staring impassively at the council, who were taking this moment to observe them. As this continued, one of Lee’s eyebrows raised and she muttered something in another language to her apprentice who just gave her a complete look of exasperation back.

Finally, it was the apprentice, who broke the silence, “Not that I don’t love eerie staring contests but this probably isn’t the reason that any of us are here right now.”

When none of the council members responded to this, Lee, moved to introduce the pair of them, “Well, as Jinn has probably explained, I’m Lee Eru, a jonin shinobi from Konohagakure, on the planet Earth. This,” she motioned to Obito, “Is my illustrious chunin apprentice Obito Uchiha.”

The woman continued staring each council member in the eye, “We’re here on an exploratory mission from our village, to discover new cultures, ideas, and technology, and, if there are other chakra wielding cultures, to make contact with them, and build the foundations of a formal relationship whenever possible.”

“As such, we would love to negotiate terms of trade between your people and mine, which can then be hammered out by far more formal diplomats than me and Obito as we are… Merely observers, those who judge the situation first hand, and hardly politicians,” she ended this with one of her too cheerful grins, no doubt thinking of their earlier run in with the senator, or perhaps even before that.

Obi-Wan didn’t know if it was relieving or not that she actively described herself as someone not adept at diplomacy. He supposed it meant, that for whoever else existed in this village of hers, there was hope in them.

For a moment, the council said nothing to this, merely observed the old-fashioned weapons the pair wielded, their almost militaristic uniforms, and then it was Mace Windu who noted, “Master Qui-Gon mentions that you and your apprentice do not believe in the dark side of the force.”
Qui-Gon had mentioned far more than that, he’d relayed everything he and Obi-Wan had observed about these people, their strange beliefs, their penchant for violence, their unusual and almost miraculous abilities, the unusually high connection to the force that both seemed to have, but particularly the woman…

Qui-Gon had been insistent that they were not sith, not even truly on the dark side of the force, but that they weren’t something anyone would recognize as being a jedi or firmly rooted in the light.

Lee grimaced and stated dully, “Our people don’t believe in sides of the force at all.”

Ki Mundi leaned forward and asked, “How can this be? When you have such strong connections to the force? Even younglings, Lee Eru, can sense the great divide that exists within the force.”

“Sides,” Lee said a strange look on her face as she stared across at the council, “Are a peculiarly human concept. The universe is cruel and indifferent and takes no pleasure in taking one side or another. I imagine, that it doesn’t recognize that sides exist in the first place.”

“Jedi of the ancient past once claimed such things,” Mace Windu scoffed, “And each unfailingly fell to the dark side.”

Lee seemed more or less stunned by this, perhaps a little exasperated, and she offered a dry, “Good for them.”

“Look,” Obito interjected, casting mismatched eyes towards his master before focusing on the council, “Our people clearly have very different philosophies but…”

“Dangerous dark side is,” Yoda interrupted, “Mere philosophy, it is not.”

For a moment Obito and Lee just stared at the council, and Obi-Wan wondered what they could possibly say next, but then it appeared that Lee gave up entirely as she threw her hands in the air and all sense of formality was lost.

“Every time, why does this happen every single time?” Lee asked her apprentice, seeming almost bewildered, “You know, someday, Obito, we’re going to end up in a place where they don’t believe in light or dark chakra, and it’s just going to be the greatest thing ever.”
Then, with an aggravated sigh, and a dull look towards the council, Lee said, “I take it, then, that you aren’t particularly willing to do business… You’re going to put us under observation, aren’t you?”

Obi-Wan suppressed the need to glance at Qui-Gon, but even so in his head he felt a ping as both he and Qui-Gon recognized that Lee had somehow deduced that Qui-Gon and his padawan were tasked to monitor the pair of them.

“Great,” Lee said before crossing her arms and giving them a rather accusing look, “Can’t say I blame you, we’d probably have done the same, but you do have much larger issues than me and Obito, politely, extremely politely, introducing our culture and interests.”

“Shishou,” Obito tried to interrupt but it seemed once Lee Eru got started she was unstoppable… She and master Qui-Gon were actually alarmingly similar in that respect.

“If I were you,” Lee said, pointing to the council, “I’d be far more concerned about the fact that my country is swarming with rabid nuke nin who give off killing-intent like they’re two seconds away from eating their own grandmother alive.”

“ Heard of assassin, from Qui-Gon and his padawan, we have,” Yoda responded, in his usual slightly bemused manner, as if Lee Eru was little more than a padawan herself throwing a tantrum.

“Wonderful, excellent,” Lee said, “And that doesn’t strike you as something you should be concerned about?”

“Those concerns are hardly mutually exclusive,” Mace Windu stated with folded hands and dark burning eyes.

A green troll’s finger pointed towards Obito, then, “On path to dark side, your apprentice is, ruled by attachment, he is.”

Lee turned to look at Obito, Obito for his own part stared down at himself, they both then looked up at the council, a complete lack of recognition in either of their eyes. Finally, Lee stated, borrowing master Yoda’s pattern of speech, “Clearly, Orochimaru-sama, met, you have not.”
Lee then sighed dramatically, looked over at Qui-Gon, and threw her hands equally dramatically in the air and asked, “Is this whole meeting just going to be this cryptic dark side nonsense, Jinn?”

Qui-Gon blinked back at her, stared, realized that she apparently expected an answer, except that his silence must have been answer enough because Lee just let out another exasperated sigh.

“Right, well, since this is going so excellently, I can already see that Obito and I will need to contact someone in Konoha who isn’t… ‘on the path to the dark side’ and you can talk to them, instead of us. And Obito and I will… I don’t even know, we’ll eat pizza or something.”

Then, slinging an arm around her apprentice’s shoulders and turning them to face the door, she said, “Jinn, if you want us, we’re going to check out that restaurant your apprentice recommended so highly.”

Oh, right the card game… They must have meant Dex’s then as that was the only restaurant he could have been said to have ‘recommended’ to the strange pair.

With that they started walking, the apprentice shrugging her arm off his shoulder as they reached the door, but then, as they began to push it open, Lee looked back and asked, “By the way, if I’m privy to such details, what exactly are your intentions towards Anakin Skywalker?”

Strangely enough, it was Obi-Wan’s master, who met her sharp green gaze and explained, “The boy is to be tested to become a jedi.”

“Tested,” Obito dully repeated, some low burning anger inside of him, an emotion that only reinforced master Yoda and Obi-Wan’s own conclusion of his dangerous emotional state, “As in, he may not pass this test of yours.”

No one commented on this, mentioned that it was highly unlikely that the boy would pass, particularly as his mother was with him and reinforcing attachment even now…

Lee spared Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan one final look, then offered with that small almost devilish smile, “For when you change your mind, or when you’re ready to meet with a representative less prone to the dark side, do give us a call.”

And with that, the pair exited the room, and then, no doubt, the jedi temple itself.
Anakin, Jar-Jar, and his mother were all sitting outside of senator Palpatine’s quarters, watching as the queen spoke to him, from a distance that would have been too far to hear from had Anakin not been training with Lee and Obito before this.

Anakin had no idea where Padme had gone.

They watched as captain Panaka entered, and Anakin leaned forward, eyes large as he continued to listen to a situation that… That did not sound good for Naboo.

“…The republic is not what it once was. The senate is full of greedy, squabbling delegates who are only looking out for themselves and their home systems,” the senator paced, eyes always landing on the queen, “There is no interest in the common good… no civility, only politics. It’s disgusting…”

Finally, the senator stopped pacing and looked down at her, a soft almost sympathetic smile working its way onto his features, “I must be frank, your majesty, there is little chance the senate will act on the invasion.”

“Chancellor Valorum seems to think there is hope,” the queen offered, but this didn’t change senator Palpatine’s expression.

Palpatine… Lee had told him to be wary about him, or at least, that’s what Anakin thought she’d meant with her final hand sign, it’d been hard to tell. Especially since only she and Obito had really been concerned by it, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had just seemed sort of embarrassed and scandalized by Lee and Obito’s behavior. Which… Sometimes Lee and Obito did do scandalous things without realizing it.

“If I may say so, your majesty, the chancellor has little real power,” Palpatine explained, “He is mired down by baseless accusations of corruption. A manufactured scandal surrounds him. It’s the bureaucrats who are in charge now.”

And the bureaucrats, it went unsaid, weren’t on Naboo’s side.
“Your best option would be to push for the election of a stronger supreme chancellor,” Palpatine then went onto say, “One who will take control of the bureaucrats, enforce the laws, give true justice. You can call for a vote of no confidence in chancellor Valorum.”

“He’s our strongest supporter…”

“Our only other choice would be to submit a plea to the courts…” Palpatine trailed off, and even though Anakin didn’t know anything, it seemed clear in the silence and the man’s expression that this wasn’t a real option.

“There’s no time for that, they take even longer to decide things than the senate…”

“To be realistic, your highness,” Palpatine said reluctantly, “I’d say we’re going to have to accept the federation control for the time being.”

The man paused then, as if an idea had struck him, and said, “Of course, there’s always your strange new companions… The shinobi, is that what you called them?”

The queen looked up at him, for the first time visibly shocked, “The shinobi? What of them?”

“You said that you owed them your life, more than even the jedi, that they fought back your attacker, rescued your ship, and did this all with an alarming ease… Perhaps, when all else fails, they could help your cause,” a meaningful glance, to the queen, between the two of them but the queen seemed to shrug it off.

“They respect nothing, they have no sympathy for Naboo’s plight, they’re a violent people only concerned with war.”

That was… That was unfair and untrue, no matter how much it might seem like it to the queen or even Padme, that’s not what Obito and Lee were. He almost shouted so too, if he wasn’t already eavesdropping and no doubt not supposed to listen in on this. But…

Why did everyone overlook them or simplify them or…
Then again, maybe Anakin didn’t have room to talk, since he was going behind their backs and trying to become a jedi instead.

“War, your majesty” Palpatine said, “Is exactly what you may need right now. Keep them close, if the senate does not pull through… Better to have such assets on your side than to cast them out.”

Assets, like… Like they were tools.

Anakin thought then that everyone had missed the heart of Lee and Obito entirely, that they’d just gotten caught up in the ninjutsu and the violence and… But what did Anakin really know about them? They hadn’t even blinked when Mos Espa was… When it was burned down. And Anakin, Anakin couldn’t be responsible for something like that again, he didn’t want to become like they were in that moment.

But now, thinking about Konoha, he realized he’d never see it in person. And, that when he reached out with his chakra or to the force or whatever it was called, when he thought of Konoha, there was nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

Sure enough, as soon as Qui-Gon and his padawan opened the door to Dex’s, there were Lee Eru and her apprentice Obito, lounging in a booth, with a basket of chili fries between them, looking, somehow, absurdly in their element when juxtaposed with the awkward tension that had been so prevalent in the council meeting.

And at once, oddly, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but feel a peculiar fond exasperation for the pair, as if the few days they’d spent together had somehow forged itself into the most unlikely of friendships, no matter how different their pasts or how strange the circumstances of their meeting.

Lee’s head lifted at their entrance, and with a cheese covered fry still in hand, beckoned them over to the booth and made room for the pair of them, “Jinn, your people are totally unreasonable and ridiculous.”

Obi-Wan looked duly insulted, no doubt believing the same of this pair, this pair who even now seemed to elude the force almost entirely. Evading the sight even of a master such as Yoda
“Well, there are many jedi who have issues with the council,” Qui-Gon said as he took a seat next to Lee while Obi-Wan slid in tensely across from him, taking this much too seriously as usual, “Myself being one of them.”

Lee nodded at this and said, “Well Konoha’s council is no barrel of fun either, but usually the issues I have with them are… different.”

She then waved a hand, as if none of this was important, grabbed another cheese fry, and apparently decided to be blunt, “Look, Jinn, you guys have a major missing nin or enemy nin problem, and it’s going to get you all killed.”

He’d noticed that about her, her bluntness, or rather, her impatience… It had showed itself through at the council meeting but even before them it seemed Lee Eru had little time to spare for anything from small talk to subtle information gathering. If she wanted to know something, she usually got around to asking very quickly, and if she wanted to say something, she usually got around to that even quicker.

“I had assumed you would have wanted to ask about your diplomat who is… ‘not on the path to the dark side’ I believe you said,” Qui-Gon suggested but Lee simply grabbed another fry with a very unimpressed look on her face.

“Well, we probably should, but Obito and I have pretty much narrowed it down to the nidaime being our only reasonable option… Although, how serious are you about that attachment thing, is a chronic fear of death and questionable hobbies lower on the scale than attachment, because if so we might want to swap out the nidaime for Orochimaru,” Lee paused, cringed, as if she wouldn’t wish this Orochimaru on the bravest of souls, and then said, “I can’t believe I just honestly suggested that.”

“Both are paths to the dark side!” Obi-Wan cut in.

“I get that, you have made that very clear Kenobi, well you and your council,” Lee said, holding up her hands, “But which would you say is more dark-sidey… Look, there’s two kinds of shinobi, the kind that give a shit about other human beings, and the kind who have basically no moral compass whatsoever. Because what I’m getting from all of this, is that you guys are really gunning for that sociopath… And it makes me really question your judgement.”
Obi-Wan’s temper rose to the bait and he leaned forward, almost dipping his sleeve into the fries, and stared Lee directly in the eyes, “Lacking attachment is not the same thing as…”

“Isn’t it?” Lee mused, cutting Obi-Wan off, “In war, or even peace time for that matter, there’s really only two paths. Either you care, or you don’t, our lives don’t allow any sort of in between.”

Obito spared his master a glance and said, “You’re getting off topic, shishou.”

“Right, right, anyways, back to your giant nuke nin problem,” Lee said, pausing, and then added, “You have a giant mother of a nuke nin problem.”

“We’re well aware of the assassin that we ran into on Tatooine…” Obi-Wan stated but Lee held up a hand to stop him before he even started.

“I’m not talking about the missing eighth swordsman of the bloody mist,” and here she leaned in, warped the force around them to direct attention elsewhere and somehow bubble the sound inside the booth so that none escaped, “I’m talking about your dear Senator Palpatine.”

“The senator?” Qui-Gon found himself asking, and then remembered her and her apprentice’s bizarre reaction to the man earlier that day, and found himself wanting to wipe a hand across his face.

“I say this, Jinn, because I consider you someone who might one day be a friend… And your padawan isn’t terrible,” Lee said nodding to Obi-Wan, who just stared at her incredulously, “You’ve let them infiltrate your civilian government, from which I understand the jedi are beholden too, at the highest level. Jinn, shit’s going to get real.”

She and her apprentice looked quite solemn at that, leaving Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan to stare at them, Qui-Gon to try to take this seriously (wondering how on earth they could have possibly come to that conclusion) and said, “Surely, you must be mistaken. Senator Palpatine has done much good for the people of Naboo, is himself a strong contender for the position of chancellor whenever the next election is called, particularly given Valorum’s failure to deal with the trade federation and…”

“I knew it!” Lee pounded her hand down on the table, “I knew it! He’s aiming for the top, that sly son of a bitch. Jinn, if you don’t watch your back, you’re going to have an enemy nin for a daimyo.”
Qui-Gon refrained, only barely, from blinking at this and instead through the force searched for the mutual bewilderment from his apprentice. Reassuring him, that yes, these people were truly bizarre.

“What do you mean Valorum’s failure to deal with the trade federation problem?” Obi-Wan asked.

“Well, not just that, there are a number of rumors surrounding the chancellor of his incompetency and his own corruption,” Obi-Wan said, “The trade federation invading a planet of the republic, it could be seen as the nail in the coffin.”

For a moment Obito took this in, and then, with a confidence that seemed misplaced in a sixteen-year-old, stated, “Palpatine’s paying off the trade federation, he’s probably the one who sent the nuke nin assassin too.”

“Oh,” Lee said, almost in a begrudging appreciation, “He is very good.”

Obito went onto explain, even as he took a fry for himself, “Assuming this man cares nothing about Naboo itself, then all of this is eerily to his benefit. Valorum fails to contain this, Palpatine’s is elected supreme chancellor, especially if the queen dies and the planet lost completely to the trade federation. More, the trade federation will always owe him, and he will hold it over their heads forever. It’s damn brilliant, I mean, even if he loses then he still doesn’t really lose.”

Then, sparing a look for Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, “He’s clearly playing a very long game, and if you don’t deal with him now, you’re going to have major problems.”

There were no words, simply no words at all.

After a too long silence where Obito and Lee seemed to be congratulating themselves on their deduction, Obi-Wan remarked, “Your paranoid conspiracy theories are all well and good, but with those kinds of jumps in logic, I may as well believe you and your master are behind everything. Especially as the force itself is muddled by your very presence.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean?” Lee asked as she stuffed a fry into her mouth, ignoring Obi-Wan’s cringe of distaste.
“Ever since we arrived on Tatooine, even before that, the force has been… affected. I am plagued by visions of what ‘might have been’, but what already has been prevented from happening, and all other futures are fractured. And all of this seems to stem from the actions that you and your apprentice have taken.”

Lee and Obito stared dully forward, looked at each other, and Lee summed up by saying, “I don’t see how this is our problem.”

“So, what, chakra here or whatever, doesn’t like us?” Obito asked, crossing his arms and staring at Obi-Wan seated next to him, “Is that what I’m supposed to get from this?”

“Or you yourselves are actively muddying the force,” Obi-Wan stated, “Such tactics have been used by ancient sith in ages past.”

Lee rubbed at the bridge of her nose, sighing, and asked, “Kenobi, if I was your nuke nin, trust me, I wouldn’t waste time with all of this ridiculous subterfuge, I’d just kill all of you.”

Then holding up her hands as if in surrender, “Just watch the old man and watch your backs, okay?”

Grabbing a handful more of fries, shoving a few in her mouth, Lee then asked, “By the way, what’s the deal with your plans for Anakin? I thought you said he was too old or something and you didn’t think he should become a jedi.”

Strange, he hadn’t thought she’d heard any of that, or that he hadn’t told her directly. But then, it appeared these people went out of their way to gather information when needed… Likely, somehow unnoticed by Qui-Gon, they had eavesdropped on a good many of his conversations on Tatooine.

“He is too old,” Obi-Wan cut in before Qui-Gon could even think to respond.

“Under normal circumstances,” Qui-Gon said, offering Obi-Wan a chidin glance, “He would be, but Anakin is a special case.”

Lee didn’t seem to question that, or ask why specifically Anakin was special (and he wondered, for a stark moment, if her people too had a prophecy concerning him), but then she noted, “And
you’ve managed to convince him that being a jedi is far more bloodless than being a shinobi.”

She paused, ate a fry, then commented offhand, “He’s driven by emotions you know. That’s why he’s agreed to this, the guilt and the fear, Mos Espa rattled him… What are you going to do about the mother?”

They were observant, the mother… Qui-Gon didn’t know, perhaps find her a job on Coruscant, safe and out of the way, but that might be too tempting for Anakin to visit her. Either way, it had to be made clear to Anakin, had yet to be made clear, that this world he was entering was a place where his mother, attachments to his mother, could not last.

His mother would be a large problem.

There was more, of course, the boy was driven by his emotions, they’d hit the nail on the head. He was a good boy, inherently good, and sought the happiness of others but… But his heart, deciding by his heart, that was a dangerous thing for a jedi and combined with his age…

“The council can’t afford not to pass him,” Qui-Gon finally said with a sigh, “I believe they’ll come to this realization as well.”

“Considering that they couldn’t even handle me and shishou, I doubt that,” Obito stated, “But they’re your people, you’ve been dealing with them longer than we have.”

Lee folded her hands together, then looked Qui-Gon directly in the eyes, “If he doesn’t pass, Jinn, then you have to have him come with us to Konoha instead. If you let that sort of raw talent walk the streets outside of your village… Let’s just say Palpatine will have a field day.”

Well, Palpatine again, these two were clearly set in this for whatever reason. Granted, Qui-Gon saw their point, more with the assassin sith than anything else, and wherever his master or apprentice lurked, but all he could offer now was, “Well, we’ll both hope he passes then.”

“Right,” Obito said dully, looking anything but pleased, “We’ll all hope he passes.”

“By the way, if this Naboo thing keeps going even further south, you can count me and Obito in to help you sort out this whole invasion thing,” Lee said, “I’m actually really good at that.”
And then, grabbing the last of the fries, she grinned at both Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon, and said, “You know, despite everything, this may be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”
Chapter 8

He had closed his eyes, lying on the grass of a training field, hands beneath his head and a warm summer breeze ruffling his hair. It was the sort of day that made him feel like he was dreaming, not dreaming as he had inside of Madara’s cave, but dreaming as if he wasn’t quite within the moment either. As if the Obito who rested on the hillside, Lee-shishou sitting beside him, was some other Obito entirely, one he could never quite reach…

Like the scars on his face were only a dream, a ripple across the surface of a pond that was Obito, and that if he blinked, blinked both eyes, they would be gone.

With a calm breath, breathing in the trees and the grass and the scent of summer, he said in English, “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.”

“Again.”

This was still early into his apprenticeship, after Lee-shishou had bestowed an alarmingly green eye on him and after he had been drilled into being mostly proficient in English, but still before he was fifteen and certainly before he’d call himself anything close to fluent.

Obito, at the time, although somewhat grateful that Lee wasn’t beating the shit out of him today or putting him through horrific training scenarios (something that Obito, did not thank Hatake Sakumo for, as the man had apparently gone all out on training his apprentice so that she now had no idea what normal even was anymore) but all the same he was kind of getting tired of repeating this same sentence over and over and over again.

Well, it wasn’t just that one.

There was also the wonderful, “In Hartford, Hereford, and Hampshire, hurricanes hardly happen.”

The hellish tongue twisting, “She sells seashells by the seashore.”

And almost all the works of Shakespeare William, in their strange, malformed, ancient version of the English tongue.
Although he was slightly better at those, or at least, she didn’t feel the need to drill him on those all the time. And even if she did drill him on the Shakespeare at least that was interesting, once he’d finally parsed out what the hell he was even saying.

He was apparently not quite a thespian, whatever that meant, but passible. And once again there was the nagging thought that Kakashi, apparently, was not only fluent but had a perfect Surrey accent and had had it since he was two.

“Shishou, why exactly do I care if it’s raining in Spain?” Obito asked, switching back to the tongue he was far more proficient and comfortable in.

By which he really meant, why was it important that Obito sound English? He was quite visibly not an Englishman, especially with the scars, what did it matter if he didn’t sound like he was from Surrey or London or wherever it was Lee thought he should sound like he was from?

Lee frowned, paused in her game of solitaire, looked down at him with raised eyebrows and seemed to consider him, then with a sigh and a look of exasperation, she answered his question, “Because the English care.”

“I don’t think I follow, shishou,” Obito commented with a frown, propping himself on his elbows to get a better look at her.

“Unfortunately, I don’t either,” Lee said with a growing frown.

“Well, now I really don’t follow,” Obito said and then, rather wryly, asked, “This isn’t your idea of building character, is it?”

“The English are a… strange people with rather strange priorities,” Lee said with a sigh before continuing, “Frankly, I’ve never understood them. At any rate, they tend to view Konoha nin as heartless mercenary barbarians, a civilian version of their own nuke nin, if you want to be more precise. Either we’re to be reviled and rumored to drink the blood of children in our basements or else it’s cute that we try so hard to match their own superior jutsus. An accent, for whatever reason, maybe because English jutsus all require precise enunciation, seems to strengthen this belief, as if we’re too dumb to speak English properly.”

Obito spared her a rather disbelieving glance, having not been to England himself yet at this point,
or at least, not in any real sense, “Come on, shishou, it can’t be that…”

Lee, with a single pale hand, motioned towards him, exhibit ‘A’ on display for the whole empty training ground to see, “Look at him, a prisoner of the gutter, condemned by every syllable he utters. By right he should be taken out and hung, for the cold-blooded murder of the English tongue.”

“Maa maa…” Obito interjected, about to point out that he was hardly that bad and had the decent of excuse of only knowing a smattering of words and phrases here and there before getting kidnapped by plant zombies and Madara, but Lee didn’t seem to care in the slightest.

“Maa,” Lee repeated rather mockingly, sounding delighted by his objection, “Heavens! What a sound! This is what the British population, calls an elementary education.”

“British, shishou, I think you picked a poor example,” Obito pointed out, which apparently was the precisely wrong thing to say as Lee’s grin grew that much wider and more assured.

“Did I?” she asked, and then, almost to some unseen orchestra, began to speak in rhythm, “Hear them down in Soho Square, dropping ‘h’s’ everywhere. Speaking English anyway they like. Hear a Yorkshireman, or worse, hear a Cornishman converse. I’d rather hear a choir singing flat. Chickens, cackling in a barn, just like this one.”

Obito refused to rise to the bait as she pointed towards him, for about two seconds, and then pointed out, “Shishou, I think we’re a little off topic… And did you really have to call me a chicken?”

Lee paid no mind to this, instead motioning towards him once again, from his head to his feet, “It’s ‘maa’ and ‘gaarn’ that keep him in his place, not his wretched clothes and dirty face.”

Dirty face, well, alright, but that was only because they had sparred before this… All the same he looked down at his hands then back up, with the burning suspicion, that this was less about Obito and more an opportune moment for Lee to recreate some dramatic scene that Obito didn’t recognize.

A situation that happened, well, quite often.
“An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him, the moment he talks he makes some other Englishman despise him,” then with a rather dramatic sigh, a hand through her red hair and looking down at him in pity, “One common language I’m afraid we’ll never get. Oh, why can’t the English learn to set a good example to people whose English is painful to your ears? The Scotch and the Irish leave you close to tears. There even are places where English completely disappears. Well, in America, they haven’t used it in years!”

Obito crossed his arms, frowning rather petulantly, and waiting impatiently for her to finish. Especially since, if she continued at this frightening rhythmic pace, he was sure to only catch one word in three.

“Why can’t the English teach their children how to speak? Norwegians learn Norwegian, the Greeks have taught their Greek. In France every Frenchman knows his language ‘A’ to ‘Zed’… The French never care what they do, actually, as long as they pronounce it properly. Arabians learn Arabian with the speed of summer lightning. And Hebrews learn it backwards, which is absolutely frightening.”

Then with one final dramatic hand gesture towards him, “Use proper English you’re regarded as a freak. Why can’t the English, why can’t the English learn to speak?”

“Are you done yet?” Obito asked.

Lee sighed and switched back to Obito’s blessed native tongue, “I see you have no appreciation for Higgens Henry. Regardless, did you at least understand the point?”

“So, if I sound like I’m from England…”

Lee finished the thought for him, “They become remarkably easier to deal with, yes. If you’re with me it’s not as much of a priority, despite being a ninja myself with quite the bloodthirsty reputation, because of strange political things I’m pretty well regarded over there… Well, until they feel the need for more propaganda. However, since you’re picking up English well enough, after you’re done with your apprenticeship you could be sent on your own, and then it will be much more important.”

“So, with that, Obito, do you have something to say to me?” Lee asked with that too wide grin.

Obito could only sigh, grimace, and start once again, “The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain.”
And Lee’s smile only grew as she returned to her game of solitaire, and gave that simple, command, “Once again.”

Unfortunately, it would take a good number of months before he heard that long desired, “By George, he’s got it. I think he’s got it!”

However, at the very least, he understood the reference by that point.

Anakin stood in the center of a semicircle, without Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Lee, or Obito, and tried to stare forward at the twelve jedi masters in the council room without looking as nervous as he felt. The jedi were always so serene, even more than Lee and Obito, who at times could appear unflappable.

Of course, Lee and Obito weren’t really jedi, and sometimes they did or said things that he could never see someone like Qui-Gon doing. Even earlier this morning was an example when they’d almost attacked the senator. At that thought, he frowned, trying to will himself to concentrate but still just seeing Lee’s face, the look she’d given him, as he’d flown away in the senator’s speeder.

The strange vague warning about the senator, of course, but also just that final look she’d given him…

He shook himself and focused on seeing images through the force, centering himself and his chakra as Lee and Obito and Qui-Gon had all taught him, and letting awareness flow through him, “A ship… a cup… a speeder.”

One of the jedi, the taller dark-skinned man with the intimidating glare, nodded towards the green troll sitting next to him. The troll nodded back and then moved his own dark eyes towards Anakin, “Good, good, young one. How feel you?”

“Cold, sir,” Anakin answered, quite honestly too, everywhere was cold. He’d known what being hot was like, and he thought he’d known cold, the desert could get unbearably cold at night, but this place, space, it was all a different kind of cold. It wasn’t the bitter, sudden, stark cold of night but instead a creeping insidious cold that worked its way into you and never left, not even when the sun was high in the sky.
It was twilight now, or rather, a twilight like Tatooine’s second twilight would have been, when the second sun set for the night. That just made it even colder.

He hadn’t realized just how cold he’d be once he left Tatooine behind. He’d never thought about things like that.

“Afraid, are you?” the troll asked, and… Anakin hesitated, because he wasn’t really afraid, he was nervous, but he was doing the only thing he could, really. All the same, this felt like one of those questions that wasn’t really a question at all. Like the troll already knew the answer and was asking… Was asking so that Anakin would prove a point.

“No, sir,” Anakin answered rather stiffly.

“Afraid to give up your life?”

“No, sir, I’m not,” Anakin replied, his lip curling, and willing himself to stay calm even when it was clear that none of the twelve Jedi across from him believed Anakin.

“See through you, we can,” the troll stated, leaning forward on his small wooden staff and giving Anakin a rather piercing look, as if, indeed, he could see right through him.

“Be mindful of your feelings,” the dark-skinned master added, not even giving Anakin a chance to respond, to say something.

“Your thoughts dwell on your former master, the shinobi, Lee Eru,” one of the others said.

“I… I didn’t tell her I’d be taking the test to become a Jedi,” Anakin confessed, allowing some of his nervousness, his distress and guilt, show on his face, “I didn’t even tell her that I wanted to become a Jedi, she still thinks, or well, I only told her I wanted to be a ninja.”

“Dark side, you sensed in them,” the troll finished for him, “Violence, you saw, in the shadows of their footsteps.”
“Mos Espa burned down to the ground, and they… They didn’t even care,” the words were rushing out of his mouth now, all the thoughts that had been building up, now impossible to stop, “And then, then I realized, that all they ever taught me is how to fight people. So that maybe, maybe one day I’ll be like them, like I’ll stand in someplace like Mos Espa, somewhere I’ve lived for months, and not even blink when someone burns it to the ground.”

And with that haunting vision of himself, a man turned into a machine and planets turned into dust, someone so like Lee and Obito in that he had been entirely indifferent to the destruction of entire star systems…

“Reasonable, your concerns are,” the troll said, “But not all concerns, you have relayed, young Skywalker.”

“What?” Anakin asked, caught somewhat off guard, blinking the dwindling sunlight out of his eyes.

“You are concerned for the woman and her apprentice,” the dark-skinned man continued for the troll, giving Anakin a rather meaningful look.

“I… I don’t know if I’ll see them again,” Anakin said, and he didn’t know when it had dawned on him, that maybe that moment on the platform really had been his last goodbye, that without Anakin there he’d have no reason to see them anymore, that they could just… disappear, “I miss them.”

And he did, they weren’t even gone yet and he somehow already missed them. He wished… He didn’t know what he wished, maybe that they’d stay, or that everything could somehow go back to how it’d been on Tatooine before the jedi and the dark man had showed up but…

“Afraid of yourself, you are, but only because fear to lose, you do. Afraid to lose them, I think, and your mother,” the troll said, like he was correcting Anakin.

His mother? What did… He suddenly remembered what Qui-Gon had said, at one point, that Anakin wouldn’t be able to see his mother if he was accepted into training. He hadn’t thought of it much at the time, maybe he hadn’t taken it seriously but…

But all the same, all the same, wasn’t he supposed to think like that? Obito and Lee always, always, made it very clear that your comrades, your friends and family, your precious people were the most important thing you had in the world. That you had to give everything to protect them and
their way of life, that this alone was the core of the will of fire, and any Konoha shinobi who didn’t believe in it was nothing more than a shell of a human being.

If you have nothing to live for, Obito had said at one point, then you will have everything to die for.

Anakin’s lip curled downwards and he asked, “What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Everything. Fear is the path to the dark side,” the troll tapped his cane against the floor levelling Anakin with an eerily intent gaze, “Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.”

“I am not afraid!” Anakin shouted back, his words echoing in the chamber, and the twelve jedi staring down at him like mountains in judgement.

“A jedi must have the deepest commitment, the most serious mind. I sense much fear in you.”

“I am not…” Anakin trailed off, took a deep calming breath, and said more calmly, “I am not afraid, I promise.”

And as if he could read his mind the troll continued to regard Anakin and then said in a calm and authoritative voice, “A jedi, shinobi are not, dangerous their values are,” the troll explained, “Disregarding their teachings, best for now, until later you can review them with a more clinical eye.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“Strongly attached, they are, and filled with hubris,” the troll cryptically answered, “Teetering on the edge of darkness, the boy is. However, continue for now, we will.”

And just like that, the exam continued where it had left off, as if they hadn’t stopped it at all. Leaving Anakin to stare, and wonder, what exactly he’d meant by that last phrase, and whether Anakin should agree or not with the sentiment.

That Lee and Obito were teetering on the edge of darkness…
Obito and Lee loitered outside the steps of the senate, in a way that reminiscent to how he and Lee had once loitered outside the doors of the ministry in England, well, not quite the same. Here, despite being clear foreigners just as they’d been in England, they raised less eyebrows, if only because when your republic was an entire galaxy wide it seemed that everyone was a foreigner.

Those passing by assumed Lee and Obito were from some strange corner of a planet they’d simply never thought to pay attention to. And Obito’s scars and mismatched eyes, while looked at quickly, were perhaps thought to make him something other than human, or some strange human hybrid.

Which, he wasn’t sure if he preferred that or the English sympathetic horror, if he was being honest.

After meeting with Jinn and Kenobi in the restaurant, which really had turned out to be surprisingly good, and oddly reminiscent of an American 50’s diner according to Lee-shishou, they’d decided to meander back downtown eventually finding themselves sitting in the courtyard facing the large senate building as well as the jedi temple.

Another building, that in itself, could probably contain a small hidden village inside of it. It too was ornamental, had a stately design to it that spoke of care and tradition, thousands of years of history to it.

Not even the palace of the daimyo seemed quite as grandiose as this.

Perhaps he and Lee could have taken this time to wander through the alleyways and begin to make something of a map of this place, perhaps they could have gone and purchased from vendors and eavesdropped on local gossip, or perhaps they could have begun spying on the senate itself given that it was in its emergency session to decide the fate of Naboo.

Well, perhaps not that last one. Obito, knowing nothing about these people, felt he could spell it out easily enough for them.

The cavalry wasn’t coming.

The Konoha council, filled with hardened Konoha nin, and the clan council, who all had relatively similar interests and came from the same village and the same wars, bickered enough as it was,
blocking each other and engaging in petty infighting. They were infamous for it.

That alone was part of the reason that, ultimately, the hokage’s word was law. When push came to shove, when a war was on the horizon, it would be up to Minato-sensei alone to dictate how Konoha was to react.

If it was up to the council to make up their minds then they’d all be dead.

A better, slightly larger example, was England’s Wizengamot, comprised of the heads of the English clans. Civil war had been on their doorstep, their most feared missing nin, who had previously almost become a kage and had infiltrated the government at the highest level, returned from the dead, had instead of readying their jonin chosen to bicker with each other, over the existence of their enemy, until he’d all but taken them over.

If it hadn’t been for a handful of aurors, who by all rights could have been declared nuke nin for their actions, and a handful of academy students who might, generously, be called chunin, England would have played right into the palm of the English nin’s hand.

But to have a council comprised of senators from hundreds of planets, each with their own agenda and bureaucracies, and to ask them to defend a single other planet from invasion that made no threat against their own people?

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen.

He imagined grandpa killing intent was having a field day with these people.

No, instead, as Lee and Obito loitered here in the twilight, they were instead waiting for Jinn, Kenobi, and Anakin to make a reappearance. Or, rather, an appearance, Anakin had been all over the place, and Obito and Lee had yet to catch sight of him since they’d seen him on the platform.

Which, honestly, was probably that much worse as the more time Obito had to think over it the more his frustration turned into genuine anger and the planned talk he had for Skywalker Anakin became that much more visceral.

Because here was this little, naïve, boy who dared to condemn them for their actions without any true understanding of what war was, and said, essentially, “No, Obito, I want to stay in this
crumbling republic and join the hidden village that kidnaps children to become their kunai fodder. Thanks for all the techniques though, I’m sure they’ll be very helpful to my new village, which, by the way, doesn’t respect you or your master at all.”

Still, it had been hours, and so far, there was no sign of them.

Obito let out a sigh, and decided, since they weren’t doing much anyway, they might as well try to do something productive, “So, how exactly are we going to phrase this to the nidaime?”

“We tried politics,” Lee said dully, “Then we failed politics.”

“… Fair enough,” Obito said, and it was, certainly, from what Obito knew of Senju Tobirama at least, the man would hardly be surprised by that.

And he did have a fair amount of familiarity with the nidaime, what with the shodaime randomly kidnapping Obito to the Senju compound once in a while to train him in mokuton. Although, training was not exactly the right word, it was more like, basking in Obito’s mokuton, and using it to make Obito an honorary grandson. Oh, he was sure if he hadn’t been booted from the clan already, then Fugaku really would have had him flayed for that.

Especially since, after having met Madara and having the bitter retrospect of being able to look in on the clan as an outsider, and hearing some of Lee’s own dealings with them, Obito didn’t find half of what the nidaime said about the clan to be that… wrong.

Which, surely, that thought would send Obito straight to Uchiha hell.

“Still, maybe a little more… tactful and detailed?” Obito said hesitantly, “We’re going to have to warn him not to show too much attachment.”

“How does one show attachment?” Lee responded drily with raised eyebrows, and an excellent point, because dammit, Obito had no idea.

“Well, apparently you and I project like no tomorrow,” Obito said, and that really did throw him for a loop, because he didn’t even have to say or do anything, they just looked at him, and said, “Uh oh, looks like we’ve got an attached little bastard, headed straight for jedi hell, this one is.”
That, actually, was somewhat reminiscent of the clan, well, the clan before the Kannabi bridge. He felt his frown grow more pronounced, he had never believed in the self-imposed stoicism of the clan, even before he’d had a name for what it was.

And because of it, because of his grin and his declarations of being hokage, his clumsiness and hot-headed attitude, he’d always been a black sheep. An unspoken disappointment just waiting to happen…

He wondered, even if he’d returned with the sharingan, with both eyes in his head and no scars on his face, if he’d still have felt that wall between him and the rest of them, if the sharingan would have ever been enough.

Obito suspected, that in the end, his eyes wouldn’t have made much of a difference.

“Do you think… Do you think it’s because I’m not like the clan?” Obito finally asked, “Or… Or is it something deeper? Something the clan saw too that I never…”

“If you’re asking for insight into the minds of *jedi* or the Uchiha clan for that matter, I’m afraid you’ve come to the wrong person,” Lee said, before giving him a rather amused smile, “Your family in particular, has always been… interesting.”

“They’re hardly my family,” Obito said, not for three years now, or perhaps even before then.

Although, it hadn’t been a total loss, he missed his grandmother dearly, yes, and sometimes he missed spending time with his younger cousins but… But in their place, he had Kakashi, who was all but a brother in blood now, and his father Hatake Sakumo, not to mention Lee herself.

With them, Minato-sensei, and Rin, he still had his precious people. Those that had always been most important to him hadn’t left him after the bridge, in fact, most of them had even become closer.

He’d decided years ago that he was more than willing to accept the loss of his clan for this strange makeshift family he’d gained.
“All the same, Uchiha expert, I am not,” Lee claimed, “I can’t even parse the monosyllabic grunts.”

Obito’s lips curled upward, and he gave a musing clan-esque, “Hn.”

“Yes!” Lee exclaimed, pointing at him, “That’s the one! All the time!”

“That was an, ‘I am amused by your strangely boisterous antics that I would never be caught dead doing’,” Obito explained, a grin spreading across his lips, “Not to be confused with ‘hn’, which is ‘I find you an obnoxious stain upon our village and am infuriated to be associated with you.’”

Lee just blinked, blinked again, then said, “I can’t tell the difference.”

“Exactly,” Obito responded, before bursting out into laughter, having to wipe tears away from his eyes he was laughing so hard, while Lee just stared at him with a rather familiar nonplussed and somewhat amused expression.

Eventually though, the laughter died down, and the sobering thought of the Uchiha and the jedi remained.

“Still… They never said anything, but I know, I wasn’t… I was never like the rest of them,” Obito said with a sigh, “And, maybe it’s the same with the jedi. Maybe there’s something integral to Uchiha Obito that just…”

“There has always been something off about Eru Lee,” Lee cut him off, her eyes distant as she stared off into the twilight, “From the moment I became aware, I knew I lived in a world of cardboard cutouts, and that I was not like them and they were not like me. I was always a few too many standard deviations off the normal distribution. And my family, or the closest thing I would ever have to family, they knew it too, and they locked me in a cupboard for it.”

She paused then, looked down at him, and offered him a soft and rather bittersweet smile, “You have never been like that, Obito, but even if you were, there’s no shame in it. It is what it is, and denying it doesn’t make it go away, and trying to understand the incomprehensible will only give you a headache.”

She placed a hand, warm and pale, on his scarred shoulder, “We can only ever be ourselves,
“And if that is the path into the heart of darkness,” Lee finished, eyes drifting towards the Jedi temple, “Then so be it.”

Whatever Obito might have said to that drifted from him as the first of the senators exited the building. At first, they trickled out a few at a time, then it was a flood, Lee and Obito stepping further up the steps to observe. All were wearing rather fine cloth, clearly quite wealthy or at least giving the impression of wealth, however the designs and styles were all different, likely speaking to their planet of origin.

And then there, unmistakable beneath all the distinctive makeup as well as the hair ornaments and crimson robes, was Naboo’s queen arm in arm with none other than Palpatine, a rather familiar look of determination in her dark eyes, while he seemed to practically glow with triumph.

Triumph and, of course, killing intent. The man’s desire to butcher everything that moved never seemed to turn off. If it weren’t so off-putting Obito might admire the man’s self-control, clearly, it was a testament to his unnatural patience that this senate was even still standing.

All the same, it seemed the session had gone well for the nuke nin.

Obito blinked, looked again, looked at the girl’s eyes and the slope of her nose and cheekbones, “I’ll be damned… Is that Amidala Padme?”

Yes, now that he looked closer, it was certainly her face beneath all that makeup. Meaning… Meaning that the queen from before, the one who had looked remarkably like Padme, or well, as far as one could tell with the overdone geisha makeup, had likely been a body double to throw off the nuke nin or any other potential assassins. It wouldn’t be the fake who would speak to the senate…

“Well, it would make sense to have a decoy,” Lee remarked, appearing to agree with him about it being the handmaiden of all people, “Although why they didn’t have the Jedi make a clone is beyond me.”

“I don’t think they do clones,” Obito said distantly, then frowned, the implications sinking in, “Shishou, you realize this means that we’ve repeatedly berated a sovereign ruler and called her a whining civilian.”
“…Minato will understand, with context,” Lee said, but it was a rather weak excuse, and by the look on her face she knew it. Because given the debriefing they’d have to give when they got back, no matter how understanding Minato-sensei was, he would not understand with context.

“We are in so far over our heads it isn’t even funny anymore,” Obito whined, tearing at his hair, wishing he had someone else to complain to, even if it was Kakashi who’d probably just blankly stare at him and then say something too Bakashi to even process.

“Oh, are they… They are waving us over,” Lee commented, and Obito looked up, to see the queen’s guard Panaka, indeed, waving them over with a rather narrow eyed glare while the queen and senator looked on in anticipation.

“Shit,” Obito said, “So, politics, does trying to ingratiate ourselves with a queen come before or after running like hell from an unknown nuke nin?”

“I doubt he’s going to cut us in half in front of the queen of all things, aren’t they from the same planet or something?”

“There’s always genjutsu,” Obito pointed out, “Besides, then he can get the queen out of the way too.”

“Oh, that is good, and he blames it on assassins from the Trade Federation,” Lee stated, eyes narrowing, “Still, I’ve never been beaten in combat before, well… permanently anyways. And besides, I give off an intimidating amount of chakra, you do too for that matter. If he’s any good, which I suspect he is, then he’s going to use this as an opportunity to evaluate our strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps try to poison us if he’s truly paranoid. If I were him though, I’d try to maneuver us away from the Jedi and into his own sphere of influence.”

“Are we really doing this then?” Obito asked, and Lee shrugged, tilted her head to one side, and considered the situation.

“Well, we’re friends with the English nin, and he is a bastard set out to destroy his own government and earn a kage hat for himself. The Jedi seem like a mostly unreasonable lot, Jinn aside, this man might be different. Not only that, but we’re here specifically to gather intelligence, for that alone it’s best to keep an eye on this bastard, even if he is eerily reminiscent of Danzo. He may not be representative of his people, and if he is, well then best to mark him now before we move any further on any of this,” that was, a somewhat reasonable response, and while it wasn’t one Obito necessarily liked it was one he could respect, for now.
Of course, if it turned out the man devoured babies then they were burning his carcass and feeding the remains to wild dogs. You could never really trust someone who hated everything as much as this man seemed to.

“Great, we’re doing this, glad we’re leaving our options open,” Obito grumbled before, falling in step with Lee, they jumped down from the steps in a single bound to where the entourage was standing.

Then they both grinned and bowed, Lee speaking for the both of them as she straightened and looked their audience in the eye, “Your honorable majesty, and the honorable senator Palpatine, it’s good to see you again. Is there something Obito and I can help you with?”

The senator answered with a smile that contained far too many teeth, “We are returning to my quarters, and wished to invite you along, there is a proposition which, perhaps, your people would be willing to consider.”

And as he stood from his bow, Obito had no doubt, that as this man looked at him he was actively imagining Obito being rend in two by a laser katana, his eyes plucked from his head, one black and one green, and eaten like maraschino cherries.

After all, his hatred, like miasma, hung over this entire city.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan stepped in to join Anakin before the council, Qui-Gon offering him a reassuring smile, that Anakin returned rather wanly. The examination had been long, perhaps warranted, jedi rarely accepted a student old enough to take these sorts of exams, and Anakin’s situation was certainly an interesting one.

Still, Qui-Gon was confident, that at least this once, the jedi council would see reason, even if Obi-Wan did not share his confidence in the slightest.

“Correct you were, Qui-Gon,” Yoda began without clarification but his eyes resting on Anakin, who stubbornly refused to budge beneath Yoda’s gaze.
“His cells contain a high concentration of midi-chlorians,” Mace finished for the troll with Ki-Adi adding, “The force is strong with him.”

Qui-Gon breathed a sigh of relief, because while he hadn’t truly doubted there’d been a nagging warning throughout the force that things might not be so simple as Qui-Gon hoped, “He’s to be trained, then.”

However, the blank faced looks of the council members dashed this hope, even as Mace said, “No, he will not be trained.”

Anakin’s face paled, tears began to gather at the corner of his eyes, but he didn’t move, didn’t flinch and by the look on his face Qui-Gon wondered if he’d somehow known even before they had announced their decision.

“He is too old, there is already too much anger in him,” Mace elaborated, nodding towards Anakin, who indeed, was already beginning to simmer with unspoken anger.

“He is the chosen one,” Qui-Gon said, motioning towards him, looking at the council members desperately, “You must see it!”

“Clouded, this boy’s future is. Masked by his youth,” Yoda responded, clearly intending to remain unswayed by any argument Qui-Gon might give him. Suddenly, without any real thought why, Qui-Gon found himself thinking back to Lee Eru, staring up at this council in exasperation, throwing her hands into the air and walking away after giving a dire warning that had been universally disregarded.

And just like that, Qui-Gon decided to take a page out of Lee Eru’s book, and directly confront the thinking of the council, “The future itself is clouded, has been clouded for some time now! Surely that, if anything, is a sign that the boy must be trained.”

He motioned to Anakin then, then back to the council, “And if we don’t train him, you can rest assured, the shinobi will, and then his path to the dark side is all but guaranteed. They, after all, have no such issues with his anger and fear.”

“Irrelevant, your point is, perhaps more dangerous to train as jedi than shinobi,” Yoda considered, “Difficult now to say, difficult to say if they would train him at all.”
Oh, but it wasn’t difficult, it wasn’t difficult at all, they would rather see the boy in the hands of those on the edge of darkness than the Jedi. It seemed that they would honestly rather see the boy become whatever it is a shinobi was.

And again, the memory of Lee Eru sparing her apprentice an exasperated look of confusion, throwing her hands into the air, and then walking out the door with all the strange drama she seemed to accumulate in any given moment.

Then, taking a calming breath, Qui-Gon announced, “I will train him, then. I will take Anakin as my padawan learner.”

Obi-wan’s eyes closed, briefly, there was a sharp pang in the force, and then it was gone, suppressed and released into the force itself, and Obi-wan’s eyes opened, a quieter, duller, blue. Anakin, meanwhile, looked over to Qui-Gon as if seeing him for the first time.

“Padawan, you have already, Qui-Gon. Impossible to take a second.”

Not impossible, simply not done before, it was a weak excuse and they knew it.

“Obi-Wan is ready to face the trials,” Qui-Gon said, “We have already discussed it.”

Obi-Wan shot Qui-Gon a look, one that was a good deal less subtle than he intended, before nodding, “We have, and I am ready.”

“Ready so early, are you? What know you of ready?”

Obi-wan spared Qui-Gon a rather humiliated and dry look, one that spoke of a smug sort of humiliation, as if to say, “I told you so, master.”

Qui-Gon grimaced then turned back to the council, “He is headstrong, and he has much to learn about the living force, but he is capable. There is little more he will learn from me.”

But that was not Qui-Gon’s decision to make, and he knew it, no, they would delay and use Obi-Wan as an excuse for Anakin to remain untrained, to be sent to Telos and then, undoubtedly to be
picked up by Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha and taken to whatever planet their village rested on.

However, oddly enough, the force did not reverberate with this future, in fact, looking into it, the force did not seem to acknowledge Lee and Obito at all. Instead, there was only this moment, the council looking towards him and telling him that Anakin would be taken with them to protect the queen, but he would not be trained.

They would take Anakin Skywalker untrained into battle while the council hemmed and hawed and told him that the fate of the boy, of the chosen one, would be decided at some later time.

And in that moment, he wanted nothing more than to act as Lee Eru herself, throw his hands into the air, and just stride out the doors with the instruction that they call him when they finally made up their minds.

Perhaps it should be a far more worrying sign, that of all people, Qui-Gon found himself relating to her.

Meeting with the queen and senator proved to be an awkward moment of watching Amidala Padme stare out the window in the guise of a queen, the orange monstrosity standing with her, while Obito and Lee respectfully loitered against a wall, waiting for acknowledgement.

However, it seemed that, as far as Padme was concerned, Obito and Lee weren’t supposed to be able to recognize her under that makeup. For a civilian, perhaps, this was a reasonable assumption, but shinobi were trained for such subterfuge, and without a henge to alter he features, even beneath the makeup she was clearly recognizable.

Still, it made for a rather tense and uncomfortable silence between them, as Padme stared out into the city, painted red and gold by twilight, her eyes dry but a look of helpless sorrow painted on her face. The face of someone who had lost more than she had thought possible yet still moved despite it, the weight of her village on her thin, adolescent, shoulders.

Obito… He wouldn’t take back what he’d said, it had been warranted, but he wish he could at least say now that he understood. He too, had once worn that expression on his face, the third war had been built from such expressions.
Panaka and Palpatine walked in, the nuke nin senator grinning from ear to ear, as the queen’s civilian captain bowed before her, utterly ignoring Lee and Obito, “Your highness, Senator Palpatine has been nominated to succeed Valorum as supreme chancellor.”

Lee’s green eyes met Obito’s for a single instant, and in them he read her complete lack of surprise, along with, perhaps, an appreciation for the ruthlessly efficient level this man appeared to operate on. Holding your own people hostage for supreme power, and having those same people gratified to see you gain that power, well done, senator, well done.

“A surprise, to be sure, but a welcome one,” the senator in question straightened from his bow a look of humility stretched across his features, one that looked, despite the killing intent still wafting from him, oddly genuine. For a man who made no pretense of his hatred for mankind, he put an odd emphasis in looking the role he played, almost as if he was unaware of how blatant he was, “I promise, your majesty, if I am elected, I will bring democracy back to the republic. I will put an end to the corruption and the trade federation will lose its influence over the bureaucrats.”

How earnest he looked when he said this, it really was remarkable, Obito doubted he himself could ever hold such a straight face.

Padme looked relatively unmoved, her eyes still dark as she looked down at her senator, mind clearly caught elsewhere, “Who else can be nominated?”

“Bail Antilles of Alderaan and Ainlee Teem of Malastare,” her captain answered for her but the senator quickly spoke over this, “Our… situation, as it were, will create a strong sympathy vote for us. I will be chancellor, I promise.”

“I fear by the time you have control of the bureaucrats, senator, there will be nothing left of our cities, our people, and our way of life…” Padme responded with a sigh, and as she did so, the senator’s eyes moved instead to Lee and Obito.

“I know, I fear the same, your majesty, which is why I have invited our warrior friends,” the senator held up a hand, motioned towards Lee and Obito, “The law, right now, is in the trade federation’s favor. They hold a majority in the senate and have bribed far too many officials for us to out rule them. As it is it will be many months before the senate agrees to send droids. Similarly, the jedi, being bound to the law, will protect you but they will not provide manpower to help take back our system. However, our friends the shinobi, they are not entities of the republic, and are likely free to help whom they will.”

“Oh,” Lee responded, stepping forward towards the three of them, “I was wondering what your
Padme’s eyes darted to Lee and Obito then back to the senator almost in desperation, “Senator, with all due respect, they are only two people! However well trained or experienced they are they will be facing an army of droids…”

“Are there enemy nin among these droids of yours?” Lee asked, cutting Padme off, and then clarified, “Enemy jedi, your sith.”

None of them appeared to have an answer to that, but Lee didn’t seem to be looking for one, as she continued, “If this is an army of puppets, then rest assured, Obito and I will be more than enough to defeat them,” Lee explained, crossing her arms and looking from Padme to the chancellor with a speculative expression, “And if it is an army of rogue jedi… Then, in all but the direst of circumstances, Obito and I will be more than enough to defeat them.”

Lee then grinned, clapping her hands together, and in a rather familiar fashion getting straight to the point, “With that, Obito and I will be more than willing to help drive back the wretched invaders from your land for the honor and glory of Naboo. Rest assured, your majesty, you count on us.”

Padme took this in, seeming dazed for a moment, then reached a decision, determination flashing once again in her dark eyes as she looked towards the captain with a regal tilt of her head.

“Captain, ready my ship!” Padme commanded, the man blanching and stating, waving his hands in protest, “Your majesty, you must stay here, where it’s safe…”

“No place is safe, if the senate doesn’t condemn this invasion. The republic is no longer a democracy and my place is with my people,” her attention turned to Palpatine, and with a somewhat softer look she said, “If you win the election, senator, I know you will do everything possible to stop the federation. I pray you bring sanity and compassion back to the senate.”

The man, with warm brown eyes and the shadow of death hidden beneath back, stared back and nodded his acknowledgement of this. Padme then turned to Lee and Obito, searching their faces, frowning, and then giving one final parting thought, “Shinobi, I will meet you at the docks, bring anything you might need for a war.”

And just like that, she and all the others left the senator’s quarters, leaving Lee, Obito, and the
senator himself behind. For a moment, the three of them watched the retinue depart, the doors closing behind them, then, eventually, it was Lee who broke the silence.

“Well played, nuke nin,” Lee said, eyes sliding to the senator, “I suppose Obito and I must congratulate you on your new position.”

“Thank you, although, it’s hardly my position yet,” the man said, but from the smile on his face it was more than clear that victory was so close he could almost taste it.

“All the same, I find myself curious about why you’ve arranged for shishou and I to participate in this charade of yours,” Obito stated, “When you have everything to gain if your queen meets some unfortunate end.”

The man offered them an odd smile, relocated himself to a seat beside the window, and then motioned for the pair of them to sit in two chairs across from his, “You two are oddly perceptive, I suppose it would make no difference what I say to you, somehow, within a second, you have seen what no jedi has managed in decades.”

“You are rather blatant,” Lee commented, lacing her fingers together and staring Palpatine in the eye.

“Only to those versed in the dark side of the force,” Palpatine said, “The sith, you see, are notorious for their abilities to hide from those who draw solely from the light side of the force.”

“And that’s what you are?” Lee asked, but the man didn’t answer, merely smiled.

The dark side again, well, at least this time, Obito and Lee weren’t being condemned for it. Still, sitting here with this man smiling at them, Obito felt the need to get to the point quicker than usual, “What is it you want from us?”

“If this is your idea of an assassination attempt, then I’ll let you know that I find it rather sad, and that this half-assed scheme of yours will not end well for you,” Lee stated rather evenly, her own killing intent spiking, as she said, “You will need far more than an army of puppets and a rabid swordsman to dispose of me or my apprentice.”

“My idea of assassination,” the man asked with a raised brow, “My, my, you are quite paranoid.
No, think of this as an… evaluation, of sorts. I have heard of your exploits on Tatooine, as well as your own boasts, you might say I’m curious to see the results against a greater force.”

“Say we do obliterate this opposing force of yours, what then?” Lee asked, every inch of her now a negotiator, her green eyes sharp in the half light of twilight as she stared at the senator, “You seem to have put a fair amount of time and effort into ransacking Naboo.”

“Then I count myself lucky for having made some interesting friends, friends that, perhaps, can be of use to me in years to come,” Palpatine said with a small and rather bemused shrug, “You see, not all beings are as close minded as the jedi, and I am not one to overlook the talents of others for my own love of philosophy.”

“And if we die?” Obito asked, with his own raised eyebrows, and wasn’t it strange, how the man did not seem the slightest put off by Obito’s ravaged face.

“Well, that’s nice for you, that said, what do Obito and I gain out of your little farce?” Lee asked, “If we play along, and we win, what do we get from being your puppets?”

“I thought you merely wanted to help Naboo for the greater good of the galaxy,” Palpatine asked, but there was no surprise in his voice, indeed there was some amusement there, all too clear as he said, “Strange, I don’t think I’ve ever been this blatant with anyone before, it’s surprisingly refreshing.”

“Sure, this time, but you’ll want to keep our people close,” Obito pointed out, “And this venture does nothing to get us closer to you than it does the jedi.”

Lee, nodding towards Obito, then added to this thought, “We want an embassy, one on Naboo and one here on Coruscant, and a political advisor would not be misplaced. You’re about to come into a great seat of power, some gratitude to Konohagakure, I think, would not be misplaced.”

The man barked out a harsh laugh, “Oh, that is amusing, I do not believe I have been this entertained in some time. Truly, your people are more pragmatic than I expected.”
“Yes, should you succeed, then you shall have not only the gratitude of Naboo but also the
gratitude of the republic itself,” the man said with a rather thin smile, “The gratitude of the jedi,
however, now that I cannot guarantee.”

Lee offered a small laugh, “Oh, we never expected that… Honestly, despite wanting to slice me in
half and eat my intestines, you’re surprisingly easy to talk to… Although the amount of killing
intent you leak off at any given moment is rather alarming.”

The man blinked, blinked again, “I’m sorry?”

“Killing intent,” Obito explained, “It’s… well, essentially, how much you’re thinking of killing
shishou and I at this very moment.”

“I’ve never met someone who hates everything as much as you apparently do,” Lee said before
grinning, and voicing with appropriate gravitas, “So, whatever the reason, his heart or his shoes, he
stood outside his cave, hating the Whos.”

“That is… Quite interesting,” the man said slowly, his killing intent rising in fact, apparently, he
had been under the mistaken belief that he was subtle. Still, with that grandfather’s smile, he said,
“Now, I believe it is best that you catch your ship, lest our beloved queen depart without you.”

Yes, they wouldn’t want that now, would they?
Chapter 9

Obito, before his apprenticeship, before the Kannabi bridge and the cave and Madara, had never seen Lee in battle. There’d been no real opportunity to, Konoha hadn’t been desperate enough to send its genin teams to the front lines, even as messengers, and so Obito hadn’t seen much of Kusa or the enemy shinobi there.

No, he mostly saw the effects, the younger and younger genin ages and early promotion to chunin. The quiet, bodiless, funerals held within the village, the streets growing emptier and emptier as the war trudged onwards, seemingly without end…

Of course, having grown up during the third war, having only been five when the war started, it’d all seemed natural to Obito. Or, if not natural, then something he could ignore a little more easily than those who clearly remembered what peace tasted like.

That was simply the way the world was, the war would end someday, but until then, Obito had his dreams of wearing the kage hat, and more importantly, gaining the respect of everyone within the village.

However, while he had never seen Lee in battle before she’d come for him in Madara’s cave, he had once seen the aftermath of it, or, rather, glimpsed it.

Team seven had been skirting unusually close to Kusa, on a C-ranked mission that was edging on B for sheer proximity to the border. However, the nervous, worn, local shop owner from Konoha, who had scraped together his savings for this mission, had paid the price for the escort mission to guide him to his brother’s village just by the border then escort him and his family back to Konoha.

It wasn’t an unusual mission, even years into the war, a hidden village’s prices were steep, especially in war time, and sometimes it took years to scrape together enough. Many families had tried fleeing inwards towards the hidden village without shinobi protection, sometimes they got lucky, more often than not they didn’t.

So, by that time, even though he was only twelve or so, he’d already been on one or two of this type of mission and was no longer in awe of it. Though what he had been thinking about at the time was a bit unclear. Memories before the Kannabi bridge tended to be a bit hazy, or well, not hazy, but rather rose colored by nostalgia or else fuzzy at the edges.
Most people, Obito thought, didn’t have a clear defining moment in which everything about them changed. Most people changed gradually, Obito hadn’t, as a result it was hard to remember sometimes how the world had looked to the unscarred version of himself. He was a stranger to his younger self.

Either way, he had probably been desperately flirting with Rin, much to Minato-sensei’s exasperation, and Bakashi’s vague amusement. He was always desperately flirting with Rin, almost as much as he was desperately declaring himself the future hokage, it had seemed like the only way to gain acknowledgement back then, this loud mouthed thoughtless persistent desperation.

Kakashi had always labeled him as adorably confident.

In retrospect, Obito would have called himself anything but, though he had put on a remarkably good show.

He remembered the way the tall grass looked, in summer, the road now dry enough after the rainy season had passed to support carts and horses again. He remembered how blue the sky had been, a few scattered clouds here and there, and Rin… He remembered Rin’s amused, slight, smile of friendship and fondness as she took in this summer’s day.

And he remembered how that smile had always felt like a knife in his heart.

Eventually they had arrived in the village, just on the edge of the border, they’d left the civilian to his own devices, all the rest of them loitering outside the brother’s home as they looked out towards the horizon and the border to Grass.

There had been windchimes, outside of the house, clinking together in the soft breeze that stirred the grass. Looking out, Obito remembered having been unusually quiet, as he thought to himself that you almost couldn’t tell a war was going on.

All of them had been unusually quiet then.

Then though, Minato-sensei had stilled, a wild delighted grin had appeared on his lips, he pressed his fingers to the ground, closing his eyes, likely going into sage mode but the grin only grew wider, “Lee’s here.”
“Eru-sama?” Rin had asked, her respect for one of Konoha’s two S-ranked kunoichi had already been cemented at that point, stars practically dancing in her eyes as she asked. If push came to shove, Rin would choose Senju Tsunade over Eru Lee if only because the former was a medic nin like Rin herself was and though Lee was respected she was rarely understood, but that said, her worship of Lee was no small thing either.

“Yes, Eru Lee, my old teammate,” Minato-sensei’s smile seemed to lose ten years then, which was a little alarming, as he was only twenty-two at that point. All the same though, even though he had been dating Kushina for years at that point, and even though Obito hadn’t really been paying attention that much, he always looked like that around Lee.

They had this very strange bond, platonic yet stronger than platonic, that bound them together even over vast distances.

How Kushina and Minato’s relationship worked with that sort of interference Obito could never quite figure out.

“The war’s gotten close to the border, then,” Kakashi noted dully, which was not news, indeed, several small villages on the edge of Fire had been attacked before this. Obito imagined it was the same in other bordering countries as well.

Unsaid was that wherever the war went, Eru Lee, like some grim reaper, inevitably followed.

She’d shown up before the hour was even up, a wild grin on her own face, practically sprinting towards Minato-sensei as she embraced him, bringing her face next to his only for a moment, so that they were cheek to cheek, before grabbing Kakashi and pulling him to her to embrace as a younger beloved brother.

However, as she’d stepped back from Kakashi and Minato-sensei, Obito’s eyes had widened as he realized she was positively dripping in blood. Almost every inch of her, of her uniform, was covered in dried blood, specks of it still clung stubbornly to her cheeks, like flecks of unwashed makeup that had drifted down from her eyes.

None of it seemed to be hers, there wasn’t a wound on her. More, she hadn’t even seemed to have noticed. War had made her used to the feeling of dried blood on her skin.

“God, Minato, what brings you out here?” Lee had asked as she’d sat down, “This is no place for
“Escort mission,” Minato briefly explained with a small smile, “And you, trouble at the border?”

Lee grimaced slightly, made some extravagant gesture of more or less, and said, “Well, not anymore, not for a while… From Kumo or Kusa, anyways, don’t see much of Iwa out here.”

Minato-sensei’s smile faded, blue eyes drifting over her uniform, the bags under her eyes, and in that moment, he’d probably seen everything, every word she hadn’t told him as their weird telepathic bond kicked in, “Are you headed back to Konoha then?”

She shook her head mutely, “Lightning, if you can believe it. They have me running all around the continent, I don’t know when I’ll get a chance to go back.”

“They’ll send you back sometime,” Minato-sensei noted quietly, but while it wasn’t a lie, Obito could tell that neither he nor Lee believed it.

Lee, with her curling red hair matted and in disarray, her green eyes framed by dark shadows, offered him a sad sort of smile and said with a fond sort of wistfulness, “Wouldn’t that be nice?”

“Are you the only one out here?” Minato-sensei asked then and Lee had offered him a shrug and a sort of, ‘what can you do?’ expression.

“There’s some out, further in, but they figure it’s… More efficient, to send me for this sort of scenario; waste not, want not,” Lee responded with a truly strained grin on her face.

Minato-sensei hadn’t grinned in return, had only offered her a rather piercing displeased look, one that protested all of her circumstances and wished for a better world for them to live in. But he didn’t say anything, soon enough the conversation turned to other things, their current mission, life back in Konoha, saying what the team had been up to since Lee had last seen them, and all the pretense of normality that one desperately clung to in war.

The next morning, the sky had been black, covered in dark clouds formed of smoke, as the funeral pyres had been lit. And Obito had thought, as they’d turned away, that for there to be that much smoke there must have been bodies beyond counting.
And that was Obito’s first, passing glimpse, of the truth behind Eru Lee’s reputation.

The flying taxi ride over to the landing platform where the queen’s ship waited was one of those unbearably awkward moments that Obito would give anything not to live through again. Or, well, live through right now.

He and Lee had almost declined it, but unfortunately, Coruscant, with its metal towers and constant flurry of urban movement, was like a labyrinth. More, the buildings were far enough apart that chakra powered jumps alone would not be able to get Obito from one to another, which meant clinging to Lee-shishou for dear life as they floated and or flew their way across this great metal city.

It seemed easier to just take the damn taxi.

Even if it did mean sitting in silence right behind the good senator and all his friends, not to mention the queen in the taxi behind them. And Obito did mean silence, perfect dread silence uninterrupted by even a radio.

Among the civilians there was the dread of the coming battle, the bitter certainty that they would most likely lose their lives, more that their planet itself would never be freed then. Completely and hopelessly unaware that the mastermind of their misfortune was sitting here in the taxi right next to them. As for Lee and Obito, well, they had just been presented an unnerving task as well as an unnerving truth about the situation they were in.

Only the senator himself seemed at ease with the situation, staring out the window with a look of determination, of course the key word there was seemed, judging by yet again the uncontrollable deluge of killing intent this man pumped out, he was likely planning the complete annihilation of the entire republic as well as this great shining planet even as he looked out the window.

Idly, Obito wondered how the man couldn’t find it exhausting, to hate everything and everyone like that every second of his life. Obito constantly felt drained by his own vast hatred for the memory of Madara.

More, at least Obito had a very good reason for his feelings about Madara. He hadn’t, for example, really felt one way or another about Uchiha Madara until he’d met him face to face. He’d been too
far removed, more the clan itself wasn’t really sure what to make of him. He was the clan’s controversial dirty ancestor that they flip flopped from being proud of his achievements as head of the clan and a warrior to brushing him under the carpet and hoping no one noticed. Out in public, oh Madara was a monster, but in private… Well, there were a few wonderings if Madara hadn’t had the right idea.

Of course, Obito now new the man was batshit crazy, but having been banished from the clan himself and labelled a Senju despot no one was likely to believe him. Well, maybe Itachi or Shisui, who still seemed to get along with Obito well enough whenever they crossed paths, but one of them was only eight years old so that meant basically nothing.

Actually, if he thought about it, that was remarkably similar to trying to tell the jedi that Palpatine was an enemy nin infiltrating their governments and likely plotting their gruesome deaths.

Point being, by the time the taxi floated to a stop by the landing, Obito and Lee were practically sprinting out of there, dashing ahead of the senator, the civilian captain, the twenty or so troops that Padme had managed to scrounge up, and the queen and her retinue.

Well, her retinue plus the orange monstrosity, that at least was a small benefit to riding with the senator, they hadn’t had to ride with the babbling orange frog.

There, waiting for them, was a rather frustrated looking Kenobi Obi-Wan bickering with his master, an equally frustrated looking Jinn Qui-Gon, and Skywalker Anakin looking up at them with a rather bleak and resigned expression.

“So, the test went that well,” Obito noted to Lee rather drily, even though beneath that, he couldn’t help being a little vindictively pleased. If Anakin could abandon them so easily then he deserved a little taste of bitter disappointment. Lee glanced towards him with raised eyebrows, seeing through his mask of indifference with ease, before looking back at the trio.

Eventually Lee and Obito reached the three of them and there was an awkward pause in all conversations as they sized each other up. Even though only a few hours had passed it seemed longer, as if it had been months since they had all seen each other.

“Well then, here we are,” Lee said with a rather forced smile, “The queen’s hired us to take care of this invasion problem, I assume it’s the same for you?”
Jinn offered a rather amused smile back, “We are still protecting the queen, if that is what you mean.”

Lee nodded to that, shoving her hands in her pockets, rocking back and forth on the heels of her sandals clearly waiting for someone to say something.

Kenobi, surprisingly, was the first to break this silence, “I see you’ve ridden with the senator, have you changed your mind?”

Lee and Obito exchanged a glance. While, technically, they had no allegiance to the senator and his ilk, they were on something of a probationary period with the man. More, the man was going places, his hidden village then, was going places, and that meant the jedi were going nowhere. More, they technically had no allegiance to the jedi, more, the senator had been far more understanding and accommodating than the jedi had been.

Based on all that, it no longer was in their best interests to shout from the rooftops that the man was a nuke nin out to slaughter them all. Even if, thinking this right now, Obito couldn’t help but cringe.

Still, they’d told them once and been disregarded, that should be enough.

“Sure,” Lee finally said, a slightly hesitant look on her face, one which practically broadcast all her feelings about grandpa death even to the most socially stunted of human beings.

Obito elaborated or rather deflected, “We had a discussion with the senator today which has changed our opinion for… the better,” Obito paused then offered a rather chagrinned smile, “I’m afraid our trademark shinobi paranoia was getting to us.”

“Trademark paranoia?” Kenobi asked rather drily with a pair of raised judgmental eyebrows that had no business judging anyone or anything because he would very likely be the first to die.

“Those who trust too easily often find themselves in shallow graves,” Lee elaborated rather casually, “In our line of business it pays to be at least slightly cautious of those around you.”

Judging by the jedi’s expressions, this was not a tenant of their own profession, which was really too bad as they could use a healthy dose of paranoia. Anakin, for his own part, certainly could as he tried and failed to enter their ranks.
That awkward silence returned, this time uninterrupted by anyone. Obito’s eyes drifted to the city below them, the bright white lights almost like stars, while the stars themselves remained black and unseeable with the pollution of light.

What a different world this was than the one he’d grown up in. He couldn’t live in a place like this, where the stars had crashed to the earth and glittered in each glass window but remained absent from the sky…

At last, it was Obito, his eyes turning back to small, innocent, miserable looking Anakin, who couldn’t help but vindictively ask, “So, Anakin, how’d your test go?”

Anakin flushed then paled then flushed again, eyes wide as he realized the jig if there ever had been one was now up, and that Lee and Obito were perfectly aware that he’d gone behind their back to consort with the jedi of all things.

He opened his mouth to say something, some excuse or reason that Obito frankly didn’t care about, when the body double queen finally arrived with a rather determined looking Padme in tow.

Jinn and Kenobi offered a pair of small respectful bows towards the queen, Jinn speaking, “Your highness, it is our pleasure to continue to serve and protect you.”

The queen nodded, a short thing, more out of politeness than any real thought, “I welcome your help, any help I can find,” here her eyes drifted to Lee and Obito with no small amount of disdain before glancing back at the jedi, “Senator Palpatine fears the federation means to destroy me.”

Well, Obito and Lee’s position as dirt under her, and Padme’s, shoe had been all but confirmed. Good to know their place in Naboo and their political standing. You’d think that Lee and Obito had left them to die instead of saving their ungrateful asses.

Jinn straightened from his bow, “I promise you, I will not let that happen.”

The queen gave another short nod then moved to make her way onboard followed by Padme and the rest of the handmaidens as well as the gathered troops, the good senator watching the procession with a grim look, as if he was worried for their safety. Obito would say this, take out the killing intent, and the man put on a frighteningly good show.
The orange monstrosity lunged towards Qui-Gon and Anakin, hugging them both and declaring, “Wesa goen home!”

He then darted onto the ship, the rest of them moving after him, Lee however stopped Jinn with a hand. “Hold it, why’s Anakin coming?!”

Anakin stopped, paused, looked at Lee with a rather betrayed and hurt expression (which, that little ungrateful bitch, he had no right to direct that kind of look at her) while Jinn merely looked at her with raised eyebrows, “He has… Been assigned a test of sorts by the council.”

“Sending him untrained to a warzone?” Lee questioned her own eyebrows raising.

“I’m not untrained!” Anakin shouted, before pausing, no doubt realizing that all the minimal training he’d had came from Obito and Lee rather than the jedi.

“It is not a decision I agree with,” Jinn hedged, “But the council… The council did not listen to me, I’m afraid.”

Obito couldn’t help but give out a small derisive laugh, these people, they were so very transparent if you knew what to look for. They spat on shinobi for their inhumanity and here they were sending Anakin off to a warzone to be conveniently killed off just to avoid training him or else sending him to Konoha.

“God forbid you don’t listen to the council,” Obito finally said, shaking his head, and without another word leaving Lee-shishou and the rest to stare after him as he stepped on board the queen’s ship.

Skywalker Anakin, he’d decided, was no longer his problem.

Within the queen’s chambers, as they sped through the system and towards Naboo and whatever fate awaited them, Qui-Gon and Captain Panaka spoke with the queen on how precisely they were going to go about this. The jedi had been forbidden from directly intervening, protecting the queen, that they could do, but not engaging in the actual battles on their behalf.

Thus, whatever happened was up to the small crew of this ship and whoever was on Naboo itself.
Well, that, Qui-Gon thought as his eyes drifted to his audience including Sabe, Eirtae, Obi-Wan, as well as Lee and Obito, and on the shinobi themselves. They seemed confident, even standing there as they watched the proceedings. The boy looked grim, his presence almost simmering in the force with anger and betrayal towards Anakin, though it had slowly drifted away as the meeting progressed. However, in the woman, there was a certain sense of calm serenity as she anticipated the coming battle, her mind and will stretching far beyond this starship.

“The moment we land the federation will arrest you, and force you to sign the treaty,” the captain said to the queen, earning a small nod of agreement from Qui-Gon.

“I agree,” he paused then, allowed himself some honesty, “I’m not sure what you hope to accomplish by this.”

“I’m going to take back what’s ours,” the girl said, and she was, in that moment, little more than a girl. A proud one, a strong one, one that could make Naboo proud, but still a child rushing what was left of her forces into almost certain death.

“There are only twelve of us, your highness, we have no army,” the captain hissed out, and there was desperation on his face, as here was a man who had seem combat and was no doubt well aware of the odds they faced.

Qui-Gon swiftly added, “I cannot fight a war for you, Your Highness, only protect you.”

From behind them there was a sigh, and Lee Eru spoke calmly, “You’re not going to need an army.”

“Excuse me?” Panaka asked, his brows lowering as he turned and forced himself to acknowledge the woman.

She leaned casually against the wall, surveying them with those strange green eyes of hers, ones that seemed at once more perceptive than even a jedi’s a she looked both into them and through them all at once. Slowly, with the same calm and confidence, she repeated, “You won’t need an army, I’ll be enough.”

“You’ll be enough?” Panaka asked derisively, however the woman didn’t seem phased at all, just, perhaps, a touch exasperated.
“We’re facing an army of puppets, droids, not jedi?” Lee asked, but a rather amused smile appeared on her lips before she left time for anyone to answer, “Then again, even if it’s an army of rogue jedi, I’ve faced that before too… You won’t need an army, I’m good enough.”

Next to her Obi-Wan was looking at her with both derision and alarm, no doubt wondering if it was simple arrogance that fueled her words or something else, something deeper and truer because the force, or something other than the force but felt like it, seemed bright and overwhelming in her presence. As if, should she desire it, the stars themselves would rearrange to her liking.

As for Qui-Gon himself, he didn’t know, a part of him couldn’t help but believe her words. Believe that while diplomacy was not her realm, battle, clearly, was. More, he almost could picture her, this great overwhelming presence of the force in one small woman, and it did not seem so unbelievable that she alone could have defended the galaxy from the sith.

But a part of him, more rooted in logic, refused to believe even the most powerful of jedi could command such heights.

“You will forgive me if I do not believe that, Master Eru,” the queen said with her forceful dignity, one which Lee did not even blink at.

“Of course,” Lee said with some dry amusement, as if she found that distantly funny and regrettably familiar, “Just reminding you that you did hire both me and my apprentice for a reason.”

“I did not hire you,” the queen said rather forcefully as if this made all the difference, “Senator Palpatine hired you on my behalf.”

The senator… The two had been curiously silent about him, they still were now, there was a wariness about him when his name was spoken but it wasn’t that gut almost instinctive reaction they’d first had on the landing pad. Or, when they’d had that strange meeting with the woman and her apprentice in Dex’s, where Lee had warned them about the man, about how he was a sith, or something like it.

Something must have happened when they’d left each other, well, clearly they had been hired by the senator to protect Naboo, but something more must have happened than even that…
Lee merely smiled and shrugged, “You, the senator, either way you can consider Obito and I temporarily employed for Naboo’s service. I just thought you might like to be more efficient with the resources you have, but do what you have to.”

Her apprentice for his own part, shot her a look, raised eyebrows and a small smile which she returned, some unspoken joke passing between them along with something deeper and more profound than that. Theirs was a connection deeper than any padawan or master Qui-Gon knew of had ever allowed themselves, and in every glance, every gesture it showed itself.

However, the others all turned their attention from them back to the queen, even as Qui-Gon still watched the pair, still trying to parse them or at the very least have some small understanding of them and the bond between them.

Sadly, he seemed alone in that desire, no one else, not even Obi-Wan, seemed to care to understand these people better. That seemed the jedi way these days, to get rid of anything that seemed remotely uncomfortable and unorthodox. Certainly, he thought almost bitterly to himself, that was what they had chosen to do with Anakin Skywalker.

“Jar Jar Binks,” the queen cried out, Jar Jar flailing and looking around with a puzzled expression at the address.

“Mesa, your highness?”

Obito’s head swiveled to the gungun, blinking almost comically, and letting out some exclaim of surprise in his own native tongue which earned him a slight whack across the back of his head from his master. In return he shot her a disbelieving look, motioning to Jar Jar, as if that was all the evidence and justification needed.

Qui-Gon couldn’t help a small smile at the interaction, what a strange pair they were.

“Yes,” the queen said, looking straight at Jar Jar, “I need your help.”

And at the sight of Lee’s comical look of disbelief, Obito’s smug smile of victory, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but bark out an amused laugh which he quickly had to stifle lest he be accused of being impolite.
Anakin waited impatiently, nervously, rather, in the main hold of the ship for either Padme or Obito or Lee or someone to walk by. He felt… He didn’t know what he felt, really, he felt all sorts of things, he felt alone and turned upside down and like nothing was going the way he’d thought.

He’d thought, well he’d thought that his decision was the toughest, that he either would be a jedi or a shinobi and it depended on what Anakin said. Turned out that wasn’t it at all, and that the jedi didn’t even want him, and now it seemed like Obito didn’t even want him, and so Anakin might end up neither at all.

He hadn’t thought that would happen, hadn’t even considered it, and now… Now he didn’t know what to do except it seemed like every door that had been opened was now slammed in his face. His future seemed so terribly dark.

More, somehow, Lee and Obito had known, known before Anakin had said anything, and they’d… Well, Lee he couldn’t read, she’d seemed sad, sad since that morning, but Obito had seemed anything but sad, no he’d seemed angry, like he could barely even look at Anakin anymore.

Doors down the corridor opened, Anakin turned, and there were Obito and Lee walking forward and talking amongst themselves amicably in their native language about something or another. Anakin stepped forward, grinning, except, when he looked at them, his grin disappeared.

Both stopped walking, Lee’s eyes turned from Anakin to Obito, she stared at him for a moment, her smile gone and she whispered something in his ear, squeezing his shoulder then walked past him leaving Anakin and Obito to stand in the hallway staring at one another.

Obito sighed, staring for a moment at the silver walls and his own warped reflection in the ship while Anakin nervously searched his face for a sign of familiarity a sign that not everything had changed in only a day…

Finally, Obito said, still watching his own reflection, “It would have been better, for you, if we’d had a chance to talk earlier. I’ve had time to think on this, and the more I think on it, honestly, the less understanding I am.”

“I’m…”

“You’re not sorry,” Obito cut in, turning to face Anakin, both eyes burning as he looked down at
him, “You’re sorry you didn’t pass your test, but you’re not sorry.”

“But I…” Anakin paused, swallowed, then said, “I should have told you, you and Lee, when I realized…”

“Do you even realize why I’m upset?” Obito asked, and it was so quiet, so calm, but beneath that forced calm was a maelstrom the likes of which Anakin had never seen from Obito. Or at least, never directed towards him.

“I… Because I…” not because he didn’t tell him, that wasn’t it, and Anakin knew it too but he couldn’t quite put into words why Obito would be so upset with him now.

He continued to speak quietly, never once looking from Anakin, rather seeming to look through him and make Anakin feel smaller and smaller in the process, “Do you know that the hokage himself didn’t want you? That Lee-shishou had to convince him that her bringing you back was worth it, worth whatever consequences came when someone inevitably came looking for you? Did you know that when shishou first told you that you could come back with us, that I argued with her, and that she refused to listen?”

Anakin, of course, had never heard that, had never thought about it, he’d been grateful to Lee and Obito but he’d never thought for a moment that he hadn’t been wanted, that even Obito hadn’t agreed with Lee the way Obi-Wan hadn’t agreed with Mr. Qui-Gon or the council hadn’t agreed with him either.

“Lee put herself on the line for you, set herself up for conflict with the jedi, conflict we didn’t need, solely for your own benefit,” Obito paused then, eyes looking Anakin up and down, turning to face him completely, “More, she and I taught you Konoha techniques, we gave you, with no questions asked and nothing truly demanded, something of our own village. And at the first opportunity, at the first sign of violence and opposition, you sell yourself over to them without any inkling of what they truly are.”

“That’s not fair!” Anakin cried out.

“Life isn’t fair!” Obito spat back, “Life is unpleasant, brutal, and short and sometimes your village burns down and there is nothing you can do about it! At least I, at least shishou and I, acknowledge that. At least we don’t sugar coat it, even though any other great village would call us sappy tree huggers!”
“I don’t want to be that kind of a person!” Anakin cried out, closing his eyes, seeing that terrible vision of the future still before him, “I don’t want to be the kind of person who can just look and turn away and not think anything and…”

“They kidnap children, Anakin,” Obito said, cutting in once again, his voice now a far more forced calm as he said these horrifying words, “They don’t call it that, I’m sure, but the jedi come knocking on doors of these force sensitive children, and I’m sure there’s little protest on the part of the parents. More, look at you, nine years old and too old. Now, why exactly is that? How can it be, that a boy who is only nine, is already too old for them? Is it simply because you can’t be brainwashed into thinking exactly what they want?”

Anakin started desperately in again, stepping forward, blue eyes wide and earnest as he said, “That’s not…”

“And look at you now, untrained, unguided, unprotected, and sent off to the frontlines for some sort of final test. Even in the third war, which was perhaps even more brutal than the second, you didn’t even see genin on the front lines let alone academy students, and you aren’t even either of those. But, wouldn’t it be convenient, if Anakin Skywalker simply… disappeared? They don’t have to debate over training you if you’re dead.”

“That’s not what this is!”

“But it is,” Obito said calmly his lips twisting upwards into a derisive smile as he paused before finishing, “Awfully convenient.”

Anakin shook his head more desperately this time, insisting, “You’re wrong, Qui-Gon would never…”

“Jinn is an honorable man among thieves,” Obito acknowledged but his eyes were still hard and cold, “You can trust a man from a village, but that does not mean you can trust the village itself. A thousand years of history is a long time for the roots to grow dark and deep in a temple, and I think even Jinn would acknowledge that.”

Obito paused then, sighed, and said flatly almost conclusively, “But this isn’t my problem anymore. You can do what you like, Anakin, become a jedi if you think that’s the best thing. Hell, turn your back on them too and convince shishou to take you back to Konoha, if they reject you after all this. I’m sure she’d agree, Lee-shishou can be alarmingly forgiving to those she considers her close friends as well as her students.”
Obito made to move past him, speaking even as he walked, not even glancing at Anakin, “However, I’m done. You don’t spit in the faces of my precious people, Anakin, even ignorantly and unwittingly like you’ve done, and expect me to forget about it. Do what you must, but don’t think I’ll have any part of it.”

And with that, leaving Anakin to desperately stare after him, Obito disappeared headed towards the cockpit. How was it that… That everything had changed? That everything had changed in so short a time?

He was still standing there, staring after Obito, when Padme walked in.

“Annie!” she cried out in surprise as she saw him, “What are you doing here?”

Anakin swallowed turned towards her, tried to force a smile onto his face, “Oh, I’m with Qui-Gon, but, they’re not going to let me be a jedi. I’m too old.”

Padme rushed towards him, looked at him with fondness but more concern than anything else, and didn’t seem to hear a word of what he’d said, “This is going to be dangerous, Annie.”

A warzone, that’s what Obito had called it, as he’d casually predicted Anakin’s death, “I can help.”

Padme shook her head slowly, softly, as she searched his face almost desperately for something she wasn’t finding, “We’re going to war, Anakin. The queen has had to make the most difficult decision of her life. She doesn’t believe in fighting, we’re a peaceful people, Annie but…”

“I want to help, please,” he smiled at her, and for a moment, she smiled back and it was the most beautiful sight in the world.

It didn’t change anything though.

Now, perhaps it was just Obito, but there were many things he’d rather be doing than waiting for giant frog reinforcements in the middle of a swamp. Well, maybe he was giving them a hard time, surely Jar Jar Binks had to be the worst of all of them, and reinforcements were a nice idea, though,
as Lee had said, hardly necessary.

He didn’t blame them though, objectively, Lee didn’t look like much. She was both young and thin, no obvious defined muscles for her, no her great unbelievable strength lay in her chakra which was invisible to civilians.

So even though she’d gotten their ship and likely saved Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan’s asses in Tatooine, it probably was hard to believe just what Lee was capable of. They’d probably see soon enough though, and then the senator would too.

The senator, great, that would be a whole other can of worms…

Well, they’d get there when they got there.

In the meantime, Lee, Obito, and Jinn Qui-Gon stared at the murky water of the swamp waiting for something to happen. Kenobi stepped up behind them, standing next to his master, and stated, “Jar Jar is on his way to the gungan city.”

Jinn nodded rather absently, “Good.”

Kenobi seemed to accept this for a moment, nodding himself, before asking, “Do you think the queen’s idea will work?”

Jinn grimaced slightly before answering, “The gungans will not be easily swayed, and we can’t use our power to help her.”

Which was the polite way of saying no, that Jinn wasn’t hopeful at all, still in the end, like Lee had said, army or no army they should be fine. Even had it been Lee herself, standing alone on the battlefield, they would be more than fine.

“You really are only bodyguards then,” Lee noted, causing the jedi to look over towards her questioningly, “You can’t even cast a genjutsu on them to aid her, this is because you’re tied to the senate?”
“We are typically… neutral, in such matters, unless directed by the republic,” Jinn explained hesitantly, “Such is the nature of the jedi order.”

Neutrality, such a nice easy word, it typically led to good places. Anakin seemed to have been fooled by it but there was no such thing as true neutrality, at the end of the day you were going to stand with somebody whether you liked it or not. Even to do nothing, to stand aside and watch, was an action.

They stood in silence, watching the still water, still waiting for something, next to him Lee let out a small huff of impatience, looking over her shoulder to watch as the civilian troops continued to disembark. She crossed her arms, stretched, then recrossed them.

Finally, appearing to reach her limit, Lee announced, “Well, I think I’m going to stem the enemy tide while we’re all waiting here.”

Obito smiled, she’d lasted even less time than he’d thought she would. Lee turned to him, a hand on his shoulder, and said, “Obito, keep an eye on the rest of these people, I’ll catch up later.”

“Later? Are you serious?” Kenobi balked, “You can’t seriously mean to defeat an army of droids by yourself.”

“Well,” Lee said even as she began to walk backwards away from them and the swamp, “I can and I will. It’ll be fine, and fun, fine and fun. Horrifically bloody, perhaps… Or greasy, do robots bleed?”

“It will not be fine and fun if you are dead or wounded,” Jinn pointed out but Lee brushed this off.

“Flesh wounds,” Lee said derisively, “Besides, it’s my job, I wouldn’t want to disappoint her majesty.”

“Obito,” she said looking him square in the eye, “You’ll know what to do.”

And with that, without leaving him a chance to even salute her as she disappeared, she was gone, teleported to some other place, to take out whatever army waited for her. Obito, Jinn, and Kenobi were left staring at the place where she’d disappeared. Obito briefly explaining with a rather fond smile, “She does that.”
Then, looking over at the worried pair, he noted, “She actually will be fine, most of Lee’s career was situations like this. It’s actually better if she goes out now rather than wait around and get impatient.”

When Lee got impatient well, that’s when things usually began to get unusual as she got more creative in her problem-solving techniques. Better to let shishou hash it out in what she saw as the most efficient manner possible. Even if it led to the gruesome destruction of hundreds of puppets.

Eventually the water bubbled, the orange monstrosity appeared out of the water, shaking droplets off himself like a dog, as he exclaimed to his audience, “Dare-sa nobody dare. All gone. Some kinda fight, I tink. Sorry, no gungas… no gungas.”

Obito… Now, he thought he’d gotten damn good at Basic in a short amount of time, better and faster even than English, but that was damn near incomprehensible. However, the others seemed to understand it well enough and it was soon discovered that Binks thought that his people must have hidden in some sanctuary of their people in times of war rather than be taken to prison camps or else killed to a man.

Thus followed an awkward procession through the swamp comprised of Obito, Anakin, the jedi, the queen and her hand maidens, the beeping robot, the captain, and all of the original crew of the ship. Anakin walked ahead of Obito, next to Jinn, sending wary anxious glances over his shoulder at Obito every chance he got.

Obito merely offered him a rather thin smile back, one that offered no sympathy or forgiveness, Anakin had lost the chance for that.

Eventually the frog stopped, sniffed around a bit, and then declared, “Disssen it.”

And then as a survey group rode out to meet them, Obito got the less than satisfying confirmation that even Binks’ own species loathed him as much as he did, and that apparently Binks’ flailing uselessness was not a new thing. More, it was a famed thing among his entire people.

A thing that, apparently, as Obito and the rest were kindly escorted further in towards the frog kage or whoever the hell they were meeting, was very likely to get them all killed. They were brought before a great hulking frog, surrounded by guards on all sides as the creature and his councilmen looked down on them in distaste.
“Jar Jar, yousa payen dis time. Who’s da uss-en others?”

Padme’s double stepped forward bowing her head slightly, “I am Queen Amidala of the Naboo… I come before you in peace.”

“Naboo biggen,” the frog kage accused as its eyes slid to Binks, “Yousa bringe da Mackineeks… Dya busten uss-en omm. Yousa all bombad. Yousa all die’n, mesa tink.”

Casually, carefully, Obito’s fingers lowered to his waist and surreptitiously removed a kunai from his pouch as the guards around them lowered their long poles around them.

“We wish to form an alliance…” the queen continued as if she wasn’t being threatened with her death.

Suddenly, Padme herself stepped forward and motioned towards the queen, “Your honor, I am queen Amidala, this is my decoy, my protection and loyal bodyguard.”

Then, proud Padme, proud desperate Padme who had cursed at shinobi, jedi, and council members alike lowered her head, “I am sorry for my deception, but under the circumstances it became necessary to protect myself. Although we don’t always agree, your honor, our two great societies have always lived in peace until now.”

She lifted her head, dark eyes burning as she took in the king across from her, “The trade federation has destroyed all that we have worked so hard to build. You are in hiding, my people are in camps. If we don’t act quickly, we’ll lose everything. Please, I’m begging you, please help us.”

And Obito couldn’t help but watch, couldn’t help but be impressed as this child queen fell to her knees and bowed before the frog kage, everyone else, even Obito, stepping in line and prostrating themselves behind her. Bowed, and better, earned his favor and his troops.

Perhaps, he thought to himself, there was something to this Amidala Padme after all.

It was just too bad that none of it had been necessary.
It went like this, the gungans assembled their troops to meet the droid force head on, and to delay them while the queen’s fighter pilots took to the droid control ship that they’d seen while approaching the planet. Which left Anakin, Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon, Padme, and the rest of the troops to stealthily make their way into the city and eventually enter the main hanger which in turn would eventually provide a path to the queen’s throne room where the head of the trade federation would be waiting for them.

Only through the will of the force would a plan like this work, Obi-Wan, for his own part, tried to maintain his serenity as he thought of that. Next to him before they entered, Qui-Gon turned to look down at the boy, Anakin, and instructed, “Once we get inside, Annie, you find a safe place to hide and stay there.”

Anakin looked up mulishly, looking rather insincere as he offered a flat, “Sure.”

“And stay there!” Qui-Gon insisted, but Obi-Wan doubted the boy was listening to him, he seemed restless. Of course, Obi-Wan’s master was right, as was the woman Lee for that matter, this was no place for an untrained child no matter what the council thought.

If only his master hadn’t argued, but then… Then it was in his master’s nature to do so, to do anything less was to be someone other than Qui-Gon Jinn, and ultimately Obi-Wan would take his master bullheaded faults and all.

Next to him, Obito was fingering his metal knives, looking forward and all around them without any expression on his face, preparing himself for the heat of battle long before any shots had been fired.

Then, behind him, the noise and heat of blasters as droids began to fire, the soldiers behind then turned and began to fire on them, Obi-Wan, the queen, the shinobi, and Anakin all moved forward into the main hanger even as the alarms blared and battle droids began to fire on them as they ran for cover, Anakin barely ducking under a Naboo fighter plane in time while Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan deflected blaster fire aimed for Padme.

Obito, however, moved forward faster than anyone without help of the force, his feet clinging to the walls as he sprinted past droids, thin metal wire in his hands that he used to quickly decapitate them even as he burned others with a wave of fire blown from his lips and through his fingers.
Even out of the corner of his eye Obi-Wan noted the efficiency and elegance of his movements, not quite on the level that Lee had been on Tatooine, but there was a similarity in their movements and style of fighting that made it clear that they belonged not only to the same temple but that Lee Eru was his teacher. He was brutally efficient with the enemy droids, taking out more than any soldier and more even than Obi-Wan or Qui-Gon as they shielded the queen.

Captain Panaka and the Naboo troops returned into the hanger even as the fighter pilots took off out into space, overwhelming the remaining droids, thus giving the rest of them room to move towards the exit to head to the throne room where the viceroy likely waited.

As they passed through Anakin’s head popped out of one of the planes, he looked down at them earnestly, “Hey, wait for me!”

Qui-Gon quickly motioned for him to stay, “No, Annie, you stay there! Stay right where you are.”

Anakin didn’t get a chance to say much else as they approached the door, about to leave, when suddenly everyone before them scattered, the sith from Tatooine standing in the doorway. Padme, Panaka, and her troops backed away while Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan both stepped forward.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon removed their capes and ignited their lightsabers, the sith did the same, his lightsaber red and double bladed. A double-bladed light saber, the same one he’d used on Tatooine when fighting Lee and Qui-Gon, that was an old style, an old and difficult style to master…

Next to them, Obito hesitated for a moment, looked to Padme as she departed while the jedi stood their ground waiting to face the threat, but then he too stepped forward with then, raising his metal throwing knives as determination came off him in waves.

And somehow, in Obito, so filled with rage, attachment, betrayal, and pain, there was serenity in this one moment, as he prepared to meet his enemy on the battlefield. Obi-Wan banished his own fear in turn, into the force, and breathing out prepared himself for the fight.

Anakin sat in the cockpit of the fighter plane, looking out at the slaughtered droids around them, not one left standing, and wondered what to do now as even Obito, Obi-Wan, and Qui-Gon disappeared into another room with their lightsabers as they began to battle.
Only, only if he closed his eyes then there were still droids in the room, and Anakin had to shoot at them because Padme didn’t notice and Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan alone were already battling the dark man, so Anakin had to turn on the plane and fight at them, and then, when they were done, he started flying and was put into autopilot and had to sneak into the droid control ship and destroy it from the inside.

More, on the battlefield, he saw Jar Jar as a general, fighting alongside the other gungans, keeping the droids at bay except… Except he didn’t, now he saw no droids at all, nothing, instead a desperate, terrible, quiet as Lee, with black grease dripping from her fingers and smeared across her face, like splattered blood on her clothes and skin, walked towards the city, her eyes burning, not even sparing a glance for the assembled gungan warriors who looked at her in awe and terror as they stared at the sparkling broken carcasses of the droids behind her.

And she looked like a sunset, the second sunset walking towards him, with everything, every world, every star trailing behind, in her shadow.

And even sitting here, closing his eyes and breathing, reaching out with senchakra towards the ever-flowing universe, towards the force, he could sense something, not him but something that contained him, something that was everything, was almost panicked by this, no confused, confused and surprised, and intrigued. There was a thought, or something like a thought, that this had never happened before and can’t have happened, that Lee Eru should not exist and could not exist because she existed outside of every single possibility.

And like it, like the force or chakra or everything, Anakin had no idea what to do.

He wasn’t a jedi, he wasn’t a shinobi either, and now they didn’t need him to go and blow up the droid control ship, not when there were no droids to control. Everything he’d thought he was supposed to do had been taken out of his hands and now he was just sitting here waiting for something to happen.

Waiting for that moment where he could make the right choice, the choice that wouldn’t lead to Qui-Gon’s death, Obi-Wan’s death, Padme’s death, and his own descent into hatred, fear, and rage.

Except… Anakin thought to himself, maybe waiting wasn’t good enough, maybe he had to come to terms with himself, with the possibility of what he could end up like, that maybe if he was a jedi or a shinobi he’d end up a bit like Lee or Obito had been in Mos Espa. Anakin had to acknowledge, maybe, that this could go badly but… but sitting here, worrying about Qui-Gon and Padme, that wasn’t going to change anything, more, that wasn’t how he wanted to live his life.
He wanted to live a life that Obito would be proud of, not to make choices out of fear of what could be, not when anything could be possible.

And so, without a second thought, Anakin opened the cockpit and darted out, using all the chakra he had to sprint out of the room towards Padme and everyone who still needed his help.

They waited, the four of them, at an unnatural forced impasse, blocked off from one another by a series of electrified walls which only opened and closed at certain intervals. Jinn sat one wall away from the nuke nin, meditating as he breathed heavily, chakra swirling about him and into him as he gathered senchakra into himself to prepare for the fight. Kenobi, behind Obito by two walls and behind Jinn and the nuke nin by five, paced impatiently, fingering his laser katana and keeping his eyes locked on the tattooed hell demon they had been fighting. The nuke-nin, with methodic ease, patched up his wounds even as he kept his yellow eyes on the jedi and on Obito. Obito, for his own part, waited in between Kenobi and Jinn, tapping his foot, out of kunai, hands practically twitching to begin flying through katon jutsu hand seals, and wondering where the hell Lee was already.

Surely, surely this was the only nuke nin they would see today, and surely that meant she had been done ages ago if reinforcements hadn’t been sent.

The fight was not good, the nuke nin was a superb swordsman, much better than Obito himself even with the sharingan in his head, better than shishou too no doubt when it came to the blade alone. This was the kind of man who could give the seven swordsmen of the mist more than a run for their money, and it showed. Without a katana that would stand up to the double bladed laser katana Obito had to fight from a distance, but even fighting Jinn and Kenobi he deflected and blocked every kunai thrown at his head and every jutsu as well. Anything more extreme than that and he risked hitting Jinn and Kenobi as well as draining his own chakra supply.

But Jinn was slowing down, Kenobi and Obito were both slowing down and breathing heavily, and if those walls opened and Jinn had to face him alone then he didn’t stand a snowball’s chance in hell. And then, then Obito wouldn’t even know how he and Kenobi would fare.

The point was that even three against one they were not winning this fight, and it was long past time that Lee-shishou got here and owned this bastard’s red ass.

The rays turned, moved away, the gates opened, and without a word Obi-Wan and Obito began sprinting back towards the fight while Jinn brought up his laser katana to fend off the nuke nin. His
time gathering senchakra hadn’t been wasted as there was a new energy and strength to his movements, quickly he pushed the nuke nin backwards towards the end of the corridor and a great pit, behind him Obi-Wan caught up to him but both were blocked by one final gate, both waiting and watching as Jinn and the nuke nin fought.

And he was slow, too slow, and not nearly as skilled in the blade…

Eventually it happened, as Obito knew it would happen, as Jinn likely knew it would happen, he misstepped and the nuke nin bashed his katana handle into Jinn’s chin, causing him to stumble back, bringing his own katana down to deliver the finishing blow but…

But Obito watched in horror as the blade didn’t strike Jinn, but instead, Lee, who had appeared out of nothingness, covered in grease and smelling like smoke, no previous wounds, and for a single second perfectly fine as the red blade tore through her.

For a moment, she stood, weight supported by the laser katana, eyes wide and glazed and seeing then unseeing, body twitching, but then, then she collapsed forward, body like a puppet whose strings had been cut, and suddenly Eru Lee didn’t exist in this world at all.

And Obito, standing there, watching, felt something inside of him shatter.

Anakin sprinted through the hallways, borrowed blaster in hand, shooting at any and any droid without thinking, grabbing cover while he could and allowing the force or chakra or whatever it was called to guide his movements like it guided Lee’s or Qui-Gon’s movements.

“I must not fear,” Anakin chanted to himself under his breath, the words long since memorized, so that they flowed even as he pulled the trigger of a blaster and darted behind walls and furniture, “Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.”

He did not pause to watch as droids caught fire, he just kept going, kept heading towards that chakra signature that screamed Padme, except, then, for a moment, it felt as if he ran into a wall that had not been there.

Everything seemed to stop, pause, like the universe itself had just broken a little, fractured, or rather, a fracture had come into existence.
Suddenly Anakin wasn’t in the hallway anymore or Naboo at all, instead he was in a great river, one made of both light and dark, that spread out in every and any direction. And in each particle of light there was a star, or a planet, or a person. All aspects of time and space and life existed in this golden river that wasn’t a river at all.

And there, submerged in this river that was everywhere and everything, sinking down, down, and down was Lee herself, eyes closed, dreaming, in a dimension without time, without space, without thought or imagination.

A realm beyond the pit of man’s fears and the summit of his imagination.

And at once, with her human form, her red hair, her pale skin that reflected the light of the universe, she seemed utterly impossibly, alien, existing outside everything that had ever and would ever exist. In all hypotheticals, all paths of this world or any other, Lee Eru did not and could not exist.

More, within her, contained in this metaphor of humanity that she built for herself, was a universe of her own. She was a separate, different, universe, or rather, a separate force that was not the force.

With that was the strange, exhilarating, terrible realization that permeated through every particle of light and dark that the force itself too, was not a river, that the river was the metaphor as the human was the metaphor and as sentience itself was the metaphor. Suddenly, in seeing other, in seeing the reflection that was like but not was, the force could recognize itself.

And her eyes, when they opened and stared at her surroundings, at the clockwork of the universe of all it would and could ever be, were filled with stars.

Distantly, somewhere within the river, in a place near where a boy named Anakin Skywalker was standing, stupefied and out of space and time for only a moment, there was a great and terrible cry unlike anything he’d ever heard before.

It was the sound of despair.

And then Anakin was in his own body, in his own time and place, shuddering, and forcing himself to step forward, as he continued his mad dash towards Padme.
Obi-Wan watched, eyes turning to Obito, as Obito gave out a terrible heart wrenching cry, falling forward and clawing at the eye on the scarred half of his face, covering it with one scarred pale hand, while his green eye stared forward at the corpse of his master in agony.

(And why… Why did it feel like it should Obi-Wan screaming, Qui-Gon slumped and dying before his eyes while Obi-Wan stood there uselessly and watched… Why did he keep thinking that Lee Eru should not have been there at all and it was Obi-Wan instead of Obito who should have been entirely too late?)

Here, Obi-Wan thought as he stepped away from Obito, from the cry in the force that permeated from him, here was the descent into darkness that Obi-Wan had been waited from.

Obito removed his hand, revealing his eye, blood dripping down his cheek like tears and his eye, now black and red and strangely patterned instead of the flat black it had been earlier. Obito, shuddering, breathing harsh, stood, moved silently forward, past the now open gate that Obi-Wan also moved through and reached Qui-Gon shoving him backwards and out of the way even while grabbing his light saber swinging it up to meet the sith lord.

The sith lord, amused, kicking Lee Eru’s corpse to the side, easily blocks Obito’s advanced but then moved uncertainly backwards as fire churned about their feet and exited from Obito’s lips. They moved, Obito somehow blocking the man’s hits, eye spinning, and his hatred a shroud of madness about him that warded off both Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon from aiding him.

But the sith was a better swordsman still, and soon enough Obito began to slow, blood still coursing down his cheeks and now tears of rage and despair joining them as he constantly brought up Qui-Gon’s green blade to fight him.

The sith lord smiled, at one point, a cruel terrible thing, and brought his blade down through Obito’s shoulderblades and to his heart, but it moved through Obito. The boy, for a moment, seemed to almost become transparent in the force, and the blade struck nothing. Obito instead, not even appearing to notice, swung Qui-Gon’s blade through the sith’s neck, decapitating him in one fell stroke.

For a moment, Obito stood there, eye growing dull and black again as he looked down at the Sith’s body, his finger twitched, the lightsaber deactivated and clattered to the floor. Qui-Gon quietly summoned it to himself, keeping it in hand even as he slowly, as if approaching a wild animal,
approached the shinobi.

Obito did not turn to look at him or Obi-Wan, but instead, with shaking fingers, picked up the sith’s deactivated blade, and stored it on his belt, next to his ancient metal blade. Then, without a word, with eyes that seemed to see nothing, blood still dripping down his face, he walked towards his fallen master.

He stared down at her, collapsed onto his knees next to her body, and threaded a pale shaking hand through her red hair, looking down at her in devastation even as he closed her glassy green eyes shut. He leaned his forehead against hers, blood and tears dripping onto her pale thing face as he sobbed against her.

Qui-Gon stood behind him, Obi-Wan only a few steps behind, and though Obito was still shrouded by pain, grief, rage and heartache, Qui-Gon stood and watched with a look of such sympathy on his face, more, sorrow of his own. He reached forwards towards Obito, but before his hand could touch the boy’s shoulder her hand rose up.

It rose up, pale long fingers, burshing against Obito’s cheek, then, her eyes impossibly opened and she smiled at him, suddenly burning bright and whole and alive where she could not possibly be, “I’m sorry, Obito, I had to take the long way around this time.”

A smile, blurred by tears, grew on Obito’s face into a grin, he pulled her up into a hug, ignoring her protests even as her wounds seemed to miraculously disappear from her body, and then, seemingly without any thought at all, cradled her face in his hands and kissed her once across the lips.

Both pulled back, blinking in stunned confusion, Lee’s eyebrows raising even as she pulled backwards and raised herself into a standing position while Obito did the same. For a moment, neither looked directly at one another but instead stood there, Obito growing desperately red, each waiting for someone, anyone, to say something.

“So, I’m not dead,” Lee said slowly, looking at Obito, “I guess I uh, forgot to tell you that.”

Obito looked at her, stunned, “Yeah, don’t think that ever came up.”

“Well, it was sort of implied in the… You know, Shinigami, thing,” Lee said slowly, wincing and rubbing the back of her head, looking a little chagrinned, “Well, I guess you know now.”
“I guess so,” Obito said rather stiffly, shoving his hands into his pockets.

“So, you took his katana, right?” Lee asked and Obito shot her a rather unimpressed look then motioned to his waist.

“Good, good, I kind of wanted that. Well, you can have that one, spoils of war and all…” Lee trailed off as she surveyed the sith’s corpse and then looked back at Obito, “And damn, Obito, you really kicked his ass.”

“… I got lucky,” Obito said slowly, by which he probably meant he somehow became transparent, which indeed, without that, he wouldn’t still be here.

“Well, either way, good work apprentice!” Lee offered her apprentice that carefree overly cheerful grin that was so at odds with both their surroundings and her own grease and bloodstained appearance.

Obito, however, looking at her, burst into a grin once again and laughed in both relief and delight. Lee, softly, fondly, smiled back at him. With that the pair turned to their audience.

“Well, shit,” Lee said succinctly looking at the pair of them, “Jinn, can you… not tell your superiors about the whole not dying thing?”

Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows as he looked at her, took her in, and Obi-Wan mutely turned to look at him. And oh damn, his master was seriously considering it, more, was more than seriously considering it. He wasn’t going to tell them, and in turn Obi-Wan wouldn’t tell them, and damn everything why wasn’t he going to tell them?!

“Master, you can’t…” Obi-Wan started but Qui-Gon didn’t even let him finish.

Qui-Gon raised his hand slowly and said, “I think, my young padawan, that perhaps this is a story best saved for another time.”

Lee grinned, stepping forward and taking Qui-Gon’s hands into her own, “I knew you and I were going to be great friends! When Senator Palpatine devours all your children and raises your village to the ground, I promise, I’ll come and you and Kenobi out. You’ll always have a place in Konohagakure, I guarantee it.”
Qui-Gon laughed this off, but seemed earnest and fond enough even as he said, “I thought you were on good terms with the senator now.”

“Oh, hell no,” Obito said as the four of them began walking towards the exit, back into the fight to find and protect the queen, “He’s just a lot more reasonable than you assholes.”

“He is a murderous grandpa,” Lee said with a shrug of her shoulders, “But there’s not much we can do now, especially now that you’ve given him the dictatorship.”

“Chancellorship,” Obi-Wan corrected with some annoyance, now remembering, why, more than anything, these two got on his nerves.

“Well, there won’t be much of a difference now,” Obito said with a rather easy smile since they were discussing the bizarre and terrible possibility of a sith lord as the chancellor.

“We’ll see about that,” Obi-Wan scoffed, “Personally, I think the senator is a rather great man. After all, by sending you two, he’s done a great service for the people of Naboo.”

Lee and Obito laughed, as if this was the most hilarious thing they’d heard all week, but none the less it was with a strange smile that Obi-Wan, Lee Eru, Obito Uchiha, and Qui-Gon Jinn stepped out of the room and to a universe filled with possibilities.
Chapter 10

He was fifteen, it was spring, in a few months it would be October 10th, Naruto’s birthday and the first anniversary of the destruction of Konoha in some other world which he did not inhabit, and the day that Lee would ask him to accompany him to galaxies unknown, unnumbered, and unventured.

But it wasn’t autumn yet and so leaving Konoha at that point wasn’t even a vague possibility then. Instead, he had strangely enough, on a day where he wasn’t on a mission and wasn’t training and could be doing anything at all, found himself in Lee’s apartment, listening, as always, to records of the English music she liked to play. This time it was not Sinatra Frank’s voice that called out but someone else in some entirely different genre. Guitar strings strummed in sweet chords with a melody that took its time while a man’s voice sang, “Raindrops keep falling on my head and just like the guy whose feet are too big for his bed, nothing seems to fit, those raindrops are falling on my head, they keep falling.”

Obito stared up at the ceiling, thinking to himself that he could be out with Kakashi or else Rin if he so chose, and any other day he might. But today… Today he had caught sight of Rin a little too early in the day, she hadn’t seen him, instead she had been smiling, a true and delighted smile that wasn’t one of exasperation or mere fondness, at one of the medics she worked with.

A smile that he couldn’t ever remember her directing at him before.

Perhaps, it was in his head, perhaps it was that painful insecurity about his own face that climbed out of the darkest pits of his mind now and then, but either way when he saw her, heard her laughing at some comment he’d made…

Obito just couldn’t.

So here he was, on Lee-shishou’s couch, staring at the ceiling and listening to her English records and sweet and simple lyrics he couldn’t quite believe in at the moment, “So, I just did me some talking to the sun and I said I didn’t like the way he got things done, sleeping on the job, those raindrops are falling on my head, they keep falling.”

He felt the couch shift as Lee sat next to him, a cup of tea almost obligatorily in hand for these sorts of moments between them, and finally, she asked, “So, Obito, is there any particular reason you’re here today?”
He moved his eyes from the ceiling to look at her, she was smiling at him, a small almost knowing thing, as if she knew exactly why he was here already, understood perfectly well, but was polite enough not to say it.

And it was amazing, at times, how she could at once seem so dense and so perceptive.

“But there’s one thing I know, the blues they send to meet me won’t defeat me, it won’t be long ‘til happiness steps up to greet me.”

Finally, slowly, tasting the words and conclusions as he said them, realizing why he’d come here versus anywhere else in the world, he stated, “You love Minato-sensei.”

She said nothing, didn’t even blink, even as he sat up, still looking at her, shaking his head as he kept going, “You’ve always loved Minato-sensei, since before the beginning, but you let him marry Kushina…”

“Ah,” Lee finally said, looking away from him and drinking her tea, eyes suddenly far more distant, lost in memories of years that Obito hadn’t bothered to pay attention to. Years of Lee, Minato, and Kushina all circling one another and Lee just standing by and watching with that easy smile on her face when all Obito wanted to do sometimes was scream.

“How can you stand it?”

For a moment, she didn’t say anything, the music instead continued to play, almost hauntingly cheerful in the background while he waited with a desperation he could barely recognize.

“Love… It isn’t like what they say, Obito, not for me, and likely not for you either,” Lee said finally and in her eyes, he could see an inhuman something, the god, peering through her face as if it was nothing more than a mask, “It is a powerful, haunting, and terrifying thing at its heart. There is nothing I would not do for Namikaze Minato, and that… That says more than enough.”

“Raindrops keep falling on my head, but that doesn’t mean my eyes will soon be turning red. Crying’s not for me ‘cause, I’m never gonna stop the rain by complaining, because I’m free, nothing’s worrying me.”

“Does it?” he asked.
“You would destroy villages, massacre your own family, make the world into a cheap illusion for the very idea Nohara Rin,” Lee said, as if she was discussing the weather, rather than that brief, terrifying and brief, glimpse Obito had once had of the world he didn’t live in, “How do you think she would take that?”

“Not well,” Obito said with a grim smile.

“Minato…” she started, and there was a note, something bittersweet and yearning in her voice even as she looked Obito dead in the eye, “I had thought he understood, they have never understood, and no reason that they should, but if anybody could…”

She looked down at her hands, still and empty, that guitar happily strumming behind them, like rain on the rooftops, and she smiled down at them, “It’s like, we are on different planes sometimes, Minato and I. He’s here, where I… I am separated, by a window. I paint hats into reality, finish the hat, from the side, and through the window I step aside, and I watch the world and that is simply what I am. I am what I do, and he knows this, and he accepts it, but it was not what he needed.”

A black, elegant, hat appeared in her hands, English in style, and she passed it over to Obito even as she said, “In a way, my love, if you call what I feel love, is requited and always has been. But… I am not Uzumaki Kushina, and we both know that.”

“It won’t be long ‘til happiness steps up to greet me.”

Obito’s hands, shaking, gripped the hat as he looked at her, trying to take in her words yet deny them at the same moment. The brim of the hat bent, twisted, he barely even noticed as he continued to stare at his own master, at the somehow serene if nostalgic expression on her face.

“In the end, Obito, she may never love you back, the very intensity of your emotions may guarantee it. And that is fine, because that’s not what love is, true overpowering unconditional love is not so easy or enjoyable as that.”

“But I don’t want that, I want…”

Lee smiled, a soft and entirely empathetic smile that twisted his heart in half, “Obito, sometimes, it can’t be about what we want.”
“Raindrops keep falling on my head, but that doesn’t mean my eyes will soon be turning red. Crying’s not for me ‘cause, I’m never gonna stop the rain by complaining, because I’m free, nothing’s worrying me.”

He didn’t leave for some time after, but when he did, he stared out at the sakura trees, out into the village where somewhere Rin was laughing, waiting to look at him the way she might a younger brother, with sisterly affection but not…

Perhaps, as he’d stood there in the spring sunlight, a cool breeze winding its way through the trees, something of his love for Rin died that day. Perhaps.

Within a few hours of Padme’s taking the throne room the jedi council, as well as the supreme chancellor Palpatine landed in the main hanger. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, the shinobi, the queen, her handmaidens, Captain Panaka, as well as twenty or so troops stood had stood and waited as the viceroy was escorted towards a ship and Palpatine, no longer a mere senator, greeted them.

Qui-Gon had watched him, watched the way that Lee and Obito oh so carefully did not look in the man’s direction, the way they smiled at him politely and gave an air of nonchalance even as the force hummed about them in anticipation of battle. The man himself however, his smile reached his eyes as he took Padme’s hands in his, and his words congratulating her boldness, bravery, and the actions of the jedi, gunguns, and particularly the shinobi themselves, foreigners who had almost single handedly defended Naboo and driven back the invaders, seemed genuine.

In fact, he practically sang with sincerity, as he announced that together, he, Padme, and the people of Naboo would usher in an era of peace and prosperity to the republic.

Obito, almost instinctively, had given a rather darkly amused smile at that. One which had earned him the raised eyebrow of Qui-Gon’s own padawan before the younger boy could wipe it from his face.

Whatever it was that Lee and Obito were so convinced they say in the chancellor… Qui-Gon was at a loss. He had no doubt that Lee and Obito were utterly convinced of the man’s nature, but all the same, sometimes the pair baffled him entirely.

Well, beyond their strange, powerful, and alarming abilities in the force, which even the greatest of
jedi masters or the most dreaded sith lords could not hope to duplicate. Obito’s eyes, not a sith’s yellow eyes but powered by his rage and unbearable grief none the less, his physical body ever so briefly disappearing from this world, and the tree he had made from nothing in Mos Espa. Lee herself managing to separate her own departed spirit from the force, returning to an abandoned body and stitching it together, infusing it with life and breath as the force itself seemed to shake in utter disbelief…

Yes, beyond that, beyond everything, they’d always been an odd pair (quite possibly an odd pair even amongst their own people) and he wondered if he’d ever truly understand them. Even regarding a man, who for all purposes seemed noble, like Chancellor Palpatine their opinions were utterly incomprehensible.

In short, Qui-Gon simply could not believe that Senator Palpatine, now chancellor, was a sith lord. More, a sith lord whose ambitions were nothing less than destroying the republic, the jedi order, and twisting the fabric of the galaxy into his own monstrous image.

And, now meeting with Yoda himself in the late afternoon within the confines of the reclaimed palace, Qui-Gon and his padawan found themselves consumed by far more pressing matters than what Obi-Wan would scathingly refer to as shinobi conspiracy theories.

“And only one sith, face, did you?” Yoda asked, pacing before Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, both still covered in sweat, clothes burnt from the lightsaber battle and stray blaster shots. However, neither were in as poor a shape as Lee, covered not only in enough petrol to light the Naboo swamps on fire but also her own dried blood.

“Yes, Master Yoda,” Obi-Wan answered.

Yoda grimaced, stopped pacing for a moment and faced the window, peering out as the red gold light poured into the room, “Always two there are, no more, no less. A master and an apprentice.”

“And it is unclear which we faced today,” Qui-Gon finished for him, “He was truly extraordinary with the saber, if he has a master, then I fear for us.”

And yet, that was what Lee Eru and her apprentice implied, that it was no less than Chancellor Palpatine, elected by the republic senate, who was the puppet master with strings connected to them all.
And, if they were correct, if Qui-Gon dared to contemplate that possibility, then truly, he did fear for the jedi as well as the republic.

“Yes, unclear, it all is, motives, history, remain in shadows they do even with death,” Yoda frowned, the wrinkles of his lips growing more pronounced as he clarified, “Killed by the boy shinobi, you say?”

“Obito Uchiha, yes,” Qui-Gon said, “With abilities that I did not think possible through the force. His eyes, became… Like pinwheels, red and black and strangely patterned, fueled by his own trauma and pain the force.”

He remembered Obito then, as he’d cried out in despair, blood dripping down his face and pushing past Qui-Gon, taking his saber with him, how the force had concentrated heavily about his eye, the dark eye, enough to cause blindness, yet how he’d seemed to see more, and finally, that single instant where his physical body had disappeared.

“He,” Obi-Wan stopped, paused, considered his words, then added, “He almost seemed to bounce into the dark side, strange as it sounds, Master Yoda. It was all very quick, like all his stability was ripped out from beneath his feet but when he realized that his master was not dying he was… teetering, again. Like it had never happened.”

“Come back from the dark side one cannot,” Yoda noted and Obi-Wan nodded in understanding.

Obi-Wan quickly clarified, trying to paint the surreal picture that had been Obito Uchiha before, during, and after his fight with the sith and Lee’s resurrection, “I wouldn’t say he is back, Master Yoda. He’s not entirely well. Even now, he is still on the path to the dark side. He bleeds anger, fear, and almost incomprehensible devotion to his own master. He’s still dangerously close to that edge, but before he was engulfed entirely, for a moment.”

Qui-Gon swallowed, Obi-Wan glancing at him, no doubt thinking that it was now or never that they told Yoda what they had left out of the earlier recounting, Lee Eru’s rising from the dead, her own almost sheepish promise that they tell no one, rather than the edited version of Lee having been injured, grievously injured to the point where they had all assumed it was fatal, before she’d managed to heal herself through the force (an act he was certain she was capable of). Instead Qui-Gon merely stated, “I fear, that if his master dies, or if something were to happen to her, he would plunge fully into the dark side without regret.”

And, in the hold of the paranoia, rage, and hatred of the dark side of the force, Qui-Gon did not doubt that Obito Uchiha would be capable of great and terrible things. Especially as the boy had
not left his recent plunge untainted, the dark side when courted could never truly be ignored, and even now, even with Lee Eru alive and well, a shadow of hatred clung to the boy.

If grief, if hatred, was the source of his great power, then there may come a day or an enemy where Obito would see no other option than to turn towards it. And then, then he would be lost entirely.

“And the boy’s master?” Yoda prompted.

“She is…” Qui-Gon trailed off, trying to think of the words, that shattering of the force when she had died, her strange resurrection, the way the force moved about her and through her, the way she herself had seemed overflowing with foreign light, life, and stars, “She is far more powerful than any of us had previously assumed. Perhaps beyond our comprehension.”

He gave a wry laugh as he pictured her, grease stained and grinning, little more than a child herself, “Certainly, she defies my comprehension.”

He paused then, his smile not dripping away, but growing softer as he pictured her at the end, laughing with her own apprentice despite everything, “However, I do not think she has the capability of turning to the dark side.”

Obi-Wan glanced at him, eyebrows raised, questioning, after all these were idle thoughts that Qui-Gon had not yet voiced, that were only truly coming together for him now, and Yoda himself seemed at odds with this statement.

He added, almost wryly again as she pictured her baffled face in the council meeting, in Mos Espa, the way she had looked at Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon as if they were madmen or else regurgitating mere propaganda, “I believe it as she said, for her, there are no sides to the force. She is so… intertwined with the fundamental structure of the universe, so powerful, that she cannot even see the temptation of the dark side, cannot comprehend it.”

Then, reaching out to the living force, oddly shifting even now, Lee Eru’s face drifting in and out like the tides, almost as if she were an unanswered question or an answer to a question that could not be formed, he noted, “Even the force itself, frankly, seems to have no idea what to make of her.”

Then, with a sigh, he separated his thoughts from the shinobi and looked Yoda square in his dark eyes, “Now, I believe, we come to the subject of Anakin Skywalker.”
“Ah yes, the boy,” Yoda said, and immediately resumed his pacing, clearly hoping that Qui-Gon would not bring up the boy at all, “Agree on you taking the boy as your padawan learner, Master Qui-Gon, I do not.”

“You do not or the council does not?” Qui-Gon pressed, however Yoda did not answer, just paced as Qui-Gon continued, “Either way, know that I do not need your approval. I will train Anakin Skywalker, with or without the council’s blessing.”

Yoda whirled towards Qui-Gon, dark eyes piercing his as he stated quite bluntly, “The chosen one the boy may be, nevertheless, grave danger I fear in his training.”

Qui-Gon answered immediately and without hesitation, “He will be trained regardless, either by me or else by the shinobi. While I would trust Lee in battle and even in friendship, she lacks the capacity to keep Anakin from the dark side, as she lacks the capacity to keep her own apprentice from the dark side. Then, Master Yoda, all our fears will be realized, or, perhaps, surpassed entirely.”

“And I,” Obi-Wan added on, back held straight and staring at Yoda without regret or hesitation, “Am ready for my trials.”

Yoda sighed then, glanced one final time towards the window, and stated, “Defiance, it is in you both now. Agree, the council does, with your vision of lesser evils. After your trials, young Kenobi, and knighthood conferred onto you, Master Qui-Gon’s padawan, young Skywalker will be. Until then, study, he will, with the other children.”

As they left, dismissed and headed to find Anakin as well as the shinobi themselves, Obi-Wan turned towards him, “Master, why did you make that promise to Lee?”

The promise, of course, being Qui-Gon’s silence, the silence he had dutifully kept even with a member of his own jedi council. His eyes turned towards the sun, now almost setting, and the way it sparkled across the river in the distance. Slowly, he said, “I trust Master Yoda, as I trust all members of the council.”

He did, at his core he trusted their decisions, he might rail against them, rail against their dogmatic interpretation of the jedi code, but they were jedi masters, his brothers, and ultimately, he trusted in their leadership.
And yet, with Lee, he did not know if he could trust which way they would fall. The jedi order was filled with factions; many would consider violence and destruction a perfectly viable solution.

Breathing in, Qui-Gon turned towards his apprentice, taking in the quizzical and worried look in his blue eyes and concluded, “However, word would spread, and some council members I trust more than others. The living force, Obi-Wan, is something not to be ignored, and now it tells me that Lee’s friendship, perhaps even over my own duty as a jedi, is one that I cannot afford to spurn.”

Obito, Lee, and their good friend the rabid nuke nin who had now gained the proverbial kage hat, sat in a forgotten office that had likely belonged to some professional diplomat or another, but, after the invasion, had been left in utter disarray.

Papers were strewn everywhere, furniture smashed, but in what chairs remained Lee, Obito, and the chancellor sat with a pitcher of wine between them, the sith lord the only one drinking.

Naturally, Obito would almost rather be anywhere else in the world.

He spared a glance to Lee, alive, well, whole, looking like nothing had happened and it was just another day in the great wide galaxy, even with grandpa death’s killing intent even more suffocating than usual. Obito was willing to bet that he’d been secretly hoping they would fail, or perhaps not, perhaps they’d merely caught his interest now and this was his uncomfortable way of showing his affection.

However, even with the pressing miasma of hate, he couldn’t help but constantly flash back to the room, the electricity and seeing Lee fall, fall in Qui-Gon’s stead where she never had any business being in the first place. It had taken her ages to fall, and he’d stood there, watching in horror and reach out out. Then his own eye…

The mangekyo sharingan.

Palpatine’s voice startled him into the present moment.
“And so you, shinobi master Lee Eru, singlehandedly wiped out the trade federation’s droid forces,” the chancellor summarized, looking quite amused by this, “Did you know that such a thing has never been done, never with troops of that number, by jedi or sith?”

Lee looked completely and utterly unimpressed by this statement.

“They were cheap rate puppets that Sunagakure would have spit on,” Lee answered rather blandly, “Slaughtering them was almost embarrassing.”

And for her it probably was. Not quite as embarrassing as English missions, but Obito could just picture Lee breaking these droids in half with one jutsu and then staring at their charred remains, waiting for something far more climactic to happen.

Obito almost wished he could have been there just to see the look on her face.

For a moment a flash of interest appeared in the man’s eyes but then it faded, and he dismissed her statement, “Nonetheless, it was a formidable accomplishment, without you, why I’m not sure what our beloved queen would have done.”

“Well, likely you would have assassinated her,” Obito pointed out, the man cracking a smile at his gall, though it was a cruel thing that did not truly reach his eyes.

“Yes, undoubtedly. Though there are the jedi to consider as well as that desert boy you brought with you, and you yourself, apprentice Obito Uchiha, slaying my own apprentice when two jedi failed,” the man shook his head, fingers tightening ever so briefly around his goblet of wine, eyes landing meaningfully on hilt of Obito’s stolen lightsaber yet making no move towards it, “Very impressive indeed, a shame, it’s so hard to find good apprentices these days.”

“Your apprentice?” Lee asked, eyebrows raised and leaning forward.

“Yes, you see, I suppose the jedi have not told you this but there can only ever truly be two sith, a master, and an apprentice,” the man answered with a shrug, as if what could you do, these were simply the laws of the universe.

“Yes, they mentioned that but…” Obito trailed off, not quite sure how to explain that Lee and Obito hadn’t really believed it. After all, an enemy village simply couldn’t consist of two, much less only one jonin and then a genin or chunin. And then to try and take over a hidden village that sported hundreds if not thousands of shinobi? It wasn’t just madness, it was suicide on an epic
“My people’s philosophy is such that more than two becomes… complicated,” the man explained, his smile thinning, clearly meaning to leave it ominously at that. By which Obito assumed the man meant they were only two because they slaughtered anyone else.

Which… Well, somehow, it appeared to be working out for him, so Obito wouldn’t question it, at least, not out loud.

“I noticed you’ve trained the boy, Skywalker,” the man then said, almost as an afterthought, “The queen stated that he came swiftly to her aid, using your people’s techniques, and provided vital assistance to her, given that you and the jedi were somewhat delayed in reaching her.”

Skywalker Anakin, yes, Obito had almost forgotten about him or rather, forcefully put him out of his mind, then had him forced out when Lee…

“Anakin Skywalker is not a part of the deal,” Lee stated flatly, her eyes narrowed and her own killing intent rising to meet the nuke nin’s, her chakra dwarfing his as it did every shinobi’s, “If he doesn’t join the jedi then he’s Konohagakure property and you will have to find some other unfortunate apprentice.”

“If he doesn’t join the jedi,” Palpatine parroted meaningfully before smugly stating, “However, if he does, then I imagine your people have no say in the matter. Certainly, the jedi would not stand for that sort of interference.”

Lee did not, could not, really deny this. Minato would never stand for it, Obito himself wouldn’t stand for it, and even Lee could not justify going to war for a boy who didn’t even want to go to Konoha, not when he had a choice.

And like it or not, Skywalker Anakin had a choice, and Obito suspected that he would not choose Konoha.

A part of him, even now, ached for the recent memory of Anakin’s delighted grin, his smile every time he learned some technique or another or talked about his future in Konoha as the village’s first pilot…
But it was perhaps because of that memory that Obito couldn’t help but feel that Anakin had made his own bed, and, if he lacked any sense, he would lie in it and face the consequences without Lee’s help.

And yet, Obito noted, “I’m guessing that you have a plethora of spies within the jedi order.”

Palpatine took an amused sip of his wine, and said, almost genially, “Why, surely, Uchiha, you have realized that the jedi are incorruptible and impenetrable.”

“Of course,” Obito noted bleakly, because to him, that all but screamed that as soon as Anakin entered the jedi temple he would be Palpatine’s for the taking. At least, if Jinn did not watch his back.

“Still, well done, both of you, I do believe this is the beginning of a fruitful relationship,” Palpatine said, “The celebrations will begin shortly, tomorrow, with a grand parade and a banquet which you have both been invited to. More, the queen has agreed to set up an embassy for your people on Naboo while I myself have been moved enough to set one up on Coruscant.”

Lee and Obito stood, bowing, understanding that they were clearly being dismissed, and none too soon either.

However, before they could leave the man grinned, and said, killing intent in every syllable he uttered, “I look forward to meeting your diplomat, I trust he will be… quite interesting.”

“I am sure he will be quite honored to meet you,” Lee responded flatly, clearly lying through her teeth, as Palpatine would no doubt set the nidaime completely on edge. The nidaime had been a bit… twitchy, after Danzo, even more than he had been reputedly after Madara.

Palpatine would strike home in far too many ways.

They then turned to leave, walking in tandem, Lee’s hand on the door knob when the man called out again, “Uchiha, one last thing before you go.”

The mangekyo sharingan, the words resounded through his head, the fear that somehow, impossibly, Palpatine knew what that meant, knew what that impossibly meant and would take Obito’s eye for himself. Or worse, Lee’s immortality, he’d realized that Lee hadn’t been merely
injured and healed herself, as they’d said, but that she had well and truly died and…

“It has just struck me, in your tale, that when you defeated my apprentice it was only through your own attachment to your master that you succeeded. My apprentice, after all, was a far superior swordsman, and yet, fueled by your rage, grief, and love, you did something that any jedi would have failed at.”

His lips quirked then, and he said, staring Obito straight in the face as if he could see something that Obito could not even guess at, “It was just a strange, rather ironic, little thought I just had.”

Obito and Lee could not get the hell out of dodge fast enough.

Anakin stopped in the middle of the hall, turning his head, the force thrumming, and there, there was Obito Uchiha with the dark man’s light saber strapped to his waist and his master Lee carried bridal style in his arms. Lee was… so still, her eyes closed, her chest dark and burned, and her body nothing more than an empty shell.

Obito looked at Anakin flatly, in the corridor behind him, where broken droids still lay sparking and twitching, the walls covered in scorch marks. However, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon must have been caught somewhere as there was no sign of them…

Then Obito said, “Anakin, this is your last chance, I’m taking shishou home…”

Anakin stared, taking in Lee and what that must mean, that Lee Eru herself was…

Obito continued, quietly, without emotion or inflection as if he had left Anakin and the galaxy behind already, “If you’re coming to Konoha, if you have decided that you want to be a shinobi after all, this will be your only chance.”

Anakin opened his mouth, no words came out, Obito said nothing, his eyes empty of any compassion and only dismissal, as if Anakin was merely some final duty to be performed for his master. So, instead of reaching out to Anakin or waiting for some response, he pulled down on a necklace around his throat, and said a single, clear foreign word, “Portus.”
And just like that, Lee and Obito were gone.

A gaping pit opened beneath Anakin, and that terrible vision returned, pulling him down even as he clawed to escape it. Qui-Gon’s death, Padme’s death, his mother’s death, Darth Vader reaching out towards him with a gloved mechanical hand, and Obi-Wan screaming at him, surrounded by fire and death and screaming in fear and anguish as Anakin stared up at him with such bitterness and rage.

“Anakin, I have the high ground!”

And Anakin, older, moved, moved upwards even though he knew, he knew, and the lightsaber came crashing down on him, and everything was dead, and Anakin himself betrayed by his own self-loathing and paranoia.

And then Anakin woke up.

He took in a breath, bolting upright, shuddering into life and feeling out unconsciously in the force, searching for calm, for stability. Except, even as his breathing slowed, his heartbeat steadied, the force, the chakra, moved in strange currents, centering unnaturally on Lee, focusing on her almost.

Like a field of sunflowers, everything, even parts of Anakin himself, seemed to turn their heads towards her.

Glancing next to him, his mother was still sleeping, alive, and sleeping. Further out he could feel Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon, Padme, and even Lee and Obito. Everyone was alive, everything was fine. It was just a vision, just a…

A vision of something that had never happened, didn’t happen, because Anakin had kept running and helped Padme in the throne room, had thrown kunai at the guards and protected her. He hadn’t even seen Obito or Lee until later and then Lee had been fine, even Obito hadn’t looked as… Harsh, as he had a few hours before. Of course, Obito had barely seemed to notice Anakin at all, he glanced at him, offered a somewhat flat smile, but mostly he’d kept looking over to his own master or else caught in his own memories.

Either way though, none of that had really happened, even Qui-Gon was still alive.
He breathed out, wondering what that was supposed to mean. Usually his visions came true. He didn’t think he’d ever had any before, or well, any so blatant about things that simply hadn’t happened.

Either they were a bit vague with a feeling of possibility or, well, they came true. Or, the few times they seemed to be about the past (which Anakin wasn’t even completely sure he’d ever had a vision of the past), they’d always been of things that had happened never…

Of course, it wasn’t like Anakin really knew what was going to happen now either. That normal certainty that he’d sometimes have seemed… muddled, there were still pieces, but they no longer really made any sense at all.

Well, Mr. Qui-Gon had told him that he’d be a jedi, or, that he could now if he wanted to, the council had decided to pass him after all. He’d just have to learn for a while, until Obi-Wan passed his *chunin* or *jonin* exams (except, no, the jedi used some different word, that was what Obito and Lee would have called it), and then he’d be Qui-Gon’s padawan. A jedi, just like he’d always pictured.

He’d been so happy and relieved when he’d heard it, that state of limbo gone and a clear path forward once again except…

Except he still could become a shinobi, if he wanted to. At least… if Obito didn’t say no.

Suddenly, Anakin was a bit exhausted to be thinking about all of this. A decision, or well, changing his mind if he was going to, could probably wait until morning. He just… He didn’t think worrying over it now, going over all the pros and cons now, would really be a good idea.

Anakin sighed, closed his eyes, moved back under the covers and tried to recapture the feeling of warmth even as he drifted to sleep once again. Except, as he moved into unconsciousness, the vision changed.

He was in that great golden river again, the river that was secretly everything that ever was or even could be, and once again there was Lee, floating downwards, her green eyes opening, filled with stars that could not exist.

This time though, instead of falling through time, space, and light, Lee shifted, righted herself, and a layer of the river flattened itself beneath her bare feet so that she was standing and walking
forward like she was on solid ground.

And she didn’t seem to feel any vertigo at all as the river still infinitely spread both above and below her, she just kept walking forward, eyes moving this way and that, searching for something…

Strange, golden, grass began to grow beneath her feet, glowing and reaching upwards until they brushed against her fingers, in front of her a great tree, like Obito’s tree in Mos Espa, began to form, reaching up and out into everything. Then, suddenly, standing at the roots of the tree and looking towards Lee, there was a man.

Only, no, it was Lee, or rather, Lee if she were a man, hair shorter, curling more wildly about his face, body slightly more muscular and lacking in curves, but everything else was nearly identical even the clothing they were wearing.

Except it wasn’t really Lee, it was someone Anakin knew, had known every day of his life and seemed more familiar than anyone he’d ever met. Like he’d always been there, just out of the corner of Anakin’s eye, but wearing any and every face he could.

Or, perhaps, he’d been in the corner of Anakin’s eye, because to look directly at his face was like staring at the twin suns of Tatooine, only ten thousand suns instead. Looking at him your eyes naturally squeezed shut, you had to turn your head, and you just knew that even hiding behind Lee’s face he was still sometimes too much to bear looking at.

Lee stopped, the other did too, mirroring her movements, her every gesture as they stared across at one another, waiting for the other to say or do something.

“Well,” Lee finally said, crossing her arms, “I can’t say you were what I expected.”

The other seemed to realize then that it was capable of talking, like he’d forgotten for a moment, he looked down at himself as if seeing his hands and body for the first time, marveling at it, then back up. His expression didn’t change though, it wasn’t any expression at all, it was as if whatever entity controlled him had forgotten that his face had to match his feelings and thoughts, or maybe had forgotten the face existed at all. Haltingly, with stilted words, in a voice that was too perfect to be human at all, he said, “I am sorry.”

Only, his lips never moved, or they did after, the voice, no the idea of the words, instead came
from everywhere and nowhere at all, from Anakin’s own forgotten lips even.

He then altered, particles of light and dark that made his skin, hair, and eyes moving around and changing pigment, so that at the end of it he was instead the man that Anakin had seen in a vision once, the tall man with blonde hair and pale blue eyes, who had stood across from Lee and the great fox in the same white robes he was wearing now…

On seeing him, Lee’s eyes widened then narrowed, her mouth thinning as she took him in piece by piece.

“Is this… better?” the man asked, lips moving just out of synch with the words.

Lee didn’t comment though, she didn’t need to, they both knew it was worse. Except… he didn’t, he didn’t understand at all.

Lee offered him a wry smile, and wordlessly, disappeared, sucked back into a small fraction of the great river, tiny dust mote of a planet called Naboo on the night of precious victory.

And, Anakin, also drifting down and down into that same Naboo, fell further into unconsciousness, determined not to think about any of this at all.

The parade was in a single word ridiculous.

The sun was high in the sky, adoring crowds surrounded them on both sides, and there was him and Lee, at the head of a band of demented frog warriors on demented frog horses, and flowers were being strewn at their feet by singing children.

When Minato-sensei had earned his moniker of Yellow Flash, and won the war against Iwa, the only thing that had happened when they’d gotten back was that he’d attended Obito’s funeral and warded off the clan’s attempts to bring Kakashi the eye-thief to trial before the clan.

No one, in the history of any war against even the most fearsome of enemies, had walked over flower petals to the sound of drums with smiling children singing.
However, worse than this bizarre episode in his life, was that, even as he walked in this ridiculous parade, smiling and waving at civilians as he passed by, eyes lingering on Lee every now and then, the sunlight in her hair, the stray petals caught between red locks, was coming to the horrifying realization that he was hopelessly in love with his own master.

And he had no idea when, why, or how it had even begun.

Only, that sometime between yesterday and today, the memory of him brushing his lips against hers, that grief and then overwhelming joy and relief, something had seemed to click inside him, like a switch being put into place and now, only a day later, he was just starting to realize that all the furniture inside of his head had been rearranged when he wasn’t looking.

Because he hadn’t been looking, why would he, when his whole life had been defined by his overwhelming one-sided love for Rin?

He’d always loved Rin, since the moment he’d first seen her, and there had never been a single thought of anyone else. It had always, only, ever been Rin. No matter what.

More than that, it was almost like he had skipped most of puberty, if only because there wasn’t any girl that would have him stammering, blushing, or giving him embarrassingly naughty thoughts. There had only been Rin and Rin was… His feelings weren’t like that, had never been like that, it had been purer, stronger, than anything anyone else seemed to feel. So that when anyone else talked about girls and breasts and legs Obito had never quite… gotten it.

Well, he’d gotten the idea, but the point was that he’d only ever gotten the idea, it wasn’t something that he could remember having really experienced.

Even Obito had never quite known how deep his love for Rin had ran inside of him.

Except now, with the sun in Lee’s hair, that stupid grin on her face as she laughed at the crowds, hands in her pockets and looking nothing like a conquering hero should, he couldn’t seem to look away.

Suddenly, everything Lee had ever done for him, every look she’d ever given him or not given him, was constantly running through his head, and she was beautiful. Beautiful in a way that she hadn’t been before. Before she had been objectively attractive, strange, but with a foreign beauty.
about her that Obito could at least acknowledge.

Except now it wasn’t just acknowledgement, a distant recognition, now it was as if whatever engine had been turned on in his head was demanding he pay very close attention to it at the worst possible moments.

Worse, suddenly, all those years of puberty he’d pretty much skipped had come crashing down into him the night before, without him even seeing it coming. There he’d been, happy as a clam to still have both eyes in his head, Lee not trapped in some laboratory or else dead, and neither of them eaten by the chancellor then he’d closed his eyes and there was every memory he’d ever had of Lee in compromising positions, of himself in compromising positions with Lee.

It was just a part of being a master and student, you shared sleeping quarters, you saw each other half-dressed and maybe even naked (though, at least according to Obito’s sexy flashbacks and dreams, he’d always seen her in shirt and some flimsy pair of shorts or another and never really without clothes), and when you sparred sometimes she’d tackle you to the ground and her legs would slide between yours in a way that had meant nothing even a few days ago but now set his lower stomach on fire and covered his palms in sweat at the very idea of it.

So instead of the usual lovesick pining dreams of Rin and the wedding they’d never have, it’d been shishou and himself in that electrical room, everyone else insignificant like fog or smoke, and when he’d kissed her it had lasted longer, and then there’d been another kiss, and then his hands had moved towards her burned clothing and…

Well, suffice to say, Obito the scarred dream hunk had gotten very busy very quickly.

And when Obito, the non-dream hunk Casanova version, had woken up with clear and embarrassing evidence of all of this, he’d thanked god that Lee had been passed out on the twin bed across the room, none the wiser, while he retreated into the bathroom for two hours trying to come to terms with whatever the hell was happening to him.

He still loved Rin, certainly, of course he did, even now walking here in the middle of the day with flower petals all over him… But suddenly, it wasn’t as if his love for Rin was gone, but like it had shifted, or he’d put it on a shelf inside his head (perhaps having shelved it a long time ago without ever noticing) and it was Lee standing in her place.

Obito had never been in the practice of ignoring his feelings, he’d actually made an art of not doing it despite the clan’s disapproval. Similarly, he’d never tried hiding his feelings either, and so he couldn’t help but keep looking back to her, staring, and smiling at her like a lovesick fool, his grin
growing every time she so much as looked at him.

Kakashi was going to kill him, no Minato-sensei was going to kill him, and it wouldn’t be a clean or easy death either. No, it’d be miserable and painful and goddammit why wasn’t that rational thought sticking in his head?

Maybe because he’d never considered the possibility of liking let alone being in love with anyone but Rin.

And it… It felt like love, or, what Obito knew of love. Lee had long since been a precious person, he’d always acknowledged it, but it wasn’t until his eye, the mangekyo sharingan and her death that he realized just how deep that feeling went.

Deeper than he had ever thought possible for anyone except maybe…

“Obito.”

Obito turned, Lee was staring at him, her eyebrows raised again in that look that wondered if he had been concussed when she wasn’t looking. He flushed, cleared his throat, and managed to somewhat casually ask, “Yes, shishou?”

(And oh god, now he was having one of those Icha Icha style student-teacher fantasies in his head, and somehow, he’d just managed to make a word like shishou dirty, except calling her by her name directly, Lee, was ten thousand times worse.

Clearly, in the theater of Obito’s brain, there was no winning.)

“I think we’re supposed to make a dramatic show of going up the steps,” Lee noted, nodding up towards the queen, the jedi council, Anakin, and well, just about everyone Obito had ever met in this galaxy and then some.

“Right, yes, I remember that now,” Obito stammered out, praying to god Lee was thick enough not to notice.
Except that idea too, of Lee never noticing, was also in its own way just as painful as everything else.

Of course, it just got worse later. The parade wrapped up nicely, Lee and Obito went and changed into formal wear (or well, handed down Hatake yukata and hakima that had been pity loaned to him after being disowned from the clan), and then the banquet was on, Jinn and Kenobi lurking in a corner while the upper echelon of Naboo mingled while Lee herself had taken residency in some other corner, leaking just enough annoyed killing intent as she ate hors d’oeuvres and drank wine to convince any possibly interested suiter that perhaps they’d best look elsewhere.

Although this was probably not so much precaution on Lee’s part as it was an automatic reaction to whenever she was forced to show up in a ballroom. Having been there for a few of them, Obito could attest that the English ministry balls just might be some of his most awful and awkward experiences.

And Obito, who a day before would have thought she looked ridiculous and hilarious, and was now thinking it was heartwarming and a damned good idea to keep everyone else out of the way, decided that he was desperate enough to ask for someone, anyone’s, advice.

Due to circumstances, someone turned out to be Jinn.

“Hey, Jinn, can I… talk to you?” Obito asked with a slight grimace as he cut into his and Obi-Wan’s conversation, “I just, it’ll only take a few minutes, probably.”

Jinn paused, blinked, and then said uncertainly, “Certainly, though it may not be something that I…”

“And, not with Kenobi?” Obito pressed, eyes then darting to Kenobi, “No offense, Kenobi, but you really, really, would not be interested in my personal problems.”

Kenobi’s judgmental eyebrows raised but, none the less, with a glance towards his master, he wandered towards the punch bowl looking as serene as any monk. Right now, Obito envied that lack of attachment and embarrassment in a way that he hadn’t envied anything, even Kakashi’s unfair natural talent.

“Right, well, first, I am so sorry,” Obito said, flushing even as he said it, bowing his head in embarrassment, “Normally, I’d go to Minato-sensei, except he’d kill me, and Kakashi will kill me,
Rin would sort of defeat the purpose, and, well, you’re the only one here right now and I have to talk to somebody today.”

Qui-Gon did not look reassured by this verbal diarrhea, in fact, he dearly looked like he wanted to call Obi-Wan back.

However, Obito really didn’t have time for that, so he just plunged straight in, “I know that you guys have a thing about attachment but… I have been in love with a girl from my village, Rin, for almost my entire life. And, well, she doesn’t love me back, never has and never will, but that’s fine, I can handle that, could handle that.”

He paused, held up his hands waiting for a sign that Jinn was following thus far, then he continued, “And Lee, Lee is… scarily in love, or devoted to, or something to my sensei, Minato Namikaze. Always has been, always will be, and for his own part I have no idea what the hell he thinks about her but there is something there… Except he married Kushina Uzumaki, for reasons that have never really made sense to me.”

Frankly, reasons that made much less sense now than ever before, to the point where he simply couldn’t understand what Minato had been thinking all those years. Still, that was beside the point, “And, I’ve always been close with Lee, since she took me as a student. She was there when my entire family threw me out, and I have always, always recognized everything she’s done for me. Except… Except I think I’m in love with her, legitimately, terrifyingly, in love with a woman who has the perception of a brick wall!”

Obito stopped, waited, Jinn Qui-Gon looked at him, nodding slowly but with a rather stunned look on his face, finally the man said, “Ah.”

“Maa,” Obito parroted dully before the panic took back over and he asked in desperation, “What do I do?”

“This is not quite…” Qui-Gon started before stopping, looking at him, then at Lee, then starting again, “I can’t say I have any expertise in this department, if I were to give you the advice I would give a jedi, I do believe it wouldn’t help you at all.”

Right, he’d probably say to stop feeling attached or something. Which, normally, well even now, the idea of that sort of annoyed Obito because he didn’t not want to be attached. He wasn’t even sure he didn’t want to be doing whatever he was now he just… Wasn’t sure what he was doing, was kind of having an existential crisis, and had no general idea what was happening.
Finally though, Qui-Gon said something simple, if perfectly reasonable, “Why don’t you go and talk to her?”

“Talk to her?” Obito balked, head swinging to look towards Lee, now munching on some strange quiche like thing.

“Certainly, if you mean to… do anything about your current situation, it would be a good idea to see how she feels,” the jedi said with a shrug of his shoulders, “Otherwise you will be waiting for the rest of your life for an answer whose question was never ventured.”

He paused, continued to stare at Lee, blinking and feeling hesitation practically pinning him to the floor. Except… Except he’d never hesitated with Rin, he’d told her in the very beginning, had told her almost every day. Granted, she’d never taken it seriously, but at least she’d known.

Obito took in a breath, nodded, headed straight for the punch bowl and immediately started in on a few drinks for confidence, then strolled over to Lee’s corner as if he didn’t have a care in the world.

Because Obito was a cool goddamn cat, like Bakashi, cool no matter the situation. He was just… a real cool sort of guy.

“So, Lee,” he started and then stopped, the words dying inside of him as he looked at her face, the strange expressions that only she could ever really manage.

Like the current mix of utter boredom and serenity that he now found not only comfortably familiar but also endearing.

“Obito,” Lee acknowledged with a small nod, “I see you too have found the punch.”

“Oh, right,” Obito said, a nervous smile crawling up his face, out of sheer nerves he took another drink, “It’s good punch, or, well, suitably alcoholic.”

“And not poisoned,” Lee added brightly.
“I know, such a good opportunity missed,” Obito said with a small, too cheery laugh, as he had considered the nuke nin killing them all here (though that seemed a bit too easy for that man and a bit too obvious).

“Right, well…” Obito trailed off, eyes drifting towards his feet before he forced them back up again. Then, listening, he heard the music of the dance floor, muted by the murmured discussions of politicians, “Would you like this dance?”

Lee paused, tilted her head and considered this even while Obito’s heart pounded in his chest, then she smiled, “You know, I can’t remember the last time I’ve danced with anyone.”

He held out his hand to hers, she took it, pale long fingers curling around his, and at once time seemed to move too quickly and too slowly as, with steps forced upon him long ago by Lee herself and ministry ballrooms, they slid into a waltz.

And in his head, he could almost hear Lee’s old records playing, “Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars…”

And somehow, as they kept going and going, in three quarter time, he thought that he hadn’t really needed the words because somewhere inside her head, Lee already knew.

“Let me see what Spring is like on Jupiter and Mars.”

Perhaps Lee had known long before he had, as she always somehow did, and it was only Obito who was now surprised…

“In other words, hold my hand. In other words, darling, kiss me.”

And in her eyes, there wasn’t a hint of Rin staring back at him, just as in his, he was somehow sure, there wasn’t a speck of Minato-sensei.

Eventually the party ended, Obito and Lee departed back towards their room, Jinn offering them a fond if amused farewell while Kenobi looked as disbelieving and judgmental as ever, Padme offering them a small nod of acknowledgement before moving towards her offices and all the work still to be done.
They changed, Lee into those flimsy pajama shorts and loose undershirt, Obito just into a pair of extra pants. The moon shone in through the window, painting Lee’s face in soft pale light, Obito, almost without thinking, leaned across and kissed her.

It was slower, less rushed, like in the dream rather than the one he’d had in the real world. When she looked across at him, lashes lowered, the moon half in her eyes, there was that look he’d seen the night before in a scene that had never happened. She wrapped her arms around his neck, he wrapped his around her waist, and then, like dancing, it moved entirely too fast and too slow.

But then, Obito never had been one for half measures, and neither was Lee.
Early in his apprenticeship, when he was fourteen and suddenly Eru Lee’s student, Minato-sensei had once invited him to the hokage manor for what he’d deemed an important and necessary conversation. One that they had never covered, or needed to cover, during Obito’s years as Minato-sensei’s genin student.

The hokage manor had looked much larger and far more official than Minato-sensei and Uzumaki Kushina’s previous apartment. Obito, obviously, had missed Namikaze Minato being given the hat and everything else along with it, so this was perhaps the first time he found himself loitering outside the gates and looking inside.

It was just so strange, since, as far back as Minato-sensei had been his teacher, he had been relatively poor. He’d had no inheritance, his family had left him nothing when they died, and every cent he made was attributed to his own work as a shinobi.

This meant generally whatever money he had was spent on weapons, ink, paper, and basic necessities. Minato-sensei had never been a man who could afford luxuries. Without becoming a kage it was unlikely Minato-sensei would ever have been able to afford a home like this.

Obito, at the time had felt more than a little overwhelmed, without really knowing why. Perhaps because it was sinking in, again, that Minato-sensei was now the yondaime hokage and not merely Obito’s jonin sensei. Then again, perhaps it was something more than that, perhaps it was the air of a hokage’s authority along with the mysterious message he’d sent to Obito about something they needed to talk about.

Either way, Obito loitered outside at twilight, watching the way the sun hit the tiles on the roof and the glass on the windows, before making his way to the door and ringing the buzzer. Opening it was an incredibly pregnant Uzumaki Kushina grinning at him with her trademark smile, looking like she should be doing anything but standing on her own two feet, “Obito, brat, look at you I haven’t seen you in ages!”

She hadn’t seen him since the Kannabi Bridge mission. Or at least, he wasn’t sure if she had seen him since then, some of the weeks afterwards in the hospital had been a bit of a blur so she could have come by to check on him.

Certainly, he thought as she grinned at him, his scars were a very different addition to half of his face and body.
He smiled awkwardly back, trying to force the dark thoughts out of his head, “It’s good to see you too, Uzumaki-san.”

“Oh, don’t Uzumaki-san me, Obito,” Kushina said as she whacked him upside the head, ignoring his own rather rueful look, “Mintao and I are married now, which basically makes me your mother. It’s Kushina or nothing, brat!”

Obito just smiled back, rubbing the back of his head, before looking around, “Is sensei…”

Kushina interrupted before he even had a chance to get out the question, “He’s in the back, I can walk you to him, and then I’ve got to get off these feet. God, they never tell you how heavy babies are. I swear, little Naruto must be made of bricks.”

And just like that they made their way over to the living room where Minato looked up from his papers, glared at Kushina noting, “Kushina, I could have gotten the door, you didn’t need to…”

“I’m pregnant, Minato, not an invalid!” Kushina shot back, which seemed to be enough for Minato to hold his tongue. Obito smiled at the sight even as Kushina wandered off, still muttering, clearly intending to give Obito and Minato the space they needed.

“Is the baby due soon?” Obito asked once Kushina’s red hair was out of sight, and at the question Minato smiled fondly.

“Mid-October,” he said with that still fond smile before noting, “Of course, neither of us can wait for Naruto, but I think Kushina’s more than ready to get back into action. Not that anyone would ever dare to call her an invalid.”

“Naruto, even for a girl?” Obito asked, not that he hadn’t been wondering about Minato-sensei’s naming choice before given that he’d settled on fishcake.

“Well, very likely yes,” Minato said, flushing slightly as he rubbed at the back of his head, “Naruko didn’t have quite the same ring to it, and besides, I’d like my homage to sensei to be unmarred even if Naruto does turn out to be a girl.”

Finally, he sighed though, looked at Obito fully, and said, “That said, I didn’t call you over to talk about Naruto or my wife though, Obito.”
For a moment he just looked at Obito, his blue eyes pensive, until finally, quietly, he said, “How much, exactly, do you know about your shishou Eru Lee?”

“Lee-shishou?” Obito asked, before grimacing as he tried to recollect everything he knew about her, “Well, I know she’s your best friend and has been forever, she’s from England and English is her native language, she was on your genin team with Jiraiya-sama for a sensei, and she’s a bit…”

He trailed off, not quite willing to come out and say, that Eru Lee was beyond bizarre. He’d always thought she was weird, whenever he caught sight of her, but now working with her every day he’d come to realize not only was she weirder than he’d ever thought she was also an unbelievable task master without a shred of sympathy for what she put Obito through. Minato-sensei had never worked him as hard as Lee was working him, she seemed bound and determined through will and training alone Obito would somehow turn into Kakashi!

Obito wasn’t afraid of hard work, he never had been, but goddammit even he balked at some of the training exercises she’d been putting him through.

This wasn’t to say he wasn’t grateful, beyond grateful for everything she’d done for him, but all the same…

“Odd?” Minato finished for him, watching as Obito flushed, hoping he wasn’t being too insulting. However, Minato seemed to understand, and not take it too personally. Instead, with a sigh, and a rather fond look he noted, “Lee is… complicated, more complicated than most have ever given her credit for being.”

With that he noted, hitting the nail on the head in that rather perceptive manner he always had, “As her student it’s unlikely that you’ve ever given much thought to why Lee is the way she is, you’ve never had a reason to, but all the same I figured that since you are her student, her first real student in any sense, that it was best if I give you some idea of exactly who Lee is.”

Obito, at the time, wondered why that mattered. Sure, he didn’t understand Lee, but no one did. Why did it make a difference whether he understood what she did or not? Besides, if understanding Lee helped him understand Kakashi then he wasn’t sure he wanted the help, insight into Kakashi’s brain could not lead to good places.

However, Minato didn’t seem to care what Obito thought as he met Obito’s mismatched eyes, launching into the story of what made Eru Lee what she was today, “I met Eru Lee when we were
four years old, before we started the academy, in Konoha’s orphanage. At the time she only spoke English, and it took several months before she became fluent in our language and longer for me to become fluent in English. So, at the time, I only understood that she’d come from an island nation in the north where it tended to rain, one filled with civilians, and that her civilian relatives had been… unkind. I would not realize the extent of this, or exactly where and what she had come from, until a decade later.”

He paused here for a moment, likely thinking back to his teenage years with Eru Lee, and in that moment Obito had the strangest feeling that Lee herself should be present in the room. Or rather, that her presence seemed to linger, unsaid, in the air around them as if merely by thinking and talking about her Minato invoked her spirit.

Finally, Minato continued, “For the first four years of her life Lee grew up inside of a cupboard, treated as essentially a slave by her relatives, for the mere crime of having been born the daughter of the equivalent of two English nins. However, they never told her that, to Lee it was simply as if she had been born into a world that hated her without any shred of reason, one in which she was far too intelligent at far too young of an age and reality itself warped to her whims. Essentially, Lee was faced with a few choices to explain all of this. The first, she herself was a freak just as her relatives claimed and their hatred and fear was entirely justified. The second, the world itself was without reason, without meaning, and was little more than an illusion playing at being real. Lee, for whatever reason, perhaps because the first seemed to pale in the face of her relatives’ dullness and fear, chose this second option.”

Obito thought his eyes must have widened in some understanding then, as he remembered all the times Lee-shishou had so casually, even in the beginning, said the world was a complex illusion that was a little shabby at the edges, or that England itself had been nothing more than genjutsu.

Minato didn’t wait for Obito’s mind to catch up to his memories though, as he concluded, “This, I think, more than anything else, has painted the way she views the world and everything in it. It is a large part of why Lee is the way she is, and if you understand that, well, you’re one step closer to understanding Lee herself.”

Leaving later, he’d wonder if he really was, closer to understanding Eru Lee that is. Certainly, the next morning she seemed as mystifying and sometimes aggravating as the morning before for all his gratitude towards her and all the gifts she had given to him. However, as the years went by, he became more and more grateful to Minato-sensei for that conversation.

Because truly, in many ways, her time with the Dursleys was at the heart of who she truly was.
Obito woke up to early dawn light drifting through the blinds and the sounds of alien birds chirping. For a moment his mind had demanded he shrug these distractions off and return to comfortable warm sleep. He’d shifted, burying himself deeper under the covers, pressing up against warm flesh and breathing in the scent of another human being, and for a moment he’d been at peace.

Then, of course, his mind stumbled into being completely alert as it caught up with all these sensations and exactly what they meant.

He sat up, breathing in a panicked breath, eyes flying open as he took in the room, which was more or less how he’d left it, turned to his right and took in the sight of his own empty bed, and then looked down to where, yes, Obito himself wasn’t wearing any clothes and Lee’s ridiculous amount of red hair was springing out from beneath the covers, where she herself wasn’t wearing any clothes.

His face, rapidly began to flush, and he could only barely hold in his strangled cursing as he tensed beside her, all the memories of yesterday and then the day before that slammed into him.

How had they even gotten here?

For years he’d loved Rin and nothing had ever happened! Then suddenly, a day ago, he’s in love with Lee-shishou or realizes he’s been in love with her and just never put two and two together, and then that very next morning he’s waking up in her bed without clothes!

He glanced down at her still, thankfully, asleep, took in the half of her face appearing above the covers, turned towards him even now and the way the light danced across her cheek bones and eyelids, caught inside of her red hair so that it shone like the dawn. More, with her body, her breasts, brushing against his naked legs, he felt the arousal from yesterday stirring and felt himself flushing even harder.

Then, looking down at her, taking in the sight of this moment and burning it into his memory, he heard the distant call of memory in his mind. Instead of here, in a too small bed with naked Lee-shishou, he was in Konoha, only twelve years old sitting with Kakashi and Rin with a rather awkward looking Minato-sensei.

Minato had looked at them, rather put upon and somewhat embarrassed, as he asked, “I hate that I’m required to ask this, but Jiraiya-sensei did a pretty terrible job of this when he was my sensei and I vowed not to be the same, but what exactly did the academy cover for you guys as far as sex is concerned?”
Rin had flushed, mortified beyond reasoning, Obito himself had felt overwhelmingly embarrassed as he tried not to think about Rin, and Kakashi, the shit that he was, had just said, “I’m afraid I graduated too early for sexual education, Minato-sensei, the last thing that I heard was that storks deliver babies into women’s stomachs.”

Whether this was true or not, or whether Kakashi actually believed in nin-storks delivering infants and then sealing them into women’s stomachs, had unfortunately been beyond any of them so Minato-sensei, sitting there, had had to go through every little detail of sexual education with Bakashi asking awkward questions at every opportunity.

It was, by far, the most embarrassing day of Obito’s entire existence, Rin’s too he was sure, and it had to be in Minato-sensei’s top three.

At one point though, somewhere in the middle, Minato-sensei had said, “And one thing you must remember, and it might not be important now, but it will be in a few years, is that you don’t have sex on missions.”

Obito had wondered why Minato was looking straight at him as he said this, as if Obito was the one he was specifically worried about, more than say Kakashi or Rin. Of course, in retrospect, it was obvious that if anyone was going to be the problem child as far as sex on missions was concerned it was Obito, but the twelve-year-old Obito had been a little too thick to put that together himself.

Kakashi interrupted rather casually again as he asked, “But what if we’re supposed to have sex on the mission?”

“Kakashi-kun, don’t make this difficult,” Minato-sensei chided with a glare before continuing, falling straight back into sensei mode as if Kakashi had never said anything in the first place, “Still, you’re right, Kakashi-kun, sometimes you might have to have sex on missions, or more likely give the illusion of sex on missions, but with a teammate, even if you’re dating or both like each other, even if you’re using birth control as you both should be, it’s a terrible idea that will at the very least distract you from your actual mission if not worse.”

Later, Obito had thought this was kind of a silly thing for Minato to need to point out, after all even with his own love of Rin it wasn’t like she’d ever looked at him or that he necessarily felt that way about her. Sure, the idea of sex with Rin, a family with Rin, was nice and more than he ever wanted, but it wasn’t as if he was consumed by the idea of having physical moments with her either.
Now though, years later, Obito was desperately wishing he’d remembered Minato’s words yesterday, when it’d seemed like a great idea to go the distance with his own teacher.

Except… Looking down at her again, brushing a few stray strands of hair out of her face, he couldn’t quite bring himself to regret it either, even if he should.

At the feeling of his calloused fingers on her forehead Lee’s eyes flew open and she stared at him, for a moment her eyes completely inhuman, then slowly but surely she sighed and sat up to join Obito, allowing the covers to pool around her waist and leave her breasts bare for all the world to see.

Obito gawked, of course he’d seen and felt them the night before, so he supposed there wasn’t a real need to be shy, but that didn’t mean he was exactly prepared to see them in early morning light either.

He flushed, tried to compose himself and look away, not at all ready for round two no matter what his body or Lee’s breasts were screaming at him to do right now.

Lee, however, did not appear to be undergoing the same mental crisis that Obito himself was, other than the naked bit she looked like it could be any other morning.

“So…” Obito started, flushing and still staring at the floor where Lee’s abandoned sleeping clothes were, “I guess that happened.”

Lee spared him a somewhat dry and rather amused look, as if to say she found it cute that Obito couldn’t come out and say it, or even really accept that they were now in the position that they were in.

“I…” Obito stopped, flushed, tried to gather what he wanted to say first, out of the giant pile of things he had to say. Finally, he said, “I don’t regret it, and I’d… Well, clearly I’d do it again.”

It was more than obvious by the state of Obito’s body that he was more than willing to go again, even though he was willingly trying to ignore this fact even as Lee-shishou stared at him.
“I just wanted you to know that it was, it’s you, not Rin and if it happens again it will never be Rin and I…” And he wanted it to happen again, more than that, he wanted… He wanted a future with Lee, one that was like their present if not more than that, he wanted to preserve this moment, the idea of this moment, for the rest of his life.

“Well, considering you were saying my name I’d hope so,” Lee noted, “And I’ll just hope you know that by screaming your name I was not thinking about Minato.”

And that had been Obito’s next question, he thought almost with desperation, he hadn’t thought so at the time. Indeed, he’d been unnaturally sure of the fact that Lee was with him in spirit and body rather than Minato-sensei, but morning light cast doubt on that assurance and it was nice at least to hear it out loud.

“Right,” Obito said, still unbelievably red as he looked down at his hands useless in his lap, “That said… We could have timed this better.”

“I don’t know Obito,” Lee said, crossing her arms over her chest without shame, “There was dancing, moonlight, it was all quite romantic in retrospect.”

“You really think a mission in a completely different dimension with your sixteen-year-old student was a great idea?” Obito asked rather sardonically himself, earning a pair of raised and unamused eyebrows from Lee.

“You could be seventeen,” Lee finally said, “We’ve likely passed both of our birthdays at this point.”

“That’s beside the point and you know it,” Obito snapped back, and then stopped, because for a moment there it was like nothing happened. Or rather, they were acting like they always did even though they were both naked in the same bed. Obito, abruptly burst into laughter, throwing his head back and his arm over his eyes as his chest shook and he collapsed backwards.

Finally, breathing out, a smile on his face as he stared at the ceiling, he asked, “You’re on birth control, right?”

Lee stared down at him, a smile of her own on her face, “Of course, every female shinobi is, it’s simply too dangerous not to be.”
Right, because otherwise someone like Lee, someone with absurd blood limits, could be kidnapped, raped, and her child taken to another village. Birth control was hardly a prevention of this, but at least it was some countermeasure. The clan had always been wary about this type of scenario, as this, along with their eyes being stolen, was a disaster that could not be allowed to happen.

Either way, that, at least, would not be a consequence of the night before.

This left him frowning up at the ceiling, trying once again to put his thoughts on order. Lee was a virgin, he was sure of it, had been sure of it before but now had the proof of it for himself. That said he couldn’t help but ask, “Did you ever consider sex with Minato-sensei?”

“No,” it was an easy answer, almost immediate in fact as if she barely had to think about it at all, “The idea of sex, perhaps at times, but by that point he was already dating Kushina and I didn’t need or want sex from him as he didn’t need or want it from me. That simply wasn’t our relationship.”

For a moment he just regarded her expression, taking it in and attempting to dissect it, finally he asked, “Why me then?”

He and Lee had always been close, or at least, since the Kannabi Bridge. Certainly, he had become very close to her, and closer through the years if this morning was anything to show for it, but Lee…

Sometimes it was impossible to know what she was thinking.

Finally, after far too long of a pause, she said, “You aren’t afraid.”

Of all the answers he had been expecting, he thought, that had not been one of them, “What?”

“Minato, deep down, I think he is afraid of the level of… devotion I have for him,” she was staring out the window, her face turned from his but he could imagine the pensive and serious look on her face as she spoke, “This is fair, I love him as a god would, I remade a world in his image, and that’s an intimidating thing. I’ve told you this before but you… You loved Rin the same way, faced the same reaction from her, but then yesterday and the day before that… Somewhere along the way you must have started to feel that way about me, and I knew you had never flinched over everything I’ve done for you or anything I would do.”
She turned back to him, eyes burning in the dawn light, “And I realized that somewhere along the way, without realizing it, I must have started to feel the same way.”

Before he could say anything else she was all business, summoning her underclothes to her as she said, “That said, it’s past time for us to rendezvous and brief Konoha, now that we’re not going to war we have the perfect opportunity to pick up the nidaime and debrief with Minato.”

Obito couldn’t help but grimace, a few days ago he’d be all for going home, had been looking forward to it even as it’d been around a month since they’d been, but goddammit this was not the day or time to do it.

After all, it’d no doubt be far too easy for Minato-sensei to put two and two together, and Obito didn’t really feel like dying. Still, he supposed as he put on his own clothes and tried to clear his head, at least it’d give him something else to focus on.

“Wow, jedi missions sound a lot like shinobi missions then!” Anakin was grinning up at him, positively beaming as he moved blonde hair out of his eyes and looked up with Qui-Gon with all the wonder that a younger Obi-Wan sometimes had, “Except, do they have rankings, shinobi missions have a few different rankings so that genin aren’t sent on the kind of missions that a team of jonin would be. Like, Obito and Lee’s current mission here is S-ranked, which means it’s really hard and really dangerous and very important to Konoha so they had to send really good shinobi like Lee and Obito to do it.”

As soon as he’d woken up Anakin had sprinted to the palace gardens to find him and Obi-Wan, asking Qui-Gon all sorts of questions about becoming a jedi. Obi-Wan had wandered off early into this, shaking his head with some exasperated amusement before finding a quieter place to meditate, while Qui-Gon with his own amusement answered all of Anakin’s enthusiastic questions.

It was good to see him so cheerful again, he’d been so grim after leaving Tatooine, and more so after meeting with the council. He seemed delighted by the sight of the river by the palace, the soft sunlight and all the plants, a world so alien and soft compared to his home world.

Naboo, Qui-Gon thought, really was a beautiful planet, one that should never have had to taste war.

“Well, there’s not a formal ranking system, but some missions are harder than others and the
council does send in those they believe most qualified,” Qui-Gon replied, although, that had come short in this latest mission as while Obi-Wan was highly talented and certainly ready for the trials, he was also a padawan and this had turned into the type of mission requiring more than one master jedi.

It had turned out well enough, perhaps due to the force itself, but it had certainly not been easy.

“You’ll learn about all this and more at the temple on Coruscant,” Qui-Gon said, “Certainly, your teachers there are far more well versed in some of these topics than I myself am.”

Anakin shifted nervously, looking at his scuffed boots and the grass beneath them, and then looked up and admitted, “Well, I’m… I think I want to become a jedi, I mean, I still do but…”

“But you are still trying to decide,” Qui-Gon finished with a sigh, this was understandable, Anakin had been through a lot in the past week, and more he was facing a decision that would dictate how he was to spend the rest of his life.

Anakin looked up, his eyes so blue and wide, looking as if he very much needed Qui-Gon to give him an idea of what to do, perhaps even make the decision for him, and Qui-Gon was about to give his opinion when none other than Lee Eru and her apprentice Obito Uchiha walked up to greet them, both wearing their more formal militarized outfits that were undoubtedly Konoha’s uniform.

And Lee looked, at once, like any ordinary human woman and like a star in the form of a mortal being. There was a strange jarring duality to her even now, highlighted by every miracle Qui-Gon had seen her perform without breaking a sweat…

“Hey, Jinn-san, Anakin-kun, how’s it going?” Lee asked with a bright smile and a wave, Obito standing next to her offered a short wave himself, offering a slight (perhaps even grateful) smile to Qui-Gon and then a rather indifferent glance towards Anakin who paled beneath the force of it.

Well, Qui-Gon thought, last night seemed to have gone well. Disturbingly well, he couldn’t help but feel, if their bond a few days ago had been something now it was… Well… It was the type of attachment you’d hear about in ballads or epic poetry, rather than see in real life. Certainly not the type of bond he’d like to see in anyone sporting a connection to the force on the level that jedi themselves could not hope to reach.

Certainly, he couldn’t help but think as he looked at them, these strange shinobi he was beginning to call friends, it could bring nothing good.
“Oh, hi Lee, hi Obito, I was just asking Mr. Qui-Gon some questions about being a jedi,” Anakin said, shifting awkwardly as Obito’s gaze, now rather flat and unamused, fell towards him again.

Lee however whacked her apprentice upside the head, “Don’t be rude, Obito, Anakin’s decisions are his own and like them or not we must respect that they are his to make.”

Obito merely shot her his own unamused look, as if to say Lee knew exactly why it was a poor decision for Anakin to become a jedi, however, Lee only offered him a rather sardonic smile in response.

“Right, anyways,” Lee said, as if she could so easily brush off her apprentice’s disapproval, “Obito and I just stopped by to warn you that we’ll be gone for about a day, it’s time we headed back to Konoha and gave an official report, especially what with everything that’s happened.”

Oh, no doubt, Qui-Gon didn’t enjoy the idea of his own reports to the council, undoubtedly, he’d have another as soon as he, Obi-Wan, and Anakin returned to the temple themselves. He certainly didn’t envy Lee hers. Still, he couldn’t help but wonder, “And you can reach the outer rim that quickly?”

Lee’s eyebrows raised, “Well, anyone else might have a devil of a time, but teleportation makes things very convenient.”

“Ah,” Qui-Gon noted, not having realized that distance itself apparently made no difference to her, and perhaps realize the magnitude that a power like teleportation could have. No planet was too far, no prison too strong, the world was Lee Eru’s for the taking.

“Expect us back shortly, while it will be a long briefing Minato will undoubtedly recognize that Obito and I can’t exactly take too long of a break either, not at this stage anyway. Hopefully we’ll also return with the nidaime and you can meet someone who you all will undoubtedly find far more reasonable than me and Obito.”

At this last note Qui-Gon couldn’t help but smile, “Oh, I don’t know, I like you and Obito well enough.”

“Somehow, Jinn,” Obito said with a wry smile, his scars twisting it slightly on one side of his face, “I don’t think you count.”

That was certainly true enough, there was a reason Qui-Gon had never been and would never be
offered a seat on the council. The fact that they had allowed him to be a master at all sometimes amazed him.

“I passed the test!” Anakin suddenly blurted, “Or, well, they decided I can become a jedi now after everything that happened on Naboo.”

Lee and Obito merely looked at Anakin, Obito with a rather unamused expression and Lee with no expression at all, undoubtedly both had assumed he had as he was talking to Qui-Gon now but all the same there was something to their expressions that made this not the result either was hoping for.

Finally, Obito, bluntly, and in that voice that was far too old for his body, he stated, “Anakin, for your own wellbeing, I suggest you stick very close to Jinn and Kenobi. Trust no one else.”

Anakin seemed devastated by this, but unsurprised, all the same Qui-Gon tried to allow him a moment to compose himself as he told the pair, “Obi-Wan, Anakin, and I are headed back to Coruscant early tomorrow morning. If you meet us in time you can ride the ship with us, otherwise I suggest you teleport straight to the temple.”

Lee nodded, offered a slight bow and a small smile, “Until tomorrow then, Jinn.”

And with that the pair was gone, only dust and light where they had so recently stood, Anakin staring after them with a frown as he noted, “Obito thinks I’m stupid for wanting to become a jedi.”

For a moment Qui-Gon said nothing, just observed the hurt on his young face, and he could only imagine what Obito Uchiha had said to him. Still, Qui-Gon now had the opportunity to answer all of Anakin Skywalker’s misgivings, “They have a very different perspective than we jedi have. However, for all that they are different I do not believe they are bad people, merely that they’ve led a difficult and violent where paranoia and the strength of their feelings has rewarded them. To them, trusting no one is instinctive, perhaps even necessary, as those who don’t likely end up dead.

To them, an order like the jedi must seem simply too good to be true.”

And Obito, embittered by his edging towards the dark side, would undoubtedly be consumed by such ideas versus his far calmer master.
“So, you mean…” Anakin trailed off, eyes wide again as he took in what Qui-Gon was saying, that neither of them had to be bad or even wrong, it just highlighted that they came from very different places.

Had Lee and Obito been jedi, Qui-Gon liked to believe they would have been his friends.

“I am not saying that they don’t mean well, that Obito didn’t mean well, but simply that in their world an order like the jedi could not possibly exist. It is important to remember that.”

This, at least, seemed to reassure Anakin as his face brightened and with a smile, resumed asking Qui-Gon questions as the day moved on in the now peaceful planet of Naboo.

“… And then Obito and I, with minimal help from our Jedi friends Jinn and his apprentice Kenobi, saved a planet from the armed forces of the murderous grandpa who is now dictator of their galaxy-wide republic.”

Obito was starting to wish he had been the one to summarize the past month, and given Minato-sensei’s expression, he was starting to think the same. He looked swamped with paperwork, his kage hat hung up on a hook behind his desk and his kage robes somewhat askew, but it seemed like he had more than enough to stare at them with an open mouth.

And Obito could practically read his mind.

You had one job, only one job, and in one week you managed to completely blow it.

The only good thing about this, was miraculously, somehow, Minato-sensei hadn’t realized what else had happened. Lee and Obito’s new frontiers. He was so flabbergasted by Lee and Obito finally making contact with these jedi, only to be pulled into one of their own S-ranked missions, blow it with the council, blow it with the queen of Naboo, but somehow not blow it with their enemy nin and daimyo that he wasn’t even really looking at the pair of them.

He didn’t see how, at first, Obito had sat so close to Lee that their shoulders were touching, or how his chair had been leaning towards her, or how he and she would look at each other maybe a little too often and certainly more than they had last time they’d been in this office.
Somehow, the yellow flash, yondaime hokage, was missing all of this and it was nothing short of a miracle.

Obito cleared his throat, drawing attention to him, as he pointed out, “That said, we did gain two embassies out of the venture, and promised to have them meet the nidaime and begin more formal diplomatic relations between us and the republic as well as the Jedi themselves.”

“See, so even though we might not have been the most diplomatic, though with very good reasons for why everything went off the rails, we did make solid strides in the right direction,” Lee said with her trademark grin, as if everything was alright, because goddammit they had a friend in Jinn and two embassies out of the deal.

Obito added his own rather cheeky grin, as he added his own thought, “Considering, I think shishou and I made pretty damn good diplomats.”

Minato placed his face into one hand with a sigh, “Why am I not surprised?”

Because he should have known better than to send Lee or Obito with in ten feet of anything labelled diplomatic. Still, Obito stood by his response, he didn’t think anyone else, even the nidaime or the shodaime, could have done it better. The Jedi were… well, the Jedi, something that clearly had not gotten across through mere words.

Finally, Minato said, “I suppose then we should talk staffing for these embassies of yours, one on their capital world and one on this planet you saved, Naboo, correct?”

“Yes, it’s also the planet the queen and the chancellor are from,” Lee explained, growing a bit more serious and business-like herself, “Given its proximity to the center of the republic, as well as recent events, it’s not a bad place to have a second embassy aside from the main one on Coruscant.”

Minato considered this, staring across at the pair of them, with his trademark hokage expression rather than that of Namikaze Minato, “This is, I suppose, something Senju Tobirama should weigh in on when he goes himself but for now my initial thoughts is that it should fall to some of the clans. Perhaps the Nara or the Yamanaka.”

Obito grimaced, but he could see where Minato was going with this, clans had a tendency to be
very organized about this sort of thing and were a good choice to at least initially run an organization like this. Still, running the police force had not done the Uchiha clan any favors and they often resented the nidaime for saddling them with that position and thus separating them out from the rest of the village.

Still, “So, you agree on the nidaime then?”

“You know the situation better than I do, and if you both agree that he’s the one to send I’ll hardly argue against that choice,” Minato said with a shrug before expanding with a slight grimace, “And the man would undoubtedly send himself anyway, at this rate soon enough the shodaime will be demanding to go and see other planets. Somehow, just sending the nidaime seems like a less extreme option.”

Undoubtedly since the jedi would blow their tops meeting the over exuberant, over powered, ridiculously emotional and attached shodaime Senju Hashirama. For all his love for his brother, which Obito was almost sure the jedi would pick up on, Senju Tobirama was a far less extreme choice.

For a moment, as Minato regarded them, still thinking on their words Obito wondered what he saw. Even if he was distracted how could he not notice? Maybe it was like Obito and Lee had thought, that this had been there before, but until Lee had died in front of him neither had really noticed.

Or… Obito had been too young before, was perhaps a bit too young now, and so now at a time when something had happened Minato couldn’t seem to tell.

Or perhaps Minato-sensei had grown too far apart from Lee, had willed himself away by marrying Uzumaki Kushina, and no longer had the ability to tell. And there was something, something so very sad in that thought.

“And this chancellor of yours, Palpatine,” Minato continued, jarring Obito from his thoughts, “How much of a threat do you think he is?”

Lee answered this, thinking back on the smiling venmous grandfather that they had now had far too many meetings with, “Politically he’s going to be incredible, I have no doubt he can eliminate the jedi and plans to do so even on his own, power wise… He has chakra, is certainly jonin caliber, but I would not say he would have enough to be a kage. He is clever, subtle and clever, and that is his great strength.”
Obito added to this, attempting to gather his own thoughts on the matter and seriously evaluate what the man could and would do to them, “It’s that cleverness that has me worried, he is… An unbelievably good actor, Lee and I only know what he is because he has no concept of killing intent. Without a doubt he’s trying to manipulate Lee and I into his service, likely he’ll start on the nidaime as soon as he arrives, when he realizes that we can’t be bought he’ll either move to assassinate us or more likely turn the Jedi so far against us that any help we offered would be immediately rejected.”

Obito then glanced at Lee before glancing back to Minato, “Also, he intends to make Skywalker Anakin his next apprentice, a boy who does have jinchuuriki levels of chakra running through him. Shishou being shishou, could tear even a fully trained Skywalker apart with her hands tied behind her back, as likely could the nidaime and maybe even me, but depending how the training goes and what he’s like in real combat… It could get nasty for anyone else, sensei.”

“I take it the boy isn’t coming here then?”

“No,” Lee answered quickly, without any real feeling inside it, as if her feelings had been stripped away and stored somewhere else entirely, “I don’t believe he will. For better or worse, Skywalker Anakin will become a Jedi.”

Still, Anakin gave them something of an in to the Jedi along with Jinn and even Kenobi. So there was always that. Yes, there was always that. The talking went on for some time, describing Anakin, the Jedi, Padme, and everyone else in significantly more detail to get the files needed started.

Minato sent a small message to the Senju compound, telling him to prepare for an early morning departure, and just like that the meeting was over without a single word of Lee and Obito’s own recent, personal, developments.

“Well, that seems to be that,” Minato said with a sigh, “You two give me entirely too much paperwork, I hope you know that.”

“Ahh, well, consider it karma for team seven,” Lee said with a smile, Minato giving a fond one in response.

“Of course, the sandaime tells me that every time I see him,” then, pausing he said with his smile, now playful and growing, “All the same, Lee, I hope you know you’re expected at my house at six for dinner. Kushina will have your head if you even think of bailing.”
And Lee, for the first time, gave an indication of what had happened with Obito, what had changed. She paused, for just a moment, stiffened slightly, and then her smile was back and said, “Minato, would I turn down a home cooked meal?”

And Minato’s smile… How had he ever married Uzumaki Kushina? Obito knew he loved her, that they really loved each other, but with the way he looked at Lee and the way even now she looked at him, how could he have done it?

Obito simply could not understand.

Lee stood, offered Minato a small salute as he started in on the piles of paperwork required, and Obito stood with her with a small polite bow towards his former sensei. And while Lee left undoubtedly to prepare herself for dinner in only a few hours Obito walked out with her, feeling as if he was in a daze, home but not home, because everything was different…

He was almost grateful that Kakashi kidnapped him for a night of terrible karaoke with him and Rin as soon as he stepped outside the hokage tower. Almost.

Padme looked so official in her imperial robes and makeup, so different, that Anakin had hard time recognizing her. Now that he knew it was her, of course, he could tell but that didn’t mean it wasn’t hard.

She was very busy, after spending most of the day with Qui-Gon he wasn’t sure he’d get a chance to see her, thankfully she’d been a little less busy in the afternoon. One final afternoon before he was off to Coruscant, and then he didn’t know when or if he’d see her again.

“I’m happy for you, Annie,” she said with a smile, and she was so beautiful when she smiled, especially now that Naboo was free and safe again. Even if the work was hard she looked so much lighter, so much more determined than she had a few days before, “Really, becoming a jedi will be a great opportunity for you.”

“I think so too,” Anakin said, “Except I’m sad I won’t be able to see you.”
“I will be quite busy for a while,” Padme said, “Still, maybe someday in the future we’ll meet again.”

Anakin liked to think so, normally, he thought the force would reassure him of this possibility but the force… It wasn’t acting like it usually did, at first, in the morning it had been fine, unusually centered on Lee and Obito again but still fine. Except now it seemed almost agitated, as if it had misplaced something and was now looking for it as if it was edging towards panic, sifting through all the planets and all the stars to find whatever it was looking for.

It was… a strange and distracting feeling, always in the back of Anakin’s head. Anakin almost wanted to reach out to the force himself and ask what it was looking for so Anakin himself could find it already, but something stopped him, maybe the idea of directly talking to the force like that. The force, chakra, it wasn’t really like that. Anakin had always been able to reach out to it, to grab ideas and visions from it, but it wasn’t like it was a person either. It flowed through everything and everyone, but that was about all, it was never… In disarray.

He wondered what Qui-Gon would make of it.

“Anakin?” Padme asked, peering at him with those dark eyes so filled with light.

“I… sorry, I got distracted,” Anakin said rather lamely, “I was thinking about the force.”

She smiled, laughed, “Well, Annie, I’m afraid I wouldn’t know much about that.”

“I know,” Anakin said with his own smile in return, “It’s nothing to worry about, I’m sure…”

He trailed off then, and was suddenly struck by a thought, “I wonder if I’ll see Lee again.”

He didn’t know why he’d asked that. Sure, he’d thought about it, about her and Obito going back to Konoha and him being a jedi, but he’d been thinking more about Padme. It was just, as he’d reached out to the force it was like something had jogged his memory about Lee and the words had almost spilled out of his mouth.

Padme didn’t seem to notice as she answered with a look of distaste, “I’m sure you’ll see her and Obito again too Anakin.”
“You really don’t like them,” Anakin said, and he’d known that before, but now it was really striking home. Even as he said it he could feel the force almost stilling, flowing into Anakin and guiding his conversation towards some unforeseen end, digging deeper into this moment as it waited for something.

She hesitated, for a moment looked doubtful, perhaps embarrassed, and finally said, “I… You must understand, Annie, I am very grateful for what they’ve done for Naboo. I realize that without them we wouldn’t be here right now, and maybe I was wrong about them but… We are such different people, and they are such violent people. I don’t know if I can bring myself to trust a people whose military strength can be bought.”

And just like that Padme was a queen again as she explained, “That said, Chancellor Palpatine is right, Naboo and the republic both owe them our gratitude, and an embassy is the very least we can do for them and what they’ve done for us.”

“So, you think they’re coming back then?” Anakin pressed, the words again tumbling out of his mouth, while Anakin himself felt almost as if he was in a dream, watching himself speak rather than speaking himself.

Padme snorted slightly, both amused and annoyed by Anakin’s question and the idea of Lee and Obito, “I’d hope so, they certainly said as much, I had thought they’d said the same to you and Master Jinn this morning. No, I’m sure we’ll see them bright and early in the morning along with whatever diplomat they insist on bringing.”

And just like that the feeling of his body being controlled retreated and Anakin was just Anakin again while the force itself seemed to fall back into its normal disinterested rhythm, as if Anakin really had helped it find what it wanted and now it was more than content to patiently wait until tomorrow morning.

He blinked, shook the feeling off, and thought to himself that he must be imagining things. The force wasn’t like that, Qui-Gon and Lee had both said as much in their own ways, he was just having strange feelings.

And he did miss Lee, and Obito, he really did.

Yes, that must be it.
So Anakin just smiled and tugged on Padme’s hand and pulled her up with him, towards the doors that lead to the blooming gardens, “Do you think you have time to show me the gardens, the only trees in Mos Espa were Obito’s.”

Ah, team seven karaoke nights, an obligatory experience that neither Rin nor Obito could ever wriggle their way out of even if this had to be the fiftieth time they’d heard Hatake Kakashi drunkenly belt Schilling Peter’s “Major Tom” for his bemused audience to hear.

Or at least, Obito assumed Kakashi was drunk, certainly his face was flushed enough, and he was off-duty for long enough to excuse it, but one could never tell with Bakashi. Half the time he barely acted human, sobriety seemed entirely beyond him even in the soberest of circumstances.

That, and, given that he appeared to have dragged new ANBU member Uchiha Itachi and made him sit front row center, he likely was pulling on the full on Bakashi show to give the tiny clan heir a front row seat to the surreal horror that was the Hatake eye-thief.

As it was, poor little nine-year-old Itachi was staring with wide dark eyes, with the expression that said his mind had left the bar ages ago and that he dearly wished he was old enough to drink. Poor kid, he’d probably thought Uchiha Shisui was as ridiculous as anyone could get.

“Standing there alone, the ship is waiting, all systems are go, ‘Are you sure?’ Control is not convinced, but the computer has evidence, no need to abort, the countdown starts.”

Rin sat on the bar stool next to him, shaking her head at Kakashi’s usual antics, “You know, it’s sad that even though I really only know a few words of English, I’ve heard this song enough times that I have it memorized.”

Obito considered this for a moment, before drily noting Kakashi’s other favorite choice of karaoke song that they had all heard far too many times before, “It could be ‘Danger Zone’.”

Rin laughed, sipped at her drink while she watched Kakashi in utter bemusement as he dramatically, with more gestures and facial expressions than was required in karaoke, told the tale of the beset Major Tom as he tried to find his way home.
“Watching in a trance, the crew is certain, nothing left to chance, all is working. Trying to relax, up in the capsule, ‘Send me up a drink’, jokes Major Tom, the count goes on…”

Obito for his own part stared at her, Rin, and wondered how it had been so easy and yet so hard to let her go. Sitting next to her here, in the darkened room, that ever present need to impress her or even to get her to look at him had faded and dulled.

Suddenly the fact that Kakashi, of all people, could so easily hold her attention no longer seemed so bitterly ironic as it once had.

Rin glanced at him, her smile slipping into something a little softer and more familiar, “How are you? You look tired, I mean, compared to the last time.”

“I am tired,” he responded, barely having to think about that statement as he felt the exhaustion of the past few days fall into him, “The last few weeks have been… Very busy and a lot harder than I thought they’d be.”

Rin nodded, apparently willing to leave it at that, but for a moment Obito almost wished she’d press. That she’d point out that something about Obito himself seemed different, more than just exhaustion, as if something about him had fundamentally changed and…

Then, of course, the countdown started for Hatake Kakashi, fingers up in the air and counting down from four to one as he sang out louder than before the first terrible chorus of this truly terrible song, “Four, three, two, one! Earth below us drifting, falling, floating weightless, calling, calling home…”

When Kakashi had first done this, years ago, and brought in some of Lee’s English records for use in the karaoke bar, he’d very nearly been thrown out. However, they’d all just gotten too used to Kakashi so at this point it was only the newer younger shinobi, such as Uchiha Itachi, were staring at him in utter disbelief and horror as one of Konoha’s greatest jonins made a complete ass of himself for everyone to see.

And yet, for the first time in a long time Obito found himself listening to the strange and terrible lyrics of “Major Tom”. For once, he thought, he sympathized with Major Tom’s plight and desperation as, so very far from home, everything started to go wrong.

In a way, it kind of summarized how these last few days had been with Lee on Coruscant and then
Naboo. That desperate moment when Lee had been stabbed, her eyes wide, and his first thought as she’d fallen was that he wanted to go home.

He had so desperately wanted to go home.

“Second stage is cut, we’re now in orbit. Stabilizers up, running perfect. Starting to collect requested data. ‘What will it affect when all is done?’ thinks Major Tom.”

“Obito?”

He looked back over at Rin who was now looking at him with a somewhat more concerned expression and… And it wasn’t that he felt nothing, but that it… It didn’t mean nearly as much as it once had. Like he had wiped the idea of Rin he’d had in his head away and left this friendly stranger, a friend and nothing more, beneath.

“Ah, sorry, I’m just tired,” he said, however even as he said it, his mind couldn’t help but wander to Lee herself and her dinner with Minato-sensei. How was that going? Was it as awkward as he imagined it was, or that it should be, or were they both oddly at ease with this strange situation they’d found themselves in when he’d married Uzumaki Kushina?

Lee could sometimes be an excellent actor, when it suited her. He wondered if any of tension showed on her face. Except… Was she seeing what Obito was seeing in Rin now? Someone she thought she had known except not quite, now that the pretense and the hopes and the dreams were swept away?

Or was it different for her?

“Back at ground control, there is a problem. Go to rockets full, not responding. ‘Hello Major Tom, are you receiving? Turn the thrusters on, we’re standing by,’ there’s no reply”

Obito had always had the feeling that, in many ways, Lee had always been more enlightened Obito was. She’d made her peace with Minato years before, perhaps from the very beginning, where Obito had clung to the idea of Rin for a decade and if Naboo hadn’t happened would likely still be clinging to it even without any sign of hope.

Perhaps nothing had changed for her because it had always been this way, ever since he first
started dating Kushina certainly.

Suddenly he didn’t want to think about Lee and whatever she was up to anymore, he turned to Rin and with a smile asked, “So, how’s the hospital these days?”

With that she launched into her hospital work, the new challenges in the week, her own independent studying as Tsunade had yet, and would likely never, take her up as an apprentice. And Obito listened and let the reunion of team seven wash over him, Kakashi’s singing included, “Four, three, two, one! Earth below us, drifting falling, floating, weightless, calling, calling home.”

She described Kakashi’s latest antics as an ANBU captain, how he appeared to have unofficially taken Itachi under his wing, much to Uchiha Fugaku’s extreme displeasure and Itachi’s utter bafflement and for a moment it was almost like Obito hadn’t left Konoha.

Or that his mission had been a shorter one, a normal month-long mission and now he was back, and the work was done. Except… Except he only had the night and then he and Lee were back at it, floating out into space once more.

And was it bad, that in some respects at least, he almost looked forward to going out again? There he didn’t have to think about the clan, about Rin, about Minato-sensei and his relationship with Lee, and Lee and he could be…

Well, on their own again, on a strange adventure filled with nothing either of them had expected. Taking one small step for man, and a giant leap for mankind.

“Across the stratosphere, a final message, ‘Give my wife my love’, then nothing more. Far beneath the ship, the world is mourning, they don’t realize, he’s alive. No one understands but Major Tom sees, now the life commands, ‘This is my home, I’m coming home.”

And then Kakashi was done, Itachi taking that excuse to disappear and run out the door before Hatake could focus his attention back on him, and with an entirely too smug look on his face Kakashi wandered over.

And oh shit, Obito thought, he may have somehow escaped Minato’s notice but already Kakashi’s single shrewd eye was darting between him and Rin and back again. As if just by looking at the pair of them he could somehow tell, even when Rin herself couldn’t, that everything had changed.
“You sounded good, Kakashi,” Rin said as he approached, to which Kakashi naturally looked rather affronted.

“Of course, I sounded good,” Kakashi said, “As Maito Gai will often tell everyone, I am very hip, and the hippest thing around is to slay at karaoke.”

The hippest thing around was not karaoke and certainly not “Major Tom” but Gai was allowed his delusions as Kakashi was allowed his, and Obito had long since learned that it wasn’t worth commenting.

Rin seemed to have learned too as she smiled and began to pack up her things, “I hate to run, really, but I’ve got an early morning tomorrow and I’ve stayed late enough as it is.”

She then turned towards Obito, hugged him swiftly, her face close to his as she said, “Obito, next month I’ll stay longer, I promise.”

Then with a wave to Kakashi she was out the door, Obito staring after her feeling… something, something unidentifiable, but not the heartache that it would have been before all of this had happened.

Kakashi, eyeing him, slid into Rin’s now empty seat, “So, I see you’ve finally moved on.”

Obito paled, looked towards him, and caught that amused twinkle in Kakashi’s eye and… Oh, oh, he didn’t realize that Lee had taken Rin’s place. As far as he could tell, Obito was sure, was that for whatever reason Obito wasn’t hung up on Rin.

With that Obito merely sighed partly in relief and also in the exhaustion of letting go of the past and said, “It seems so.”

“Good, she’s getting serious about that boring medic nin she’s been dating,” Kakashi said casually, and even though Obito bristled slightly it clearly wasn’t enough of a reaction to fail Kakashi’s test.

Although it did irk him that he hadn’t heard about it before now, of course, Rin would never bring it up to his face. She was so used to walking on egg shells when it came to Obito’s unrequited feelings that it usually would fall to Kakashi to break the news in the worst manner possible.
Still, Obito offered a rather nostalgic smile as he stared at the door where Rin had left into the night, “Better than dating you, I suppose.”

“You know,” Kakashi said suddenly, as if this thought had only just occurred to him, “My father keeps asking if I’m ever going to get around to dating anyone, and if he should just give up on the idea of biological grandchildren entirely, and I told him that Rin wasn’t a terrible option all things considered.”

Ah, now there was Obito’s old friends called irritation and aggravation as Kakashi took things entirely too far, “Somehow, I don’t think Rin will be volunteering to be your baby-mama, Bakashi.”

Kakashi didn’t laugh, it would ruin his image, but his rather Lee-like smile portrayed all the amusement at Obito’s expense that it needed to and so Obito ended up laughing for him, somehow at ease with everything, despite everything…

Soon enough they were out the door, walking through the streets back towards the Hatake compound. However, about halfway through something stopped Obito, an idea or sense of one and he turned his head back to where they’d come from, where only a few blocks away Lee’s small apartment rested.

“You go ahead, Kakashi, there’s something I need to do.”

Kakashi stopped, looked at him with a raised silver eyebrow, “Do? What could you possibly have to do at this hour?”

But Obito didn’t even pay attention, just offered him a wave as he walked back, past the bar and down the street to Lee’s apartment. And there, as he had so many times before, he knocked on the door and waited for it to open. Then there was Lee, hair unbraided and flying out in every direction, blinking across from him with her large green eyes that almost seemed to be lit from the inside.

And all Obito could think to say, even as he smiled stupidly across at her, stepped inside, and pulled the door closed behind him was, “I don’t know why, but ‘Major Tom’ somehow reminded me of you.”
Uchiha Obito had a reputation of being late, not quite as bad as his aggravating teammate Hatake Kakashi (who was somehow good enough to get away with it), but certainly he tended to be distracted in his own right.

Eru Lee, however, for all her quirks, usually wasn’t.

Tobirama sighed, long since having been packed and ready to go (perhaps a bit too eagerly, and with a bit too many English and regular supplies, if his older brother had had anything to say about it) but could you really blame him? Alien dimensions, entirely different branches of jutsus, it was the kind of adventures he had dreamed about as a child though war and death had stripped those fantasies away from him.

Then, it seemed foolish to even dream of peace, as his brother had.

This brave new world of Lee’s though, Lee and his brother, would once have been far beyond his wildest imaginings.

And yet here he was, an almost bottomless pack stuffed to the brim with supplies from three entirely different dimensions, more than eager to begin diplomatic relations with this foreign republic, no matter the odd and vague warnings that Namikaze Minato had passed on from Lee and Obito themselves.

If only Lee and her goddamned apprentice could be on time!

He looked over to where Lee’s apartment was, wondering if he should head there and start pounding on the door, it had seemed better to wait here for the pair to show up but every minute they were late the more it started to grate on Tobirama’s nerves.

Which was a pity because for the most part he liked the pair of them, Uchiha Obito had a special place in his heart for defying family tradition and proving himself to be a decent human being, also given that Hashirama had practically adopted him Tobirama saw him more than he did most chunin in the village.

As for Lee, well, while she unduly reminded him of his brother’s terrible qualities she also reminded him of Hashirama when he was at his best. As a result, he had always been fond of the girl, even when he wanted to kill her.
Finally, the pair appeared, sprinting down the street and landing in front of him, the boy catching his breath, “Sorry, nidaime-sama, we lost track of the time.”

We? He thought as he looked at them, he’d expected some other lame excuse, and then some explanation of how his master had had to track him down. What could they have been doing at this hour of the morning together?

Almost against his will he found himself looking at them more closely, the way they stood next to each other, how distracted at least the boy seemed, and suddenly he wasn’t liking the conclusions that were being quickly drawn together inside his head.

“Right,” Tobirama instead replied, “You have everything?”

“Yes,” Lee said with a quick nod, “We should be all ready to go, and hopefully we can catch the jedi ship over and give you… A crash course on what to expect.”

“Were the files not a crash course?”

Lee and Obito looked at each other, the kind of look that spoke a thousand words, finally it was Obito who looked back and said, “Not… really, it’s one of those things that you’ll have to experience in person.”

“Expect many lectures on the ills of being too attached to things,” Lee added, a sentence which, did, indeed, have Tobirama slightly dubious about this whole prospect. Not enough to back out, certainly not that, but enough to wonder if he really did have an idea of what he was getting into.

Either way, it was too late for doubt, as Lee, looping her arms through both of theirs, hurdled the three of them through time and space, leaving Konoha far behind.
Chapter 12

Aside from the usual training, missions, and what have you of being an apprentice Obito’s apprenticeship to Eru Lee was somewhat special in that involved a lot of what Lee would sometimes term cultural education. Or, as Obito liked to call it, having to read and watch every science fiction and fantasy thing that had ever existed and then some.

Lee had a great and overwhelming love of science fiction, ironically at odds with her own hatred of the plant zombie alien aftermath of Kaguya’s rein of terror five hundred years ago. None the less science fiction, English science fiction especially, was both her bread and butter.

So, naturally, when she made Obito her apprentice, she also made sure he got more than his fair share of it too.

Granted, this was half the reason he got so good at English so quickly, but all the same, as a ninja there was something to be said when you found yourself spending every Wednesday night on your shishou’s couch watching anything from Jaws to Starship Troopers.

This particular Wednesday night, when he was fifteen and more than used to this arrangement, brought him the next episode of Star Trek: The Next Generation, in his opinion a far more watchable and enjoyable show than Star Trek: The Original Series had been.

There was nothing particularly special about this moment, just a moment in time like any other, Lee’s green eyes wide as she leaned forward staring at the ominous Borg while Obito munched on popcorn and wondered just how Captain Picard was or was not going to get out of this doozy of a situation.

Because, as the Borg was explaining to Picard, in a singular, emotionless, mechanical voice, it was quite the doozy of a situation, “Strength is irrelevant. Resistance is futile. We wish to improve ourselves. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service ours.”

Obito would make some comment at this point but a glance to Lee told him she was far too invested in a show she’d watched more than once before to appreciate his input now. So instead he just kept munching popcorn and wondered how seriously he should be taking all of this.

Granted the idea of the Borg, this colonizing race assimilating other sentient beings into their own
mechanical culture, was terrifying. In fact, it was rather reminiscent of Kaguya and the Zetsu, one could say that the Zetsu had been human beings assimilated into the great Borg that was the shinju tree and Kaguya so very many years ago.

And indeed, their individual resistance had been futile.

So, perhaps, he thought to himself as he watched the screen, this episode should prove just as terrifying and haunting as Total Recall had. That said, there was something about the hokey special effects of English television and films in the late 1980’s that took away from the concept. Perhaps for the best, as Obito hadn’t really been in the mood for that sort of terrifying introspection.

Still, god, it had been too much Star Trek recently. He shifted in his seat thinking it over, they’d first gone through the original series, then all the terrible Star Trek films for the original series (although now at least he knew why Lee would sometimes scream “Khan!”) and now the Next Generation… He also had the strong suspicion that there’d be even more Star Trek later on, some other new series or even new films he’d have to watch and goddammit was it bad that he just wanted to get back to watching Spielberg Stephen films again?

Finally, as Picard stoically took in his fate and prepared himself for resistance against an invulnerable enemy, Obito couldn’t help but ask, “So, if Picard is… borgified, does that mean the show’s over?”

Lee didn’t even look at him, “No, of course not.”

“Oh, of course not,” Obito parroted back with a roll of his eyes, “Forgive me, but Picard becoming a Borg seems… bad.”

“Very bad,” Lee said with a slight nod, attention never wavering, as it never did during these moments. Lee always took her television very seriously.

“Yes, so because of that…”

“We’re only in season two,” Lee interjected, “There are many more seasons to go, my young and ignorant apprentice.”

“Goddammit!” Obito sighed, grabbed another handful of popcorn, and said, “Well, at least this show is better than the last one, but seriously, we have got to break up this Star Trek run with other things.”
Lee frowned, glanced away from the Borg cube, an ominous metallic and radioactive green structure, and towards him, “Fine, we can take breaks, if only so you can have more appreciation for the **Klingons**, the **Borg**, Q, **Khan**, and all the rest.”

Obito grinned, a far too relieved thing considering, and quipped, “Shishou, you are a gentleman and a scholar.”

She waved this off and both turned their attention back to the screen, to the horrified enterprise crew encountering what once, not so long ago, had been their well-spoken captain, now assimilated just as so many had been on Obito’s own world five hundred years ago.

Just as Qui-Gon had promised early morning found Anakin, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan bidding the queen and Naboo farewell as they prepared their ship to follow after the rest of the jedi council, departed a few hours before, for Coruscant and whatever future awaited Anakin there.

Coruscant, his new home…

Mos Espa had both felt like home and not. He had never known anything else, but he’d always chafed at the sand and the suns, at slavery, at Watto… He’d always dreamed of home being somewhere further inward, on a planet like Naboo, full of green and growing things. Then, when Lee and Obito had arrived, Konohagakure had become the home he envisioned for himself. Yet, even now, staring up at the early morning sky, trying to see past the blue atmosphere and towards the stars and planets and Tatooine glittering in the distance, he couldn’t believe that Mos Espa was gone.

He’d once dreamed that he would leave that place and never look back, he’d never thought that would be because there was nothing to look back to.

He glanced back down, Padme was walking towards them with her entourage of handmaidens, dressed in her strange imperial robes with a smile on her face. Anakin grinned at the sight of her, but his chest felt tight and his throat swelling closed with something anxious and tender, because he really didn’t know when he was going to see her again.

He thought he would, the force almost reverently assured him that he would, but it was going to be a long time and…
“Naboo thanks you, all of you, for the service you have done for my people and my planet,” Padme said with a small bow towards the jedi and Anakin, “We will never forget the debt we owe to the jedi order.”

Qui-Gon lifted a hand with a soft smile, protesting, “Nonsense, to do any less would have been a crime in and of itself. Naboo should not have to owe gratitude simply for that.”

Anakin opened his mouth, tried to think of something to say, or rather, how to say goodbye. How to… to make Padme remember him, until whenever they could meet again, make her remember him the way he knew he would remember her. However, he couldn’t find the words, couldn’t even think of what to say. Then, just like that, with his mouth still open waiting for words to come off his tongue, the moment was gone, and without even having to look he knew that Lee and Obito were back.

He moved his head almost on instinct, and there they were, standing on the air strip like they’d never left at all, only the addition of a newcomer the sign that they’d come and gone. At the very sight of them he felt the force light up, buzz with excitement, and give a great sigh of relief at the same time. Then, just like yesterday and the day before that it was focusing on them, on Lee, moving in currents around her and her companions in a way that Anakin couldn’t help but find really distracting.

He felt himself focusing almost unnaturally on the newcomer, a strange, thin, white-haired man with red eyes who didn’t look all that old. He stood close to Lee and Obito, and Anakin didn’t really know why, but something about the way he stood and held himself reminded him of Obi-Wan, or at least, what Obi-Wan could be in ten or fifteen years. He just had this feeling of collected confident no-nonsense intelligence about him that Anakin didn’t even think to question.

Lee and Obito he looked at too, taking in all the details, things he wouldn’t have thought to notice like the way Lee’s hair caught the light or the brightness of her smile as she took in their surroundings or how closely Obito stood next to her and how his mismatched eyes softened whenever he glanced in her direction. More, he kept feeling himself, no the force, try to look through them, to their past or even their future, but mostly catch strange glimpses out of time and place.

Things like a silver-haired boy around Obito’s age, with his headband slanted over one eye and the other a dark gray, likely Kakashi Hatake, singing in a darkened room, no, a bar, to a flushed and amused audience, “Across the stratosphere, a final message, ‘Give my wife my love’ then nothing more.”
Or else Lee and Obito talking to that blonde-haired man with the pale blue eyes, the one from Anakin’s visions, a man wearing the white robes of the hokage. A man who, Anakin now realized, must be Minato Namikaze the yondaime hokage.

He blinked, swallowed, forced himself to push the visions away and remember that he was Anakin Skywalker on Naboo with Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan and not… Well, he didn’t know what, but not whatever it was that was looking at Lee like he had never seen anything like her.

Lee waved and walked toward them with that wide and cheerful grin that she wore entirely too often, “Jinn, good you haven’t left yet, we weren’t entirely sure how early ‘early’ was for you people.”

She then motioned to the white-haired man, who glanced at her with a pale raised eyebrow as if he had seen Lee’s antics far too many times before to be impressed by them, “This is Tobirama Senju, the second honorable hokage of our village, and our official diplomat for Konoha.”

The man then offered them all a shallow, but dignified, bow and a few words in Lee and Obito’s language, “It’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

Lee then motioned towards the rest of them, first to Padme, then to Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon, then to Anakin himself, “And this is Amidala Padme, queen of Naboo whose planet we saved from invasion. Over there is our friend Jinn Qui-Gon and his reasonable and pluckily moral apprentice Kenobi Obi-Wan. Last but not least is Skywalker Anakin of Tatooine.”

The introductions were short but there was something weighted to them, as if in Konoha, out of sight and mind, Lee and Obito had said far more about each of them, Padme, Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and even himself than that. For a moment, standing there flushing, Anakin wondered just what it was they had said about him.

What had Obito said about him?

Still, the man looked towards Padme with a softer smile and said, “For whatever shenanigans Eru Lee and her apprentice have put you through, I’ll go ahead and apologize not only on their behalf but also the behalf of our village. You see, they just can’t help themselves.”

Obito and Lee both stiffened at that, glared somewhat at the man but with no real hard feeling, before Obito muttered, “I’d like to see how you would have handled it,” then dutifully translated
Tobirama’s message to Padme.

Padme, for the first time in Lee and Obito’s presence, gave a true heartfelt smile at the comment, “Thank you, Master Senju, but even at their most difficult I will be the first to say that Naboo owes its safety to Konoha perhaps more than anywhere else. No matter what, I will never forget that.”

Lee translated these words back before remarking in her native tongue, “I like how she likes you in two seconds and even after Obito and I saved her ship and saved her planet we’re still treated like dirt beneath her heel.”

Tobirama’s red eyes slid to hers, filled with sardonic mirth, as he drily noted, “I have yet to call her a whining civilian upstart.”

“That is unfair, and untrue, and I resent all your implications,” Lee said with a sniff, crossing her arms, and looking for the most part somewhat offended much to Tobirama Senju’s complete and utter indifference.

No, not quite indifference, Anakin realized as he looked at the man’s face, but his amusement. As if… As if moments like this reminded him of how very fond he was of Lee Eru. It was a moment though, the curve of his lips into the slightest of smiles, and then it was gone, and he was professionalism again as he gave his regards to the jedi specifically with Lee and Obito playing translator in turn.

An almost intimidating professionalism that Lee and Obito had always lacked...

Anakin’s eyes drifted to Padme one last time, took in the glitter of her brown eyes, and wondered why even when he was looking at her, standing there and looking for all the world like an angel, who he wouldn’t see again for ten years, the force kept pushing his thoughts towards Lee…

It just wasn’t very fair, he thought to himself, that even this last moment with Padme he couldn’t really have for himself.

“Alright, now Jinn, I need you to be at your most jedi for this,” for the one day journey back to Coruscant, Lee had brought together Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Obito, and her diplomat Tobirama Senju into the cramped communications room to prep for their meeting with the council, leaving Anakin
to bother the pilot about this and that control as they approached their final destination.

Lee sat in the chair before the holo communicator, the buttons and signals of the dash casting a dull orange glow across her pale features and a halo of red and blue in her hair. For a moment, more than the rest of them, even her apprentice with his mismatched eyes of Tobirama Senju with his strange pale hair and red eyes, she looked unearthly and like something beyond sentience.

Lee had a look of the utmost seriousness on her features however, despite the gravity she had placed upon this moment, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but feel amused by all of it. Here they were, in the great void between worlds, and he was being used as a template of a council member.

Master Dooku, he thought, would have laughed at the very idea of it.

Then again, had it been any other jedi on this mission, he doubted they would have been able to keep so calm about Lee or her apprentice let alone befriend them.

Befriend them, he frowned to himself, was that what he had done? Strange as it sounded he did feel… more comfortable with them than he had ever thought possible, than should be possible given what he had seen from both. Yet his fondness for them grew by the day, and though he wished that either or both could have been jedi, could have been brought up in a manner to follow the code and not court the dark side, he was fond of them all the same.

Still, with a small smile, he answered, “My most jedi?”

“Yes,” Lee insisted, clapping her hands together, “Your most straight-laced, by the rules, honorable jedi who flinches at the very idea of attachment and the dark side.”

“Am I not that jedi already?” he wondered aloud, sparing a glance towards his own exasperated padawan who was standing in a cramped corner against a wall, looking like he wished he was almost anywhere else and not watching this latest disaster of Qui-Gon’s latest and greatest strays.

“I think what shishou means to say,” Obito said before his master could even get the chance to explain, “Is that you’re reasonable, and your apprentice too to some extent, we need to prepare the nidaime for someone… Not reasonable.”

“The members of the council are not unreasonable,” Obi-Wan scoffed, no longer able to help
himself, “Any idea that they are, perhaps, comes from the fact that you as a pair are unreasonable.”

“Please,” Obito blithely responded, “We said about five words to them, about trade and culture, and they were accusing us of devouring unborn children.”

Obi-Wan flushed but none the less corrected Obito’s misapprehension, “They were accusing you of courting the dark side! Which, I’ll add, you seem to do on an almost daily basis!”

Obito hardly seemed convinced or even shamed by this as he noted, with an unamused frown and narrowed eyes, “I can’t help what I am, Kenobi, and if that offends you I hardly see how that’s my problem.”

“It is not about what you are it is about what you do!” Obi-Wan retorted, “Are you really so blind and mired in the dark already that you can’t tell the difference?”

Obito opened his mouth to respond but was cut off by Tobirama, whose calm, quiet, words seemed to be enough to stop Obito’s words before they could even start. Qui-Gon wondered then what the man could have possibly said but found himself distracted as Lee spoke once again.

“See, this is exactly why we need this practice run,” Lee said motioning towards Obito then towards Obi-Wan, “The cultural divide between us is vast and rather intimidating, if the nidaime is to make any progress at all he needs to see how exactly this will go down. So, Jinn, I need you to be the most jedi of jedi to have ever walked any planet and pretend you’re meeting our fancy-shmancy diplomat for the first time.”

Qui-Gon spared Tobirama Senju a dry look, noting inside his head that he pretty well was meeting their diplomat for the first time, inside the man’s expression he read a fond exasperation for Lee’s antics, as if he was more than familiar with them and far past the point of merely being bewildered.

Lee then said something to him, likely explaining more or less what she’d told Qui-Gon, and earned a pair of dubiously raised eyebrows from the man who seemed just as bemused as Qui-Gon while simultaneously being as annoyed as Obi-Wan.

Still, with a sigh, the man looked over at Qui-Gon and asked a question, dutifully translated by Obito, “My name is Tobirama Senju, second and former hokage of Konohagakure, on the planet Earth, the formal diplomat that the village has sent to replace Lee Eru and her apprentice Obito Uchiha to negotiate trade contracts and such.”
Second hokage, what had they said the current was, the fourth? Suddenly Qui-Gon realized how very young their village must be, so much younger than he ever would have guessed. Especially, judging by Tobirama Senju’s age…

No, there was something wrong about that thought, Tobirama Senju… He wore the guise of mortality, the force sang within him as it did Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha, but time seemed to have stopped for him. There was some tie, a song, wish, or promise connecting him to Lee Eru that could not easily be severed.

Though he wore the face of a man younger than Qui-Gon himself he was at once entirely ageless.

But what would the council say?

Would they remark upon this strange, subtle, bond he shared with Lee Eru? Did he even know that this bond existed? For all his fondness and familiarity, Qui-Gon wasn’t entirely sure he did.

Perhaps, instead, with foreboding, their eyes would drift towards Lee and Obito, who now seemed impossibly closer than they had ever been before. Or, perhaps they had realized the closeness that was there, unacknowledged between them, and now their attachment shone every bright for it. Or, perhaps, they would drill him on the topic they had pounced upon with Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha in that first meeting.

The topic, that ultimately, was at the heart of any discussion they might have with these people.

Feeling somewhat silly, pretending to be sitting among the council with Mace Windu and Yoda, and pretending to be anyone but himself, he motioned to Lee and Obito, “Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha have discussed in length their philosophy regarding the force without sides. Namely, that they do not believe in the dark side of the force, do you share this opinion?”

The man, to his benefit, did not even blink at the question and responded rather swiftly leaving Obito once again to translate.

“Yes, I believe that chakra itself is merely a force, one without morality to be prescribed to it.”
Obi-Wan sighed against the wall and Qui-Gon felt the need to do the same. So, it truly was cultural then, and judging by the look on his face he found the idea of the dark and light sides of the force to be just as incomprehensible as Lee herself did. What could their people possibly be like, he wondered, what horrors did the court when they prescribed to such dangerous notions as denying the dark side altogether?

Was it any wonder, he thought now, that Lee and her apprentice spoke constantly of violence and war?

Rubbing at his temples and at once feeling exhausted, Qui-Gon said, “I will not tell you to lie about your beliefs, would not advise it even. However, I think it’s no surprise to say the council will not like that opinion.”

The man said something, Obito translating again after a pause, “You’re certain that’s the first thing they’ll ask?”

“Well, they may remark upon your attachment to Lee, perhaps your pride…” Qui-Gon then sighed and shrugged, “I wish I could be the bearer of better news but I’m afraid our people may never get along.”

There was something about that thought though that almost pained Qui-Gon, even now the force was almost screaming in his head, telling him to not let Lee disappear into the ether and to hold onto her and her companions tightly. Not just tightly but to befriend them as he had never dared to befriend any outsider before. This, the living force cried, is important, more important than anything you have ever done before, even finding Anakin Skywalker in the desert.

Perhaps, he thought, that was why he had found Anakin Skywalker in the desert. The chosen one in turn had led him to Lee Eru.

Except… That thought should not be correct, surely finding the chosen one, training him, was more important than anything else could or would be. Anakin Skywalker would bring balance to the force, and yet it was Lee Eru, impossible, Lee Eru, that the force turned Qui-Gon’s head towards.

Looking at her now, he could not tell if it was merely the lights of this small communication room or something else, but she glowed with all the light and wonder of the force. As if she herself had been painted by the unseen power of the universe.
Could the council possibly ignore Lee as they had ignored Anakin?

“Perhaps, if you opened yourselves to the idea of the code,” Obi-Wan then suggested hesitantly, his eyes distant as he sought for some solution, interrupting Qui-Gon’s own thoughts, “Take classes with younglings on philosophy and learn precisely why we believe what we believe. Then, perhaps, the council may look upon you and yours in a kinder light.”

“And even after we take your courses, if we refuse to relinquish our precious people?” Obito asked, his voice colored with wry amusement, as if the mere idea of giving up earthly attachments was barbaric to him.

“Then surely,” Obi-Wan said just as wryly, “You cannot expect much.”

Surely, you can’t expect much…

And yet, Qui-Gon thought with wonder, the force did. The force did not paint a future, but a present, the living force breathed and swelled and lingered about Lee Eru’s head like a glowing crown made of the blue, yellow, and red lights of the communications dashboard.

The force, he thought to himself in wonder, expected miracles from Lee Eru.

“Jedi,” Obito and Lee stood on the bridge, staring out into the vast expanse of space, stars, suns, and worlds glittering in the distance. And at once he felt lighter than air and so far from home, free from all expectations yet already missing the familiar trees and sky of Konoha, “They’re not going to make this easy, are they?”

Tobirama had gone off on his own to prepare himself for the meeting ahead, sort through his supplies, and give himself a moment of peace before they hit the ground running. The jedi likewise had gone to retire for a few hours before touching down and Anakin was very likely sleeping beside them before he started his new life as a jedi.

As a pawn and new sith apprentice for Palpatine.
The poor little fool. Still, for all his anger towards the boy Obito couldn’t help but hope that Jinn and Kenobi would be prudent and wise enough to keep him alive, safe, and happy. Anakin deserved that much at the very least, no matter how poor his decisions.

Lee’s shoulder brushed against his, wearing her familiar jonin’s dark green uniform as she smiled out at the great void that they sailed through, in this tiny tin can that felt so very insignificant against the canvas of the galaxy, “Of course not, but as Kenobi said, we can hardly expect anything less.”

No, they could hardly expect anything less, and Obito smiled at the thought, “I suppose it’s the nidaime’s problem now, isn’t that right, shishou?”

Obito and Lee, after all, were the first phase, agents of observation, as it turned towards true diplomacy they would be on their way out the door, back to Konoha and home and leaving formal negotiation, running of embassies, and anything else to whoever Minato-sensei deemed appropriate.

He felt like it’d been so long already, and yet here they were, almost home.

“Perhaps, but we’re hardly done here either. There’s places to go and people to see yet,” Lee said with a small smile, seeing through his conflicted thoughts once again, “The nidaime will need to learn Basic, I’d like to negotiate trade for those lightsaber crystals, or at least get one or two so that we can learn how to reproduce or substitute for them, and there’s still a whole universe out there to see before we go home yet.”

“Lightsaber crystals?” Obito said with a surprised and amused laugh, “Now, shishou, you’re just getting ambitious.”

That, Obito thought to himself, he doubted the jedi would ever truly part with. They didn’t seem to have too many village secrets, but if they did have one, then Obito was sure as hell that the secret behind their lightsabers was it.

“What is life without ambitions?” Lee asked, with a sharper, more amused smile that spoke of sly things, “None the less, I just have this feeling that it is worth asking at the very least.”

“A feeling?” Obito asked with a snort and a small derisive last, “What meeting did I miss out on? The last I heard only Jinn has ever given us the time of day with Kenobi a lagging second place
behind him.”

She didn’t answer for a moment, simply stared out at the window, past the pilot’s head and into the dark. The light of the stars, dim and distant through the glance, still danced in her hair, on her pale face, and in her eyes as if captured there.

Her eyes, Obito thought, were filled with stars.

Finally, distantly, she said, “I’m not quite sure myself.”

Obito felt his eyebrows raise as he took her in, her strange somber and musing expression, the way she held herself here at once so human and so not in the same instant, and remarked, “Well, that’s not ominous.”

“It wasn’t,” she paused, looked back towards him, started again, “I mean, I know how it sounds but… It didn’t feel ominous it felt… Strange, a bit surreal, but not ominous.”

He waited for the rest, watched as her eyes grew distant, lingering in memory, as she softly explained, “When I die, in Konoha or even England, usually I meet the Shinigami of some other world, or a man who calls himself Death, at the base of the shinju tree. He is… He is a good man, my father I’ve always suspected, but he is old, distant, and his life has been full of great and terrible things.”

There were many things Obito could say or ask about that, details, explanations, descriptions, anything but he held his mouth closed as Lee continued, far away in memories of a man she called her father in a world beyond death.

“However, here… He wasn’t there when I died here, someone else was instead,” she paused again, looked at Obito, as if deciding how to try to convey this, “And he was… at once younger and older than Death had ever been and so much less human for it. He’s… like me, but not, sentience itself is new to him, and I think he has always been desperately alone. He is so lonely that I don’t think he has never even recognized the concept of another person before.”

“And you think he’s…” Obito trailed off, leaving Lee to fill in the word, whatever conclusion she was trying to reach.
“I honestly have no idea,” Lee said, amusement breaking through her momentary somberness, “But I think he’s from here, he… is here in many respects. And I think, that even if the jedi don’t want to go around giving us lightsaber crystals, he’d be more than happy to point the way.”

Obito considered this, an odd thought occurring to him, “Wait, you’re not planning on dying again any time soon, are you?”

He’d seen her go and come back before, and he knew, theoretically, that this wasn’t a large deal for Lee. All the same though something in him panicked and cried out at the idea of Lee so casually dying, dying for a conversation with a… anthropomorphic representation of something, the galaxy, the universe, maybe even the force.

She shook her head, a wry smile painted across her lips, “Oh, no, I’ve met him more than once now, he’s been very eager to make my acquaintance.”

“Really?” Obito asked drily with raised eyebrows, not sure if this should be relieving or not.

“Really,” Lee confirmed, “He even had the decency, or the gall, to dress himself up as Minato last time we talked.”

At that Obito laughed, laughed so hard he almost cried, because in a way that had been both on point and not at all. To see so much and so little all in the same instant…

Then leaning forward, for a moment not caring that he was on a ship with the nidaime or the jedi or anyone else who he was sure would disapprove of attachment or simply him and Lee, brushed his lips against Lee’s and felt her grin in return as he whispered against her cheek, “Of course he would, all the same, he could have had the gall to dress up as me instead.”

Lee laughed at that, as loud and as long as Obito had, which only got Obito started laughing again with her, earning a glance backwards from the pilot before he focused on the controls once again, ignoring these strange foreign shinobi and their strange foreign gossiping in a language he couldn’t understand.

Still, he thought, Lee was beautiful, when she laughed.

And for a moment Lee dying and returning, speaking to strange foreign gods who liked to wear Minato-sensei’s face, the eventual return date home and all the problems that would wait for them there, the mangekyou sharingan, and even floating in this tin can out in space didn’t matter in the
Anakin’s dreams drifted, like sand on the desert wind, out and out into the empty desert. First visions of himself and Padme, in years to come both older but not necessarily wiser, and she was even more beautiful than she’d been when he first saw her on Tatooine, a desert storm on her heels…

And he would smile at her, all bravado and talk and padawan’s braid, as he said that he had never forgotten her or how beautiful she was.

And her smile, oh, her smile he would more than happily betray the jedi code for.

Then the sands drifted further, out and out, visions shifting of fragments of things that could no longer happen, Qui-Gon’s death on Naboo, his mother’s death by the hands of sand people, and then a great strange expanse of the unknown, with Lee standing there in the center of it all.

An ineffable variable, a single unknown point in the shape of a human woman, which threw off all calculations and all projections.

Yet… Yet in the dream, Anakin wasn’t alarmed by this, there was the thought that he had once, not so long ago, found this idea very uncomfortable, more, agitating. The idea of there being anything outside, anything not of, anything apart was a strange and foreign one and Anakin as he was in his dream had never had to deal with strange and foreign things.

He had always been, he always would be, he was the frozen wastelands, the bountiful fields, and the swarming cities of sentients buzzing this way and that. His was the silent, unknown name, on every pair of lips on their first and last breaths. He was the sand in the desert and the glittering stars.

He had made all the suns and all the worlds, his fingers stretched further than Anakin could comprehend, far beyond the galaxy and its republics and empires, and that was the way it had always been.

Anakin, as he was in his dream, had not realized that he could be reflected, no, that someone else could stand in a familiar yet unfamilier form before him, dancing across his skin in mortal guise
and speak to him through the words and minds of sentients. Connecting to him on both higher and lower plains of existence…

There had once been a wish, or something like a wish, not so long ago on a desert planet at the edge of the republic. There had once been a wish, and it had centered upon the idea of sentience, of mortal form, and a wretched loneliness that he didn’t recognize but Anakin could recognize for him.

Except now Anakin stood in the shadow of his own dream, staring up at the form of that blonde-haired and blue-eyed man from Konoha, Minato Namikaze, as he stood beneath the twin suns of Tatooine in the great desert far beyond Mos Espa’s borders.

And there, sitting across from him, as if she had always been there, was Lee.

“Minato again?” Lee asked, motioning to him, to his form, and Anakin watched from the man’s shadow as he looked down at his pale hands with amusement and confusion before looking up at Lee.

“I thought you liked him,” he said, and though his voice sounded mortal enough, likely mimicking Minato Namikaze’s, there was something far more powerful in it, the suns of Tatooine beat down in the notes of his voice along with the tranquil rivers of Naboo.

“He is my greatest and oldest friend,” Lee agreed, and said nothing more, but some unknown, distant, knowledge danced in her eyes tantalizing and tempting Anakin and his other corporeal half.

Except they could not read her, not even as they sometimes could her companions who were lesser forms of herself, because she herself was as expansive as he was and more, was not of him. He could not flow through her as he did his own sentient vessels and worlds.

Lee paid this no mind, perhaps not even realizing his and Anakin’s thoughts, as she produced her tea set out of nowhere and began pouring them both a cup, “Is this going to be a regular thing?”

Minato who wasn’t Minato picked up the cup, stared at the green liquid, like any other tea that had been made on any hundreds of habitable worlds and drunk by billions upon billions of sentients, and yet, when he tasted it he thought he had never tasted anything so strange and so wonderful.
Even sitting in his shadow, dreaming on a ship headed to Coruscant, Anakin couldn’t help but shudder at the taste.

“Regular thing?” he repeated almost dully, not quite understanding, as he always did not quite understand her. She played sentience far better than he ever had, with a grace and ease and eloquence that he at once envied and didn’t, because he had never truly been capable of envy.

There had been nothing to covet before she had arrived on his barren desert world.

“Me falling asleep, you appearing, us walking into a desert on a horse with no name,” Lee said, and she smiled at him, an amused and sly thing to which Minato smiled back as if her very smile was infectious.

“Ah,” he paused then, considered her, considered the idea that she might not want what he wanted, what he found himself wanting as there had been nothing to really want before, “I wanted to see you, no, I… want to see you.”

Anakin, in the shadow, shuddered and burned as he took in the force of that statement and everything unsaid. That this greater entity that encapsulated him and everything else would always want to see her in every moment, wanted to hold her close and guide her to all the wonders and all the worlds he had to show, wanted to bask in her sentience and her mortal form and her smile…

The day she had been gone, he thought he had misplaced her, set her down somewhere on Naboo with that great beacon of light called Anakin Skywalker and then turned around and blinked and shifted her somewhere else entirely.

He’d searched, at first methodically, then with alarmed and growing panic as she didn’t seem to be anywhere at all and…

“I’m not going anywhere,” Lee commented drily.

“Except when you do,” he retorted, evenly, but that panic, relieved and forgotten, prowled like a beast beneath his words at the idea that she could so easily disappear when he wasn’t paying attention.

He’d never had to pay attention to anything before either.
“I don’t really mind,” Lee finally said, sipping from her own cup with a delicacy that was at once familiar and foreign to Anakin, “It’s a little exhausting, sure, but it’s always nice to meet new friends.”

“Friends?” he asked, knowing the meaning of the term, the word, but at the same time not because that was a word for his sentience, for those particles of himself which danced and touched one another, not for him.

“Sure, you don’t think we’re friends?”

“I have never…” he paused, swallowed the words, then continued, reaching across and taking her pale hands in his, wondering at their warmth and the feel of them, “There was never anyone to be friends with. It’s… I am that I am, and I am everything, there was never… You were never here.”

For a moment, Anakin didn’t think Lee quite got what Minato who wasn’t really Minato was trying to say to her, but then, then her smile was so soft and so sad, filled with nostalgia and unfinished hats, that Anakin was somehow certain she did.

“I think we can be friends,” she said, her red hair almost floating in the desert breeze, and her eyes reflecting the light of the twin suns and all of the hopes he’d never even realized he’d had.

“Good, I think… I think I like that,” he finally settled on, though this was a weak acknowledgement in the face of how he really felt, stars singing as they spun about one another in a strange song of euphoric joy.

He settled back, sipped at the tea, then stared up at the sky before looking at her again, marveling at the way she both seemed to blend in and stand out all at once, finally, he asked, “What are you?”

“What am I?” she parroted, amused, as if she hadn’t quite understood the question.

He tried to explain, pale blue eyes boring into hers with an intensity that would have blinded any sentient should he ever have chosen to confront them directly, “You’re… You’re not from here, you’re not me, you’re not a part of me. There’s never been anything like that before.”
“I’m from a village called Konohagakure,” Lee corrected, more amused than anything else, “If you want to be specific I was born on an island a dark and rainy island called England, a dimension or two away from this one.”

Anakin in the shadow could feel himself nodding along to all of this, even while the man took it in like he was hearing, or rather understanding these words for the first time. No, that Anakin wasn’t understanding what Lee had always meant, that Earth was much farther than a few planets away from the outer rim.

He nodded though, as if this made at least some amount of sense, that the place Lee came from could not be a part of the republic or even the outer rim, then he asked, “And you… wear sentience.”

That wasn’t quite right, but it was the concept, that Lee herself should be something much grander and more expansive than a single woman. Her mind should and did expand far more than her own body, and yet she also thought with her own body and mind like a sentient being would.

In a way that he had always wanted to…

“I like to think I do,” Lee quipped, “And in thinking, I am, and thus, here we are.”

“You think therefore you are?” he said slowly, tasting the words, unfamiliar in language and concept but Lee just nodded.

“I think therefore I am,” she repeated.

“I have… always been but never truly thought,” he said instead, thinking of himself, all those ages upon ages of drifting within himself, like blood circulating through a body. Except, except there had once been a wish, in a desert world on the edge of the republic, and he had once had enough sentience on his own, without Lee to guide him, to covet and want.

And the wish’s name had been sentience, and it had taken the form of…

Anakin found Minato’s head turning towards his shadow, eyes that were not eyes glowing in the sunlight, and in his shadow Anakin quaked and cried out as all the worlds and suns focused their attention upon him alone.
In the ship on the way to Coruscant, Anakin Skywalker woke up in a cold sweat.
Chapter 13

Obito, fifteen-years-old, watched the proceedings of the Wizengamot with glazed and tired eyes, fluttering shut at every moment, as Lee’s head tilted dangerously forward towards the seat in front of her. Finally, she hit it, and without her shinobi’s headband on (as it always made the English rather twitchy to see it gleaming in their governmental buildings) Eru Lee, Lord of the houses of Black and Potter, hit her head on Lord Malfoy’s chair and gave out a great cry as she clutched at her bruised forehead, “Dammit!”

There were gasps, glares, and mutterings but Lee barely seemed conscious enough to really hear them as she rose slowly, painfully, back into an upright seated position, eyes fluttering and blinking as the Supreme Mugwump rattled on about something having to do with the demented house elves that the wizards had enslaved into doing their household chores.

Because only English wizards would enslave a frankly frighteningly powerful race of sentient beings to do their dishes.

Of course, this item was on the agenda because someone named Granger Hermione, apparently a brief acquaintance of Lee-shishou’s and Minato-sensei’s during their English mission at Hogwarts, felt very strongly about elves and had formed S.P.E.W, an unfortunate acronym for an abolitionist group for the house elves. Now, Obito was all for the cause and against slavery in general, but they had to be going on fifty clauses to this goddamn thing (an apparent trademark of Granger Hermione’s proposed laws) and according to Lee (before she’d started falling asleep) they weren’t even getting to the part where they had to vote on it or attach it to another possible law.

Which of course would involve much bickering because the old English clans really didn’t want to have to do their own dishes and certainly didn’t want to be bossed around by a civilian born upstart like Granger.

Obito caught the eye of Lord Malfoy, Malfoy Lucius, who managed to both glare and sneer at the same time as he took in Lee and her apprentice. However, there was still a hint of fear in that expression, likely because Malfoy was one of the English nin’s men, and as such he had been warned if not seen exactly what Eru Lee was capable of.

That, or perhaps, in this moment Lee did carry a certain authority and nobility about her in these foreign robes.

With the two golden rings one for the most noble and ancient house of Potter and the other for the most noble and ancient house of Black, along with her tailored robes embellished with the seals of
both clans, she more than looked the part of an English lord. More so, perhaps, than most of these men who despite their civil war and all their airs and notions of ancient clan blood and nonexistent blood limits, even in civilian’s clothing, nodding off in the middle of the session, Eru Lee was a storm only barely contained in human skin.

The wealth and grandeur of her robes, dyed crimson and gold, for whatever reason only seemed to compliment this.

Obito himself, now in his own well-tailored dark robes (for the wizards never seemed to accept anything less), bearing the Uchiha crest (if only because the English wizards did not need to know that Obito had been excommunicated from the clan), looked far sharper and out of place. Elegant finery no longer suited him, with his eyes and his face, and even in the softest of clothing he always looked two steps away from the battlefield.

Then again, Obito thought to himself as he shifted forward, willing himself to stay awake, perhaps that was not so bad in a place like this. England had been two steps from all out civil war for over ten years at this point. There were children entering Hogwarts who had known nothing but these dark days of tension, guerilla warfare inside the warded sections of London, shops and houses burning with the symbol of the missing nin Voldemort rising above each, and civilian born children or families simply disappearing only to find their severed limbs dangling from the entrance to the ministry.

Even in men like Malfoy Lucius, who were so assured of victory, of this ongoing war that they had sold their souls too when they were still stupid schoolboys, there was fear lingering in the corners of their eyes.

And yet, the English made an art of denial, in their robes, their Wizengamot, their minister, their auror corps… Here they stood, in the midst of civil war which they were undoubtedly losing, the English nin having filled the place with more moles than righteous loyal citizens, and they were discussing the benefits of freeing house elves.

All too willing to sell their country, their souls, their children, if it meant they could stick their heads in the sand just that much longer. It was, it was committing suicide as a nation, Obito couldn’t help but think. A strange, alternate, civilian dystopia that for all the ills and evils of a hidden village could never occur in Konoha.

Lee twitched next to him, forcing herself awake, only to groan as she realized the man supporting Granger’s bill was still reading. “Are we not done yet?” Lee asked in Obito’s native tongue, a slip she usually didn’t indulge in inside England, the idea that Lee spoke this other non-English language also usually made them twitchy.
In some other world, they knew, Eleanor Lily Potter would have belonged to them and them alone rather than the mercenary village Konohagakure.

“It doesn’t seem like it,” Obito muttered, ignoring the twitching of Lord Malfoy’s sliver head, as if he himself was not thinking the same exact thing.

“Christ,” Lee sighed, “Why do we even come to these things?”

“Shishou, they gave you a seat on their village council,” Obito reminded her, although he knew that she knew this, she was just conveniently forgetting it in favor of whining, “Sensei would never let you waste this kind of influence and intelligence.”

Lee sighed again, looking truly defeated as she slouched in her seat, looking nothing like a lord or highborn English lady, “God, don’t I know it.”

“It would have been so much easier if Minato had been a secret English clan heir instead,” Lee said with a sigh, before raking through her hair, briefly revealing her famed scar and seal, only to hide again with red bangs.

Lee sighed again, drooping forward, before blearily looking back up towards the English in the center of the room, beneath all of them, facing the Supreme Mugwump who had replaced Dumbledore Albus after his death and earnestly pressed for the rights of house elves in these dangerous times.

With both of their eyes watching, Obito quietly asked, “Shishou, how long do you think this country will last?”

Lee said nothing, her expression grim and her eyes old, tired, and filled with the memories of the third war. Lacing pale fingers together, she stared down at the scene before her, perhaps overlaying this civilian atmosphere instead with the broken bodies, the blood, and the fires of Kusa.

“It’s hard to say,” Lee finally said, “The English nin is moving slower than I would have expected. Years, and he’s been kept at a relative standstill, if you discount his plethora of spies in the Wizengamot and Ministry. Of course, England is large and filled with many wizards, but they are not shinobi. Then again, neither are his missing nin...”
She trailed off, leaned forward, tapping her fingers and then said, “You know, for all his guerilla warfare, I think it will be quiet when it happens.”

“Quiet?” Obito asked, ignoring the turning glaring eyes around them and the looks of irritation from Lee’s peers of the realm, the hissed English words of, “Would you please be quiet, Lady Potter!”

“He will distract them with blood, war, death, and spectacle in the streets. He will bring them to the brink of madness through fear and paranoia. While slowly, oh so slowly and carefully, he will fill the seats of the government one by one with his own men,” Lee said, motioning ever so subtly, far too subtle for any civilian to catch, towards all of the English nin’s men who were sitting in this room already.

“Then, one day, they’ll wake up one morning and realized that without any fanfare, without any alarms sounding, with hardly any blood at all he will have won. All voices against his will be taken away and silenced, all those righteous and proud already dead, and to an adoring, fearful, audience they will crown him as a king and kage of this miserable nation”

And as the man finally finished, the lords voting majority against the abolition of the house elves save for Lee and a few odd others, Obito couldn’t help but wonder if it hadn’t happened already and, like Lee had noted, they simply hadn’t realized it yet.

Living in this strange, surreal, dream that they were still free men.

It was a very odd structure, this hidden village of theirs. It was built in fact, more like what Jinn himself had called it along with his apprentice Kenobi, a temple rather than a hidden village. For one thing, in the main square across a great towering forum that Lee called the senate, it was made of a gleaming stone like marble that shone like a star in the bright sunlight. Two golden robed giants, perhaps ancient jedi themselves, solemnly guarded the entryway. And in a planet that itself surpassed the silver cities of Lee’s home world, with cars flying miles above the pavement, each building glowing an array of neon colors, silver and tall in the sunlight, it stood out as an ancient vestige of what this planet had once been. Or, perhaps, what this galaxy itself had once been, the roots of mysticism with which monks to this day in the elemental nations approached natural chakra and ninjutsu.

It had never once crossed Tobirama’s mind, for very good reason, to build Konoha in this design.
No, every hidden village that Tobirama had ever heard of had not been built for aesthetics (though each had ended up, through the very nature of their design and their growth, to be intimidating monoliths to be gawked at and feared by wary travelers), each had been built for function. The great scaling cliffside walls of Sunagakure, Konoha’s dense forest grown by Hashirama’s own hand and the mountainside that protected them, Lightning’s high and bitter mountain range, all of them had been designed as great fortresses the likes of which had never been seen in their world before.

Temples, they had all thought, were best left to monks.

Ironically, it was on stepping out of the flying taxi cab, up the pristine staircase and through the great entryway, that Tobirama began to truly understand what Lee and her apprentice had been so insistent about on the way over. Though they wore swords, though they took child apprentices and taught them the art of kenjutsu, though they wielded chakra in a combative sense and took on missions for the benefit of the state, this building alone planted the idea in his mind that these people were not shinobi.

Perhaps more of shinobi than the English, but the English wizards were civilians in all but name for all that they insisted otherwise.

Inside the floor was clothed in a rich crimson carpet, bordered with a royal purple frame, great Roman pillars supported the high overarching ceiling and a fountain gurgled in a central courtyard. Children, human, and many who either had extensive blood limits, contracts, or else were not human at all, huddled around a robed adult jedi with blue skin and two twin tentacles dangling from her head as pigtails would a little girl, who appeared to be lecturing on some topic. The children were all early academy aged, all dressed in similar conservative robes of neutral colors, staring up at the woman with wide dark eyes, soaking in whatever she was saying with a serenity and patience that academy students even a few years older than them would have lacked.

More though, as he stared at them with wide eyes, catching the eyes of one of the children who blinked at him curiously, there was none of the natural edge that even an ungraduated shinobi child would have had at this point. The rugged knowledge that violence, bloodshed, death, would be in their future whether they liked it or not.

Glancing at his companions, Tobirama noticed how Obito’s eyes lingered and hardened at the sight of the children, looking underneath the underneath of this image and searching for something to explain the difference between what it was and what he himself had grown up with.

Or, perhaps, Tobirama thought as he glanced once more at the children, Obito was caught on how very young they were. Four, five, three and entered into this kenjutsu monastery without any material possession to their name or any emotional attachment to mother, father, brother, or
clansmen.

Lee’s eyes, however, betrayed nothing, she stared resolutely forward, with a grim determination as she prepared herself for verbal battle with the Jedi Council. Every step she took revealed this, her sheer force of will that had been honed and refined and sharpened into something truly terrifying since she was a girl not much older than these children, and once again he was caught with the thought that what had once been strangely charming and cute on an adolescent girl was rather disarming on a grown and terrifying woman like Eru Lee.

She’d grown into her reputation well, even in a world where no one knew her name, they whispered and stared and flinched away from the barely contained force of her chakra.

Of course, he did wish sometimes that she got a handle on that. Granted, it wasn’t nearly so bad as when she’d been a child (she had learned some subtlety over the years as well as enough tact to know when to dampen down her chakra) but being the sensor that he was standing too close to her for any period of time was liable to give him a headache.

Well, that and Lee usually insisted on being Lee, which certainly didn’t help matters.

For that alone, Tobirama thought with a wry and sardonic smile, he had had a feeling that whatever diplomatic tasks they’d tried to fulfil on their own was left in bitter shambles and that Tobirama would have more than his work cut out for him.

It was a minor miracle that they had made a friend in this Jinn Qui-Gon and his apprentice at all.

They stepped in the elevator, a glass thing that overlooked the gleaming city, and rode it upwards hundreds of flights, and as they did his eyes fell on the back of Lee’s head, watching as she refrained from tapping her foot in impatience.

Well, that was not true, there was a charm to Eru Lee as there was a charm to his older brother. They aggravated many, confounded nearly all, were called fools by the ignorant and overly cynical, but none the less if you saw them in the right light and from the right angle they shone brighter than the sun.

It seemed that Jinn, at least, had joined the small community of people that had glimpsed what Eru Lee truly was at her heart.
And with that thought his eyes turned towards Obito, Lee’s almost worryingly faithful apprentice. They were standing close in the elevator, but that perhaps was necessary as there wasn’t really room for five grown adults and child, still there was something about the way they stood even about the way that Obito was carefully not looking at Lee that…

Tobirama sighed, he did not have time for this right now, and honestly the day he started dissecting Eru Lee and Uchiha Obito’s love lives was the day he admitted that retirement and abject boredom had finally driven him mad.

The elevator rose, the boy, alone, shifted from foot to foot, looking out over the city with wonder as well as nervousness. Skywalker Anakin, the files had said Lee had put in substantial effort to recruit him to Konoha, and even now the boy seemed somewhat guilty around Lee but especially Obito. They had also said that his was a natural strength that rivaled a jinchuuriki’s, not an understatement given what Tobirama could feel of him beneath the constant furnace of chakra that was Lee.

In his shifting the boy caught Tobirama’s eye, paused as if caught in some guilty act, then stared stoically forward once again as Tobirama’s eyebrow shifted upwards. He wondered if he should be insulted, that in a galaxy that featured entirely inhuman species, Tobirama was still gawked at.

The elevator opened, they moved forward, and as a final warning Lee asked, “Are you ready, nidaime?”

Tobirama spared her a rather unamused look, “Lee, I have been doing this before you were born.”

Lee raised her own eyebrows dubiously in response but said nothing, fell in line behind the cringing jedi (who by their expressions and the brief agitation of their chakra expected this to be an unmitigated disaster), and then entered the council room.

It was a wide circular room, great glass windows all along the outside, and just on the inside of the glass a dozen chairs formed a ring where robed jedi sat, each with a not insubstantial amount of chakra and a hard-earned almost eerie serenity and composure, nodded in greeting towards them. Jinn and Kenobi bowed first, the boy Anakin with them after a moment’s hesitation, then Lee, Obito, and Tobirama shortly after that.

Straightening Tobirama took a second longer to look each over.
Not all were human although all were humanoid, one was a woman with tentacles growing out of her head like the woman on the first floor, another a man with a strange cone shaped head, several others of different shapes sizes and colors than one would expect of a human being, and directly across from them with the sun at his back was a short green troll like creature with pointed ears who himself was smaller than Skywalker.

Jinn spoke, bowing his head forward and shortly after he did so Obito muttered his translation close to Tobirama’s ear, “Master Yoda, we have returned from Naboo with Skywalker Anakin as well as the shinobi Eru Lee, her apprentice Uchiha Obito, and their chosen diplomat Senju Tobirama.”

Jinn then pushed the boy forward, a gentle paternal smile on his face as well as a bright and almost overpowering hope, “Skywalker Anakin has agreed to become a padawan,” Obito stopped, paused, then explained swiftly, “Essentially a genin apprentice. I trust that he will train and learn with the other younglings until Obi-Wan complete his trials (jonin exams).”

Jinn gave the council a pointed, heated look, as if this in itself had been an issue of hard debate that Jinn expected fierce opposition over. However, whatever reaction he’d had over Anakin before (whatever bizarre reason they’d felt the need to leave a boy of that kind of potential untrained and untied and vulnerable to agents of a foreign power like Eru Lee) had faded into discontent grumblings.

There were glances exchanged, specifically between a dark-skinned man and the green troll, but then the green troll, the apparent head of the council, said in an oddly gravelly voice, “Know my opinions, you do, Master Qui-Gon. Trained, the boy will be, the council decided.”

Tobirama spared Obito a truly annoyed glance at the hack job at translating, but Obito only gave him a rather annoyed and insolent look himself, as if to convey that this was what the troll’s words truly sounded like and if he wanted better he should have Lee translate.

And it would be a cold day in hell when Tobirama would allow himself to rely solely on Eru Lee for any translation.

Jinn seemed to accept this answer, though not with grace or ease, there was a fire still in his eyes as if he knew that the unspoken words there was that this decision had been pulled like teeth from the council’s unwilling mouth.

“We have already debriefed you on the events of your mission,” the dark-skinned man said with authority, “As for the boy, this is as good a time as any for Kenobi Obi-Wan to take him to his new quarters.”
The boy in question stiffened at that, perhaps seeing the discontent in many of the council members eyes, the dark-skinned man’s eyes in question practically burning, but then bowed and muttered some words of gratitude or a promise to not disappoint them before Kenobi gently ushered him from the room, allowing the doors behind them to softly open then close once again.

A tense and unpleasant silence overtook the room, agitation growing in each jedi, ebbing and flowing out into natural chakra in a strange rhythmic pattern as they tried to regain their serenity. Lee and Obito merely waited, their own chakra rising in anticipation, burning brightly, preparing themselves for future frustration, disappointment, and verbal sparring.

Tobirama watched with alarm as Lee opened her mouth to break the tense silence, and Tobirama quickly spoke before she even had a chance to spit out whatever Leeism she had in mind that would do them no favors in forging bonds with these people.

(Knowing Lee, she’d probably offended them beyond reason ten times already.)

Tobirama bowed slightly forward, as Jinn had, before straightening and meeting their eyes, “My people thank you, jedi, for receiving us and for thus far granting us your friendship and protection.”

Obito glanced down in warning at Tobirama, mismatched eyes burning, but none the less translated Tobirama’s words into Basic. They said nothing, did not even twitch, and that agitation morphed into something solid and immovable as if Tobirama had gone out of his way to confirm their worst suspicions.

“Friendship,” Obito translated coldly for the aged cone-headed jedi, “Is a strong word, I think. To not attack blindly, like bloodthirsty mercenaries hungering for coin and profit, is hardly worthy of the term friendship.”

Lee offered them a sly, unamused, grin, and said something cutting and cruel back in Basic which had them paling then reddening in anger. There was shouting then, drowning out Obito’s muttered translation of Lee’s taunt, and it was a moment before they quieted down.

In the meantime, even while glaring at Lee in irritation, Tobirama realized that deference was not going to cut it. He stood straight, no longer bowing, and said in a voice that had once belonged to a kage, “Our people have come in good faith, ready to trade techniques, information, and goods with yours. We’ve trained one of your own, aided your people in a battle in the place of your senate, and
like it or not we will have an embassy on Naboo and an embassy on Coruscant. I think we have gone far beyond any reasonable expectation of first contact with your people, if you’re going to bar your gates to us, then you could do us the honor doing it blatantly and with a stated reason rather than through passive aggression and muttered excuses.”

To their credit they did not flinch under his gaze as so very many had, they did not buckle, though their chakra signatures did, for a moment, flicker in apprehension. However, they let his words, translated through Obito, linger in the heavy silence.

Jinn, the lone jedi outside of their circle, stood too stiffly, forced into silence, head pointed downward towards the floor so that none could see the ire growing on his face. The apparent black sheep of this strange village that was anything but hidden.

Finally, it was the twin tentacled woman who spoke, “Your people court the dark side, to take from your knowledge, your techniques, perhaps even your goods and services, would undoubtedly lead to the corruption of us all.”

“The dark side?” Tobirama couldn’t help but ask at Obito’s translated term however this just seemed to fuel the council’s bitter amusement.

The cone-headed man explained further, dark eyes roving over the shinobi as he took them in piece by piece, finding each piece lacking, “We have spoken extensively with Eru Lee and her apprentice about the differences between the light and dark sides of the force, watched as the boy drifted closer and closer towards damnation on Naboo, watched as they blindly disregarded the dangers of fear, rage, grief, and attachment as paths into the darkness.”

“We will not battle you as sith,” the dark-skinned man added, voice hard and cold, “As jedi did in millennia past, but none the less, we will extend you no favors beyond that.”

“So long as hold to philosophy you do,” the leader, the green troll, finally added, leaning forward as if this in itself was a term that Konoha might agree to.

Suddenly, Tobirama knew exactly what Lee and Obito had meant, could feel his own disbelief and rage growing inside of him at the callous disregard of these people. That they could glance at them, at their work and lives which in many ways mirrored the jedi’s and declare it not simply as detestable but as the path to damnation. As if they were all doomed, Tobirama, Lee, Obito, and even Hashirama, to become the monster that Uchiha Madara had once become.
The troll’s knobby finger pointed out towards Tobirama, straight towards his heart, “However, even you, I fear, dangerously attached to the woman Eru Lee you are, and with perhaps too much fondness for the apprentice Uchiha Obito.”

Tobirama breathed in, breathed out, he had been here before. So many times, he had been here before. It was Hashirama who had convinced, beyond all hope and reason, for the Uchiha to band with them and join Konoha. Hashirama who had sat at the first Kage summit along with Tobirama himself. However, after Hashirama’s death, it had been Tobirama who had negotiated and bargained with the embittered Uchiha clan, who had bargained and negotiated with all the paranoid resistant clans who were not sure they could trust this village after Hashirama’s death, and for all his mistakes and all their consequences Konohagakure was still standing.

He opened his eyes, willed himself to be calmer yet still confrontational, an unquestioned authority to a foreign village, and said, “Kenobi Obi-Wan made mention of classes for your academy students, on philosophy and your sides of the force, I would be eager, while learning Basic and setting up embassies, to sit in on them. Then, perhaps, I too will understand the dark side of the force, the paths to it, and can perhaps act to change my people’s ways.”

They had not expected that, Lee and Obito would have stormed out by that point, probably had already in their first meeting with these people. He could practically picture it now, both turning on their heels, Lee’s hair flying behind her as they marched angrily in time out the door.

The tension bled with their confusion, with their musing over this proposal, there was no muttering or whispering but eye contact was held, and it seemed that some silent debate was going on one way or another.

A consensus finally was reached, and the leader spoke in his gravelly voice, “Agree, we do, to your proposal. Through Master Qui-Gon and padawan we will contact you with details. After classes taken, Basic learned, discuss we will philosophy and perhaps… trade.”

Jinn breathed out a sigh of relief, straightening while Tobirama nodded his assent, glad that they at least had the sense to go through a party that both groups could stand. Jinn and his apprentice were going to have their work cut out for it with them.

Still, it was somewhere, a seed of an idea, and for now that would have to be more than enough.
“I hate jedi,” Lee announced with a cheese coated fry in the air, courtesy of Dex’s, Lee’s apparent new favorite restaurant this side of the galaxy, “Seriously, Jinn, what is wrong with you people?”

Jinn for his own part, with an irritable Obi-Wan reappearing from wherever they’d dumped Anakin, had his face in one hand and was shaking it back and forth as if he didn’t even know what to say anymore. Finally, though, he said with a sigh, “You realize I’m a jedi, don’t you Lee?”

Lee, when had Lee been promoted to first-name basis? Perhaps she had already but somehow Obito thought that was something of a new development. Still, Obito himself, while he would have liked to cut in was too busy translating back Lee and Jinn’s quips to an increasingly unamused Senju Tobirama who looked like he wanted to get back to their hotel room (paid for by the grateful republic on behalf of the chancellor who was still on Naboo for the week coordinating repairs with the queen), debug and ward the place, and start doing some long term planning as well as teaching him fundamental Basic.

“Master, I don’t even know why you bother to correct her at this point,” Kenobi said in a rather long-suffering manner that he did not at all deserve. Which Obito would have again pointed out if he wasn’t too busy translating these words over to the nidaime (who looked unwillingly sympathetic, as if he too had reached that conclusion with Lee-shishou long ago. Except, at least the nidaime had earned the privilege of wearing that sort of expression).

“You’re fine, Jinn,” Lee dismissed, pale hand waving in that sweeping gesture that Obito had grown to love but everyone else loathed, “Even Kenobi is fine but…”

She threw her hands into the air, entirely done with everything, perhaps even chili cheese fries in space, and then said, “You know what? It won’t be Obito and my problem much longer, and our friend the nidaime can handle it.”

“Thank you, Lee,” the nidaime responded rather bluntly to Lee’s statement to which Lee just nodded in acknowledgement as if he really had been thanking her for dumping interdimensional diplomacy on his shoulders.

“What do you mean?” Jinn asked, leaning forward, looking fairly concerned by Lee’s words, the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes growing deeper as his brow furrowed.

“Well, Obito and I aren’t diplomats,” Lee said slowly, motioning to herself and Obito with yet another fry, “We’re… the first stage of things, the observation, maybe first contact if it truly can’t be helped. Now that Tobirama is here Obito and I will be beginning to transition back to Konoha.”
Jinn looked as if he hadn’t considered this, that Lee and Obito were extremely temporary additions
to his world, and he seemed rather alarmed by that idea. However, as they said it the idea must
have taken root so that all he could ask was, “But so soon?”

“Well, the nidaime has to learn Basic, take your philosophy classes and what have you, we have to
square things away with the evil chancellor set to destroy you all as well as whoever else, and
Obito and I have a few other places we’d like to go but after all that…” Lee shrugged slightly,
trailing off and leaving Obito and her imminent departure in the air for everyone to see. Granted, it
would still be months, perhaps even a year or more, before all of that got done but it was coming
none the less.

Obito himself had been thinking only too recently, on the ship to Coruscant, that time was
practically flying by.

Kenobi muttered about the evil chancellor, entirely unamused as always, but Jinn seemed to pay
that no mind, leaning back and tapping calloused fingers against his lips in thought. Finally,
quietly, he said, “The force, Lee, sees you as very important to the jedi and to the republic. I don’t
think it would be wise to leave permanently.”

Obito couldn’t help but snort, even before translating for the nidaime, motioning to himself and
Lee in time, as if to highlight how utterly ridiculous as a pair they were, “Are you serious? Us,
important to your force?”

For all that he had always liked Lee, come to love her, and then suddenly come to love her a whole
lot more than that he was more than aware of what a strange almost comical pair they made. Either
they were terrifying or they were clowns, Lee and Obito never really did in between these two
extremes, and the idea that the light and dark striped zebra these people called the force thought
Lee and Obito were important to this republic doomed to civil war. Well…

Through laughter Obito translated the words over to an unamused Tobirama who looked as if he
hated being left out on the joke, but even as he did Jinn looked perfectly serious, quite grave, in
fact.

“The living force, since your battle in Naboo, has been focused on you in a manner I have never
seen before. Not even with Anakin, who is undoubtedly the prophesized chosen one;” he paused
then, looked them both in the eye, as if to convey the gravity of what he was saying, “I don’t know
what the force plans for you, the future is cluttered and muddied, but keep in mind that perhaps it
is you who will aid us in the fight against the sith. Especially if, as you claim, the sith master is
none other than the chancellor.”
Lee blinked, her own amusement and levity fading and her amused smile with it, then asked, “And why would the force look to me, Obito, or even Tobirama, outlanders in every sense of the term, to take care of your missing nin?”

“I don’t know,” Jinn said shaking his head, sighing, crossing his arms with serenity as he said, “I only know that you are very important.”

Kenobi said nothing, did not even disagree, which said… Obito didn’t know what, but of all people Obito would have expected to disagree it would have been the apprentice who had always chafed slightly at Obito and Lee’s antics.

And while Senju Tobirama was a force to be reckoned with as well as a voice of compromise and reason when he needed to be, Obito now wondered if the council hadn’t caved more easily than he had expected? Lee and Obito had said very nearly the same thing, but before they’d gotten any words in edgewise they’d been shut down and all but thrown out. The nidaime hadn’t been.

Obito felt a quiet sense of unease growing inside him.

Lee then, quietly and matching Jinn’a seriousness, said, “Jinn, you and Kenobi, and even Anakin, will always have sanctuary in Konoha, I guarantee it. However, what becomes of your republic isn’t in our hands. We’ll make the decisions dictated to us, orders from the yondaime hokage, and however much freedom Obito and I might seem to have that’s where we fall at the end of the day. More, if your people shutter the gates, know that your chancellor has thrown his wide open.”

She then shifted her gaze to Kenobi, lingered on his startled expression and blue eyes, as she said, “If you want us to fight your chancellor, turn the tide when civil war comes, you’ll have to be the ones to convince your council that it’s worth it, and then in turn convince the hokage that the war can be won and whatever forces are lost are worth the price.”

Then, her eyes green and terrible, the way they were when she looked over a battlefield or her many memories of them, she said, “Know, Jinn, that this is not the first crumbling empire that we’ve seen.”

Then it was lightness once agan, Lee popping a cheese fry into her mouth as if that was that, and saying around bites, “All the same, I’m sure Obito and I will be popping in and out quite a bit. There’s few enough around that speak English let alone Basic. If we really do start trading, or hell if Naboo or whoever starts hiring us, then you can bet your ass you’ll see Obito and me here.
Was it just Obito, or did the air itself seem to heave a sigh of relief?

His eyes drifted upwards, searching for something, but there was nothing. The diner was the same as ever, no genjutsu aside Lee’s in sight. Just an ordinary diner in the center of the republic…

“Right, also, before I forget,” Lee said, interrupting Obito’s own musings, “Tell Anakin that… That if he does need help, that if he calls, I’ll hear it.”

Jinn could have taken offense, Kenobi too for that matter, but he just nodded and smiled as Lee took his hand in hers, watching as she squeezed his with a grin then doing the same to Kenobi before preparing to leave.

Still, it was so like Lee to promise that, to let Skywalker Anakin go his own way, back into his own version of Madara’s cave and yet still offer one final ray of light. Obito wondered how the boy could not appreciate that offer, that act, the way Obito himself did.

Or the way she smiled as she promised, carefree but with a depth of almost inhuman compassion, a blinding force of love that could overcome all obstacles.

Abruptly, Obito turned, noticed the nidaime staring directly at him, eyebrows raised and red eyes entirely too shrewd. And Obito didn’t say it out loud, almost didn’t dare to think it, but none the less he knew with that one look that where they had fooled or slid past everyone else the buck had stopped with the honorable second.

And he desperately wanted to say, “Oh, shit.”

Of course, being a trained shinobi as well as an Uchiha for all that he had ever denied it and they had thrown him out, Obito held his tongue and didn’t emit even a squeak of apprehension. Lee, if she wasn’t as dense as a brick wall, would be so very proud.

Anakin hadn’t brought much with him, which was probably for the best, because as soon as Obi-
Wan had shown him to his new room his things were taken away by an apologetically smiling padawan. Anakin knew without asking that he wouldn’t see any of it again.

Instead, looking around the room, he noticed how plain it was, not too much different than his quarters at home. There was a bed, which was little more than a small flat cushion and some blankets, a shelf with a few lonely books on it, a window, a dresser, a desk and plain metallic chair, but nothing more than that. There was no C3PO here, no wood carvings, no sign of Lee, Obito, or his mother anywhere in sight.

Sitting down in the chair, Anakin wondered about his mother, he hadn’t seen her since they’d taken him to Naboo. He’d thought maybe he’d see her again when he got back but it all moved so quickly, even Lee and Obito he’d barely gotten a chance to see before they left with their diplomat the second hokage.

No one had ever said it directly, they hadn’t given Anakin time to ask, but he knew that he wasn’t supposed to see any of these people ever again. Attachments, to his mom, Padme, Lee, Obito, anyone at all were supposed to be severed.

And sitting here now, in the soft lighting of the room and the streaks of sunlight coming from outside, it was hitting him just how alone he really was now. Like he would have been if Lee and Obito hadn’t come at all, if Qui-Gon had found him instead and died on Naboo, leaving Anakin to be trained by Obi-Wan.

His mother would have died in that world on Tatooine.

At least here, Anakin thought to himself as determination welled within him, at least here that couldn’t and wouldn’t happen. His mother lived on Coruscant now, had gotten herself work somewhere he was sure, he’d see her and Padme again.

And Lee.

Anakin blinked, blinked again, there it was again that feeling. Like the force whispering in his ears but… not stronger, not necessarily more focused, but… He didn’t know how to describe it. He huffed, crossed his arms, and tried to concentrate, enter that light-headed state he’d been in on Naboo where he’d started to move past himself and into the force.

At first, he was pointedly, almost painfully, Anakin Skywalker in this too small room in the jedi
temple that barely felt like a room at all. Then, slowly but surely, he was floating outside of himself, moving past Anakin and into Coruscant, wandering weightless and bodiless through the rushing city to where Obi-Wan Kenobi and Qui-Gon Jinn stood over the railing of a building, quietly talking about republics, sith, shinobi, chosen ones, the living force, and destiny.

He kept going, pushed forward by the force, past Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon’s favorite diner that at some point would have become Anakin’s favorite diner, past large buildings and underground pod races, until he was walking through the doors of a sleek hotel, one that climbed up and up into the cluttered skyline of the city.

And there they were, Lee Eru, Obito Uchiha, and Tobirama Senju bartering at the desk by a pleasantly smiling Twi’lek woman whose dark eyes took in the militaristic uniforms and rugged appearance of the human shinobi with hidden alarm. The very air around the trio crackled and burned, lit up in the force as particles sang around them, circling as if caught in their orbit, Lee’s orbit.

The white-haired man, Tobirama, briefly looked back towards Anakin, eyes narrowing and blinking as if trying to make out Anakin’s form, but his attention was pulled away soon enough by Obito as the three of them signed their foreign signatures on a form acknowledging the payment supplied by the grateful republic and Naboo.

Still, there was something about Lee, something about her that the force that carried him along was fascinated by. Not just the way she looked, moved, spoke, or acted but something much further beneath all of that which was entirely opaque. And Anakin remembered that now from the dream (the terrifying haunting dream that clung to his consciousness even a day later) except, looking at her, he couldn’t help but say, “She’s not anything like Padme though.”

It was the wrong thing to say, as if by saying that Anakin had separated himself from the force, the river which had brought him to Lee suddenly stopped, turned to regard him, then just as swiftly carried him back through Coruscant and into his body, leaving him gasping and clawing at the floor.

The floor… Anakin looked around, the chair was tilted over, he hadn’t even noticed that or falling off either. Slowly, he stood and righted the chair, picking himself up and once again looking at his surroundings, this time with a hint of fear. He’d have to ask Qui-Gon, when he got a chance, or Obi-Wan, or one of his new jedi teachers.

That, after all, was why he’d really wanted to be a jedi. Not only to face his own fears, to not act solely out of fear, but because Lee wouldn’t have really understood or Obito either. For the first time, Anakin realized, that maybe he’d come a jedi because when it came to the force, what the force was, how it was made, what it wanted, because Lee would and could never know the answer
Still, standing there, breathing heavily, Anakin wondered if he had to go to sleep tonight.

“This is… not an inn,” Lee finally settled on as they walked into the penthouse suite, towering over the city and only a short flying cab ride away from the senate and jedi temple. Obito couldn’t help but agree, Konoha rarely shelled out funding for inns during missions unless there was a cover associated with it. The first and obvious reason was that it was an unnecessary expense, the second was that it distracted and attracted enemies, painted a benign and civilian environment where a shinobi should instead be focused on one’s surroundings.

Even on the few occasions Obito had stayed in inns, most of those in England, they had never been close to the sort of luxury he was seeing here. A floating holo display depicted a strange singing alien woman dancing on a stage, the room spread out into a master bedroom as well as another smaller side bedroom each sporting silken sheets and richly dyed fabrics that would have put the main Uchiha house to shame. Everything was color coordinated, art hung on the wall depicting vibrant plant life that could not be found on Coruscant, and despite having grown up a branch member of one of Konoha’s wealthiest and oldest clans Obito could not help but feel dirt poor in the place.

“We have this until the embassy is built?” Obito asked, bewildered, because that was the idea they’d gotten from Padme before they’d taken off but with the way Padme seemed to think of them he was surprised they hadn’t been allotted a room above a brothel.

“Maybe they build embassies quickly,” Lee said, but from the look on her face she doubted it as well. Obito, wandering in and setting down his bag in a corner, began to wonder if this wasn’t a blatant and rather insulting bribe.

Work for the nuke nin, despot and tyrant, and he’ll give you cushy hotel rooms with jacuzzi bathtubs. Though, in a life denied any civilian luxuries at all, perhaps that was enough to turn a materialistic jedi into being his pawn.

The nidaime alone seemed unmoved by his surroundings, or rather, stoically his reaction as he too set down his bag and moved to set up fuinjutsu seals, sending out volts to destroy bugs in the furniture (and judging by the sparks there were a frightening amount) setting up the standard traps and genjutsu that could be added to by Lee herself as she warded and trapped the adjoining rooms. Except even as he did that Obito felt as if the man was watching him, biding his time until he could get either Obito or Lee alone and then…
“Two bedrooms though,” Lee noted with a frown as she looked through one room, then the other, gesturing towards each and watching as they glittered beneath genjutsu and ninjutsu traps of her own devising, “Rather than three.”

Not just two bedrooms, two beds, which under normal circumstances was hardly a problem and hardly worth mentioning. Except that at Lee’s words both Tobirama and Obito stiffened and exchanged glances.

“I suppose Obito and I will take…”

“Your apprentice gets the single,” Tobirama cut her off, eyes narrowed and voice uncompromising.

Lee stared at him for a moment, eyebrows raising, and then asked, “Tobirama, should I ask why you’re sounding so eager to share a bed with me?”

To the nidaime’s credit, he didn’t blush, only glared slightly as he said, “I am eager for you not to share a bed with your apprentice.”

Lee’s mouth opened, a silent “ah” escaping her lips, as if she too had only now just clued in that Senju Tobirama had put two and two together and did not approve of their shenanigans. As that realization dawned on her, the knowing that Tobirama knew, an awkward silence stretched between the three of them.

The bedroom situation still very undecided, a point that honestly did cause Obito a little anxiety (where even a few weeks ago he probably wouldn’t have blinked) as the bedroom with Lee would have been nice, not that being on his own was bad, but also the Lee and Tobirama staying together was not exactly something he was eager to see.

No, no, even a few weeks ago it might have caused him some unease, but he’d have brushed it off when he couldn’t figure out why. Now he knew exactly why and because of it, while silent and trying not to blush, was not nearly so eager to back down without some kind of a fight.

Finally, Lee broke and spoke first, “Well, I’m going to go shower.”
And just like that, she disappeared into the bathroom, allowing the automatic door to close and
lock itself behind her. For a too long moment Obito and the nidaime simply stared at the door,
listening to the thundering faucet of the jacuzzi as Lee filled the tub.

Slowly, too slowly, Tobirama and Obito turned to look at one another. The nidaime was taller than
him, not by much, but enough to still look down at Obito. More, the man had this intimidating
presence and competence that had always put Obito on edge, even after he’d been thrown out of the
clan and found himself on strangely close and good terms with the nidaime hokage.

Except Obito was no longer a child, and even then he had always stood his ground, he had outlived
Uchiha Madara’s madness, Lee’s training, and even Lee’s death. With that in mind, he walked past
Senju Tobirama with dignity not to be questioned, pulled out a seat for himself at the table, and
with a dark raised eyebrow waited for the nidaime to join him at one of the other seats.

For an instant, the man looked rather amused as well as annoyed, but then his expression was
blank once again even as he walked to the table and sat down across from Obito.

Obito spoke first, “Perhaps this discussion is better after we’ve swept for bugs and traps.”

“It’s done,” Tobirama responded without amusement, gesturing to his own rather rapid work,
which did look damn good but Obito supposed that was what you got when you were on a mission
with a man who had made this sort of thing his life’s work. That, and those who did not seal
campsites or hotels quickly usually ended up very dead.

Then, just like that, the nidaime started in, “You’ve slept with her?”

Except it wasn’t really a question, no, the nidaime was looking at Obito as if he knew perfectly
well that there had been sex and that there had been sex more than once now. As such, Obito didn’t
dignify that with a response.

“There’s a time and place for sexual intercourse, missions are never one of them,” Tobirama
started to which Obito nodded his own casual agreement.

“It could have been timed better,” Obito acknowledged but this seemed to be the last thing the man
wanted to hear.
“Beyond that, Obito, surely, you’re old enough to realize what a stupid idea this really is,” Tobirama said, “She’s your teacher, she’s ten years older than you, there is not one person in the village who will condone this and for very good reasons!”

“When have I ever cared what people have thought of me?” Obito asked, in perfect seriousness, “I didn’t care what the clan thought, I won’t stoop to caring what the village gossipmongers think either.”

“And what they’ll think of her?” Tobirama asked, nodding towards the bathroom door.

“If they think Lee is capable of taking advantage of anyone’s naiveté in a sexual capacity then I question their judgement already,” Obito said with a shrug, crossing his arms and waiting for whatever argument Tobirama came up with next, no doubt valid to someone who wasn’t Uchiha Obito.

“It won’t just be the village gossipmongers or even your old clan,” Tobirama pointed out with a rather bitter smile, “Your friends, your sensei, they’ll judge you for it as well.”

Yes, yes they would, but still Obito closed his eyes and breathed out, before confirming the path to damnation that he was surely on, “All the same, I’m not going to pretend or hide or not act just because of what people might think of me. Kakashi, Minato-sensei, I suppose they’ll simply have to suck it up and deal when the time comes.”

Among these, of course, was Senju Tobirama himself who would have to swallow the bitter truth of this for all it was worth.

He sighed, rubbed a hand through his hair, “She’s ten years older than you, Obito, ten years older and your own master with yourself only barely legally aged. You will have lived up to every stereotype of Jiariya the perverted toad sage and then some.”

Obito couldn’t help but let a small laugh escape at that, at the very idea of it, “I know.”

Finally, looking at him and shaking his head, he asked, “And what about Nohara Rin?”

Obito looked at him for a long time, took in the surprising earnestness of the nidaime’s expression, of his disapproval along with a desire to understand and stop what he saw as an inevitable train
wreck. Undoubtedly, in the end of his story, Obito would run back traumatized to Rin while Lee would return to pining after Minato, both of them the worse for it.

Still, Obito’s smile was soft and sad, panged by nostalgia as Rin’s shadow drifted from him, “Rin is irrelevant to this conversation, as is Namikaze Minato for that matter. It is what it is, and there won’t be sex on missions, but I won’t deny it, this, either.”

The man looked at Obito, entirely uncomprehending, and then, with his usual irritation usually pointed at Lee he said, “You, the pair of you, are entirely unreasonable and impossible to deal with.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Obito said with an easier grin.

“Your sensei should have never allowed Lee to take you on as an apprentice,” Tobirama continued, eyes narrowed now as he leaned across the table, killing intent rising, “You get on like a house on fire.”

Then, pointing at Obito, “Only you two, would think it was a good idea to engage in a romantic relationship, in an entirely different dimension, between a master and her student who are ten years apart!”

“Hey now,” Obito interjected, now somewhat affronted and annoyed, “Ten years is doable, and I am technically legal.”

Then, pausing, he added, “Also, I agreed that the extradimensional sex was a bad idea.”

Not that he regretted it, but as his own haunted reminders of Minato-sensei told him (and now the nidaime), there was a time and place for it that wasn’t in a completely foreign land without backup of any kind.

Apparently Tobirama was either out of words or unwilling to say more, stewing in the now awkward silence, eyes locked on the door no doubt waiting to pounce on Lee (who would likely receive a worse lecture being the older and therefore more responsible party who had long since outgrown hormonal puberty).

However, Lee likely knowing this, was taking her sweet time in there. Undoubtedly giving
Tobirama the chance to vent his frustration and anger all out on Obito before talking to her, a wise if underhanded tactic. Lee was always, as she preferred to put it, a magnificent bastard.

Except in this case, Obito couldn’t help but think, she underestimated Senju Tobirama’s patience.

“Rin may have come around in time.”

Obito glanced over, startled from his thoughts, and saw the nidaime looking at him, with those dissecting red eyes. And what a sad statement it was that even the nidaime hokage knew intimate details of Obito’s one-sided decade long love affair with Rin.

Obito considered this, considered Rin, he doubted it himself but still he could only acknowledge, “Perhaps.”

“Did you get tired of waiting?”

Yes, yes and no, perhaps some part of him would have been willing and content to wait forever. In some other world, with Rin gone entirely, he would have turned it into an illusion for the very idea of her. Would have planned, schemed, murdered, and destroyed himself and everything he loved for over fifteen years for it.

Except he had gotten tired of waiting, even before this mission his love for Rin had become unbearable and exhausting, to the point where even he could hardly keep up with it. Yet, he wondered if that wasn’t because in his mind, unseen and out of sight, there had already been some glimmer of Lee standing there in his head.

So, he said the answer Tobirama wouldn’t have expected, “No, I just… Realized that she didn’t want me and that the end, I think, I didn’t really want her. You know Lee isn’t a substitute.”

Tobirama laughed, surprised and amused, “No, she’s certainly nobody’s substitute. Yet I couldn’t help but wonder if she was yours.”

Obito dismissed this with an easier grin, “Please, I’ve been her apprentice for years now, I might know her as well as Minato-sensei at this point. I, of all people, know there’s only one Eru Lee and that she does not share power.”
An abuse of the quote, surely, but it seemed to entertain Tobirama to some extent. The point was though that even if Rin and Lee weren’t vastly different (which they were, unbelievably different from one another in every category you could imagine) you simply couldn’t use Lee in place of someone else or even rebound onto her if that’s what Tobirama thought he was doing.

Except the way Tobirama seemed to understand that sentiment, again, Obito couldn’t help but wonder what it was the nidaime hokage thought of her. That he’d hold her in such high regard, almost the same regard that Obito himself did, for all that he also chastised her like a child and berated her for her mistakes.

What was it Senju Tobirama saw when he looked at her?

It was hard to tell, especially as the nidaime’s expression hardened once again and he reminded Obito, “You do not have my approval.”

“Of course not,” Obito said, undoubtedly too casually and unconcerned for the nidaime’s taste, “I’d never expect that.”

Except if Obito wasn’t going to have Kakashi’s approval, Minato-sensei’s approval, or anyone else’s approval then the nidaime’s personal disapproval was hardly worth anything more than those even if it did come from a very intimidating source.

Still, if he saw even half of what Obito could see when looking at Lee…

Obito’s eyes, wandered towards the bedrooms, and nodding towards both said, “We’ll compromise, you and I share a room, and Lee gets the single.”

And that, even if it didn’t solve all the future gossip, the future looks of disapproval and shame, solved at least one problem in Obito’s dumpster fire of a personal life.
Chapter 14

“Shishou, why exactly are we doing this again?”

Lee and Obito were standing, chest to chest, Obito’s hand in one of hers and the other placed on her waist, and even inside her tiny apartment where no one was going to walk in and see them Obito was flushing desperately.

When Lee had first barged into his life and shanghaied Obito off to be her chunin apprentice, English dancing lessons were not what he’d had in mind.

“The English, unfortunately, like to concern themselves with pointless and mundane things. It’s a national pastime,” Lee said as she continued to guide Obito through the motions, forcing him to learn how to lead while he kept his eyes on her feet and tried to memorize the patterns, “And they take great pride in these things so that if you can’t do them they will judge you forever.”

“You mean like the accent?” Obito clarified, referencing Lee’s constant drilling him in his English and English accent whenever they had down time and often when they didn’t, to which Lee nodded and prompted Obito to turn them in time with the classical waltz she had put on for the occasion.

“Similar,” Lee said, “Their government has regular galas, great dances which the elite of the country all attend, and aside from the buffet and political gossiping it features quite a bit of dancing. And you will be expected to dance, and gossip at the same time, and all in all feel like you’re in a very strange interpretation of an Austen Jane novel.”

Obito stumbled slightly, losing his concentration as he tried to look up from his feet and into her eyes, feeling his face grow brighter as he wondered how he could be so bad at this when he’d been training in katas for basically as long as he could remember.

Repetitive movements like this, ones that didn’t even hurt, it should be a walk in the park.

“You’re losing focus,” Lee commented, to which Obito flushed and glanced down at his feet again only for Lee to say, “And look at my face, not your shoes, they will eat you alive if you do that.”

Obito scoffed and forced himself to look up again and remember the movements as he kept eye contact, “Who exactly will I be dancing with, shishou?”
“Well, I’m sure I don’t know, Obito,” Lee said, now looking mildly annoyed at Obito’s talking back, “Me, certainly, but you’ll probably get a few English girls hanging on your arm here and there, even with your face looking like it was mauled by bears, if only for your bad boy appeal or else as a spy from the English nin.”

“Bad boy appeal?!” Obito blurted, stopping in his tracks and looking at her with his mouth swinging open.

Obito, despite being an Uchiha, had never had any fangirls in the academy (and certainly he’d never drawn Rin’s attention). Most of this was because he lacked the trademark Uchiha stoicism, brooding, and, dare he say it, bad boy appeal.

Now, Obito might have come back from Madara’s tender mercies a little darker, jaded, and more jagged than before but that didn’t mean he’d gone and turned into one of his cousins.

“You’re a shinobi,” Lee said with a bright and cheerful laugh that was entirely at odds with Obito’s miserable mortification, “Trust me, by that alone, you have earned yourself barrels of English bad boy sex appeal.”

Obito glanced at her slyly with his narrowed, mismatched, eyes, and asked, “Are you saying that you, shishou, have English bad boy sex appeal?”

“But of course,” Lee said with a nod as if there was nothing unnatural about this, tapping Obito’s foot and getting him to step in time once again as the record changed tracks, “Combined with my messiah sex appeal, why, I may just be the sexiest and most terrifying of them all.”

Obito couldn’t help but laugh at that, not just at the idea of it in general, but the sudden vision in his head of some of his cousin’s stoic grunting brooding forms superimposed over Eru Lee and the mobs of English fangirls that would be swooning and stalking her from the shadows, so eager to bear her children.

That, and just the idea of Lee being, well, sexy, was kind of hilarious. It wasn’t that Lee wasn’t pretty, or that she wasn’t terrifyingly competent, it was just… Well… She would open her mouth and whatever bad boy sex appeal there was to be had would be completely ruined.

Eru Lee was a lot of things, but a sexy brooder, she was anything but.
“Well, this just goes to show that you have no taste,” Lee said, but with mirth rather than with any real offense, “I’ll have you know that I’m very popular with the English ladies and gentlemen.”

“The ladies too?” Obito asked, eyebrows raised as he turned her, grinning at the successful maneuver where for maybe the first time he didn’t step on her feet.

“Of course,” Lee said, her grin growing, “It’s a national obsession, when they’re not calling me a blood guzzling mercenary they’re speculating on all of my many love affairs and the likelihood that I’ll return to England full-time and marry Malfoy Draco. The likelihood, as you can imagine, is exceedingly small.”

Obito’s smile grew, having heard something about Malfoy Draco, clan heir of the Malfoy’s, and his strange obsession with using his father as a threat, but then remembered her previous words and noted with a flush, “Hey, I have great taste!”

“I’m not sure liking and only liking Nohara Rin can be defined as having taste,” Lee said with a frown to which Obito couldn’t help but scoff and be slightly insulted for all that Lee’s joke really was mild and in good fun.

Maybe, liking Rin for so long, and then coming back from the Kannabi bridge so different while Konoha and everyone else had stayed the same, he was a little rawer than he used to be. Madara… Sometimes he couldn’t help but remember that even more than Kakashi or Minato-sensei or the clan Madara had talked a lot about Rin.

Either way, progressing enough to dip Lee slightly (a task and a half given that Lee was a fair bit taller than he was), he said, “Oh come on, there’s no one better than Rin! And even if there was, I wouldn’t be interested. And besides, shishou, do you have any room to talk what with Minato-sensei?”

“But you didn’t ask me if I had any taste,” Lee pointed out as they straightened upwards, this time moving a little faster through the motions, surpassing the speed of the song itself, “More, I don’t take the results of my one-sided love affair quite so personally as you do.”

Obito flushed, not quite willing to say that it wouldn’t be one-sided forever (because it had been and it very well could remain that way) but not quite willing to stay completely silent either. So instead, he compromised and said, “Well, if I have no taste then you’re at least ten times as tasteless.”
Lee grinned as the whirl, “I dare say there’s a great many who would heartily agree with you on that. But I guess, Obito, that we’ll just have to be tasteless and hopeless together and hope that at the very least, it can make these endless English parties fun.”

“Well, if there’s a buffet and punch,” Obito pointed out with his own grin, “Then it really can’t be that bad.”

Unfortunately, he’d later learn that they were that bad, and perhaps even worse but he was older and wiser then even if he was just as tasteless and hopeless as Lee had painted his younger self. Still, even at that moment or in the ministry, Obito later wondered if there was some cloud called irony hanging over his head that, every once in a while, he might glimpse out of the corner of his eye.

That perhaps, even then, there were reasons he remembered these small moments in small apartments when old English music played.

Still, Rin had been so bright back then though, that he somehow hadn’t even noticed.

There was nothing quite like waking up, day after day, with your legs a little too tangled and your face a little too close to a fully grown and unamused man. Similarly, there was nothing quite like that awkward moment where you realized that he had likely been awake a few minutes before you, and so he was already staring at you with those unnerving red eyes while you just prayed to god you looked half as unnerving staring back.

And, on top of that, there was nothing quite like lying there, thinking again that you should have just taken the floor or else rotated except that the bedrooms naturally were more warded and that somehow doing even that felt somehow like losing whatever unspoken battle you and him were having.

Point being, it was another day in the life of one Uchiha Obito, shinobi in space, sharing a bed with the resurrected nidaime hokage who looked like he was having about as much fun with this as Obito himself was.

Well, perhaps slightly more fun, in that he seemed to be getting a full night’s rest each time. The bed was large, but the years and six months in Madara’s cave had honed Obito into a dreadfully light sleeper and for all that he liked Senju Tobirama the man was not quite the familiar and
comforting presence of either Eru Lee or else Obito’s old genin team.

That, and it was hard to fall asleep next to a man who highly disapproved of your choices and tended to show his disapproval by beating you into the ground.

Still, Obito groaned and detangled himself, and moved to the other side of the bed and sighing, wondering just what they were going to do today. They’d checked on the embassy’s rather minimal progress thus far, for whatever reason the republic had decided instead of just giving them an older building to building an entirely new one in their over the top gratitude to the heroes of Naboo, Tobirama was set up in his jedi academy courses with Anakin as a companion and translator and was due for a whole set of them today, and while the chancellor had reputedly returned from Naboo he had only scheduled them in for a small meeting in the afternoon that really wouldn’t take much time at all…

Well then, it looked like Lee and Obito would be doing their usual routine of research in the jedi libraries with glaring from all directions while Jinn played the role of their hapless escort.

It was just too bad that Obito was tired enough that the very idea of trying to slog through written Basic was already giving him a headache.

Still, he sighed, and to the wall dully said, “We should really demand that third bed.”

Tobirama barked out a laugh, which was something at least, as he shrugged into his full clothing, “Somehow, I think three room hotel rooms weren’t as popular.”

That, and, somehow Obito didn’t wonder if this had been deliberate on the part of the chancellor. Granted, perhaps this was a bit too paranoid about the man but given the jedi’s overwhelming aversion to attachment the idea of throwing at least two of the three of them together would probably cause their hair to stand on end.

Except that Obito and Lee apparently already wigged them out almost to the point of stabbing first and talking later so Obito hardly saw how one less bed would be that much bigger of a deal.

He stood, feeling his shoulders and neck crack, the usual stiffness of the scarred half of his body and that dull ache that always came in the morning, and slowly put on his own clothing before, in half a daze he walked out of the room and into the kitchen where Lee herself was waiting.
Well, attempting to wait, she was slumped at the shining glass table, skin pale, dark shadows under her glazed eyes, and only barely looking conscious as she idly stirred her tea and left her plate of strange blue alien eggs to grow cold.

In Lee’s own words, she looked like she’d just been run over by a brick filled Hogwarts Express.

“Jesus,” Obito said as he slid into the seat across from her, “Shishou, what happened to you?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Lee grunted, straightening and slowly beginning to eat her eggs.

Obito scoffed, entirely unsympathetic as Lee produced a cup of tea out of thin air and slid it towards him, “You couldn’t sleep? I’m sleeping with the nidaime.”

And if Obito were only slightly less frighteningly one-track minded when it came to his romantic tendencies then he didn’t doubt that waking up every morning in extremely compromising positions with the not unattractive Senju Tobirama would be playing hell with his head and possibly bring on some sort of sexual crisis or at least extreme bouts of mortification.

“Honestly,” Lee said looking at him with raised eyebrows, “If it were possible I’d probably trade.”

Obito’s eyebrows lowered not sure whether to be insulted, self-conscious, or just plain unamused, “Seriously?”

She then seemed to realize that she’d just implied, to Obito, that she’d rather be sleeping with the nidaime and she shook her head, wiping at her face and with rapid hand gestures corrected herself, “No, not that bit, not…”

She trailed off, hand pausing, caught in midair like some confused bird, and then said plainly, looking Obito straight in the eye, “I keep having those weird force dreams.”

“Weird force dreams?” Obito asked, wracking his head for what that could possibly mean and coming up short. Meanwhile, during this, the nidaime walked in, looking like it wasn’t morning at all and like he was ready to go as he took his own seat at the table, gratefully taking Lee’s tea as she passed it to him.
God, he must have been one intimidating hokage.

“I told you about it once before,” Lee acknowledged, “On that second ship back to Coruscant. At least, I think he’s the force. He hasn’t exactly used that word but he all but-shouts it every time we meet, if I were to call him anything the force is as good a word as any other, but he also likes to wear Minato’s face.”

“Oh, right,” Obito said, nodding slowly as the memory came back to him, “That whole thing…”

Which, at the time, had also sounded weird and Obito had sort of shrugged off. It was one of those higher plane Lee things that mortal average joes like Obito didn’t and shouldn’t have to care about.

Mostly it’d been the idea of this weird alternate universe Lee dressing up as Minato-sensei to impress her that had both hilarious and kind of irking. Like that even here, in an entirely different dimension, Minato-sensei’s shadow stretched over her.

Either way, Lee hadn’t brought it up since and Obito figured it hadn’t been that important.

Except apparently it was.

“And you can’t sleep?” Obito asked, looking at her more closely, and noting that it really had been a progression over the last few days of Lee looking steadily more exhausted each morning.

“Well, I probably look like I’m asleep, but it’s not really sleeping,” Lee said rather drily, as if something about this was darkly amusing, “He takes advantage of… I won’t exactly call it vulnerability, it’s not, but he takes advantage of my distraction or drifting about inside my own head to pull me onto some higher plane of existence.”

The nidaime was giving her a musing look, not as if he believed or didn’t believe her, but like he wasn’t quite sure what to believe. Home, chakra would never do something like this, mostly because sentience or even the illusion of sentience was something chakra didn’t really have.

So, it was up to Obito to quietly ask, looking at her, and once again feeling, “And then what? What happens?”
“We talk,” she said with a shrug and a small smile, as if she knew this answer would drive both Obito and Tobirama up the wall, “About life, the universe, sentience, humanity… All sorts of things really. It’s mostly just slightly strange, benign enough just… Just exhausting.”

She rubbed a hand through her hair as if to emphasize this point, leaning back and complaining, “I’m not saying I need sleep, necessarily, I think that I could go without it if I have to. But I’ve gotten used to it and doing without after all these years of sleeping and eating and doing normal human things is, frankly, kind of uncomfortable.”

Tobirama scoffed, “Only you would think to call being deprived of a necessary human function merely uncomfortable.”

Lee brushed this off with a single hand, “I’ll get over it, it’s really fine, just slightly draining. He’s really not that bad, it’s not so much that he reminds me of myself but… He really is new at this sort of thing, I think he’s very young, and for him this is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to him in… Well, ever.”

Obito blinked, not entirely sure he heard that right, but then when the words processed again and still sounded the same he couldn’t help but dubiously ask, “You sleeping is the most exciting thing that has ever happened to the force?”

Lee laughed at that, even as she sipped her tea, looking like that question alone just about made Lee’s day, “He doesn’t get out much.”

At Tobirama’s chiding look she sighed and added in a slightly more impatient and direct tone, “Remember what he is, or at least, what I think he is. I think he’s been… Sort of aware, but from his perspective it’s only ever been him. Us showing up, from outside of his domain, it’s Christmas.”

She then sighed again, a long and tired thing, and said, “Still, I’d appreciate it if he gave me a real chance to close my eyes every once in a while. The only real break I get is when I’m awake and down here with all you mortal peons, and even then, it’s not that much of a break. I can hear him buzzing somewhere, right next to my ear or I see him the corner of my eye, and yet he’s still out of sight and reach.”

Well, that wasn’t ominous or anything. Obito tried to sense it himself, looking around, but the kitchen of their suite seemed just as benign as ever, not a piece of furniture out of place and no buzzing chakra or force to be found.
“I wonder if I can talk Jinn and Kenobi into shutting him up already,” Lee said, but from the look on her face she doubted, she’d probably already tried herself and been summarily shut down.

Still, for the most part, she looked unconcerned. Which might not mean anything, as Lee tended to find a lot of very concerning things not concerning at all. It took a lot to shake up Lee, as it was Obito couldn’t really remember a time when he’d really seen her out of her element, even against Madara she’d been ferocious and determined but hardly unnerved.

Obito spared an inquisitive glance over to the nidaime, waiting for his two cents on Lee’s latest metaphysical dream shenanigans with the avatar of another dimension’s natural chakra. The man for a moment said nothing, continued to stir his tea, then slowly said, “Well, I won’t claim to have any expertise on the truly ridiculous situations you get yourself into.”

“Hey,” Lee said with a slightly annoyed glare, “This one is not my fault.”

The nidaime paid it no mind as he talked over her, “And I won’t imply that it’s your overactive imagination, but I will note that the natural chakra of this universe is… odd. Certainly, it’s different from home, and it’s been giving me a headache.”

Rubbing at his head, as if even admitting it out loud was bringing the headache back he then sighed and said, “It moves more quickly than ours, circulates through everything, but around you Lee it moves like a hurricane. Which, combined with your own ridiculous levels of chakra, cannot be good for my health. All the same, perhaps it’s to be expected from a foreign dimension.”

Maybe, Obito was hardly an expert, he wasn’t the sensor that the nidaime or even Lee was and he’d been using the sharingan sparingly if at all in this place and hardly was using it to stare at the currents of natural chakra surrounding them.

Perhaps, even now, it wasn’t really worth worrying about. Lee would be fine, she always was, and if she just spent every night gossiping like a school girl with the force wearing Minato-sensei’s face that was…

Well, not fine, something about that idea wasn’t fine at all and he’d really prefer that it didn’t wear Minato-sensei’s face of all things or any face at all especially since Obito was confined to a room with the nidaime and…

Obito forced it down, instead grinned across at Lee and took one of her hands in his, smiling at the sight of it and contenting himself that the idea that this world, this reality, was certainly more than enough and…
“Down boy,” the nidaime cut in, Obito flushing and turning to meet the man’s annoyed and disapproving stare.

“What?!” Obito cried out, hand gripping Lee’s tighter, to which Lee herself smiled slightly, lips quirking upwards.

The nidaime just kept frowning, eyes narrowing as he crossed his arms and declared, “I miss when you were hopelessly lovesick over Nohara Rin.”

Well, Obito certainly didn’t, and he shot the nidaime back an unamused glare of his own (which only caused the man to raise his eyebrows as if Obito really thought he could give that look to him of all people).

“And I miss when you weren’t here!” Obito shot back.

“No, you don’t,” the nidaime lazily corrected, “You two were hopeless without me and practically begged the yondaime to bring me along. Not that you didn’t already cause enough damage and headaches.”

“I resent all of your implications,” Lee quipped, “And begging is a grand exaggeration.”

It wasn’t, but the nidaime didn’t need to know that, especially since he’d undoubtedly been dying to come like the giant nerd he secretly was.

“And don’t go patting yourself on the back yet,” Obito pointed out, “You’ve only been here a week or so and still need a translator so you’re hardly fixing any of our mistakes yet.”

Although a determined Senju Tobirama was a terrifying one, Obito had discovered, and when the man put his mind to it he made truly frightening progress in Basic, both speaking and written, at a far quicker pace than Obito even had during all those months in Tatooine.

The man, taking these jedi courses and practicing in basically all his free time, undoubtedly, would be passable in Basic in no time at all.
Which, though Obito himself was damn good, was just patently unfair.

“Give me time,” Tobirama said with a small smile, “I built a village, I can certainly handle a few foreign shinobi.”

Just for that, Obito thought, he hoped Tobirama had to sit through ten thousand lectures on the dangers of love and attachment.

Still, Obito thought, it wasn’t a bad day or a bad place, this strange luxurious hotel suite in space, now filled with all of Tobirama’s collected data pads, androids, and supplies as well as whatever interesting knick-knacks Lee and Obito stumbled across.

And if he could sit here with the sunlight filtering in through the window, overlooking this strange metallic city of a planet, then Obito was more than fine with that.

Maybe it was bad of Anakin, but the best part of his new jedi training courses, to help him become Qui-Gon’s padawan whenever Obi-Wan passed his trials, was the nidaime hokage Tobirama Senju.

It wasn’t that it wasn’t all interesting, or that Anakin hadn’t tried to make new friends or at least talk to people… Well, no, all of that was a lie, most of it wasn’t interesting. Sure, there were classes with a training lightsaber (except those Anakin seemed a little far ahead not only because he was older and taller but also training so much with Obito and Lee), courses on mechanics, but there were also a lot of classes on reading and writing and just reaching out to the force.

Which… Lately, Anakin hadn’t wanted to reach out to the force at all.

As for his classmates, they were all four or five years younger than he was, everyone his age was already a padawan or else sent to Telos and they all just stared at him all the time making it clear that Anakin had been brought in way later than everyone else and was different because of it.

Sitting next to white haired, red eyed, strange Tobirama Senju who looked maybe only half human and was fully grown at that, stoic and proud and seeming nothing at all like a jedi as he listened to Anakin translate lectures about the force and the light and dark sides of it and the history of the
jedi, at least Anakin looked shorter and more normal by comparison.

That, and, even if it was roundabout at best and even if the jedi instructors clearly didn’t like it, Tobirama Senju was a connection back to something from Anakin’s old life. He was a way back to Lee and Obito, who he got to see every day, and Anakin liked something about that.

So, he really didn’t mind when, in yet another lecture about the force and letting it flow through you and guide you and whatever, he was sitting and whispering translations in Obito’s and Lee’s language back to the second hokage.

That, and, translating distracted him from what was really being said, things he… He didn’t want to think about.

The other children next to him, all younger and sitting cross legged and smiling, were all perfectly still as they listened to the instructor drone. Lee had never droned and neither had Obito, granted they hadn’t talked too much about chakra and how it worked, just bits and pieces here and there but when they did they had never gone on and on like this for days at a time.

And they’d always welcomed questions, and here… Well, they welcomed questions, but it was clear that they looked for a certain type of question that Anakin just wasn’t going to ask. Everyone here had just grown up with these ideas and it was all new to Anakin and…

The man, a small bothan with orange fur, stopped as Anakin lifted his hand with a grimace.

“Yes, Anakin?” the man asked pleasantly and patiently, but not with any of the familiarity of Lee or Obito or even Qui-Gon.

“I… Sir, what does the force want?” Anakin asked, finally just biting the blaster laser and saying it.

“I’m sorry?” the bothan jedi asked, “Could you clarify that, Anakin?”

Anakin rambled, face flushing as all the other kids looked at him like there was something wrong with him for even asking, “The force, I get that it moves through everything, through all of us, and guides our actions and is balanced between light and dark but… But what does it really want?”
The bothan tilted his head, as if trying to understand Anakin’s words better, “The force, Anakin, moves through us all, guides us through many possible futures, and clearly has a preference of some futures over others but it is not something that has active sentient wants.”

“Why not?” Anakin blurted.

“Why not?” the jedi parroted, cat eyes growing wider by the minute as he tried to comprehend that.

“It’s been here since the beginning, right, and it’s in everything and it clearly wants some futures more than others and guides people, so why shouldn’t it want things? And if it does want things, then what does it really want?”

They all kept staring at him, like Anakin had gone and lost his hand and decided to become one of the sand people, and then the bothan jedi instructor laughed, “Oh, Anakin, what an imagination you have. Truly delightful.”

Anakin’s face burned, he glared down at the floor and his bare feet against the thin mat he was sitting on, the children around him giggled even as the jedi continued to explain, “There are force sensitive sects, on primitive worlds once outside the republic, that had similar ideas of the desires or sentience of the force but at its heart the force is infinitely more complex and simple than that. We jedi have been studying it for millennia, we work all our lives to become one with the force, and for all its profound mysteries it has never done something so simple as want in the manner you and I might want.”

“How would you know?” Anakin mumbled bitterly to his feet, apparently too soft for the jedi to hear or the other initiates, but loud enough for Senju Tobirama sitting next to him.

The jedi was moving on though, the lecture continued, and soon enough they were paired off to work on meditation, connecting to fellow force users, and discussing what they’d learned. As always, because he was older and different and spoke Lee’s language, he and the nidaime were placed together in the far corner of the room, watching as the bothan instructor smiled and made his round encouraging and correcting as he made his way to each pair.

And all he could think was that the last thing he wanted to do was touch the force and that these people didn’t get it at all, didn’t understand that the force could, and did, want something and that if they’d listen for two seconds Anakin could even tell them what it was.
He just didn’t know why.

He sighed, looked over at the nidaime and ducked his head in embarrassed, switching over to Lee, Obito, and Tobirama’s language, “Sorry, I mean about translating, I missed some stuff in there and…”

Tobirama waved his hand in dismissal, “It’s fine, you’re hardly trained for translation and are already miles beyond Lee ever was or has been.”

Anakin tried to hold in his smile, the thought that at least this, he was doing right.

“How are they?”

“As ridiculous as ever,” Tobirama said, but with fondness, as if he wouldn’t have either Obito or Lee any other way, “They pretend to be fully functioning adults, but I only know that it’s a matter of time before the next disaster strikes. And, like always, I’ll be the one to clean up the mess.”

Anakin did smile at that, a full beaming grin as he thought back to those memories, “Yeah, they were always causing some trouble in Tatooine, even before Qui-Gon, Padme, Obi-Wan, Jar-Jar, R2, and everyone else showed up.”

“One time,” Anakin confessed, leaning forward with his hands under his chin, “Obito accidentally blew up half of Watto’s stock in the junkyard when he was showing me one of his jutsus and he and Lee had to spend all day with me figuring out how to put it back together again.”

He could still remember Obito and Lee screaming at one another, Lee’s hands flying everywhere as she demanded he tell her what it looked like to begin with, Anakin trying to describe it, and Obito practically tearing his hair out as he constantly reminded both of them that he was hardly an expert. Still, at the end, they’d all been laughing, toasting to their own victory back in Anakin’s house at having managed to fool Watto for at least another day.

It seemed so long ago but at the same time like it was just yesterday…

And even though he’d been a slave, some part of Anakin missed those days and Mos Espa with it. But it was gone now, all gone, and Anakin was gone and moved on too.
Only those dreams, dream after dream of Lee and the force wearing Minato Namikaze’s face, even gave him a glimpse of it.

Anakin peered up at Tobirama through his lashes, taking in his confident appearance and the way chakra seemed to gravitate towards him even more than Qui-Gon, like he had some authority over everything he touched, and he asked hesitantly, “Hey, Mr. Senju, do you… do you know how chakra works?”

Tobirama raised his pale white eyebrows ever so slightly upwards, then asked, “Do you mean your force or chakra?”

Anakin flushed, pushed his hands together, and said, “Well, I… I didn’t realize there was a difference.”

“The principles seem more or less the same,” Tobirama said with a slight shrug, “But Lee, Obito, and I come from… a planet very far from this one. Our chakra, even our natural chakra, acts very differently from your force. We were discussing as much this morning.”

Anakin nodded, not entirely sure what that meant except that it wasn’t surprising, the man in his dreams with Lee had seemed to think that Lee came from somewhere further than even he could comprehend, and he knew everything. Still, Anakin glanced at the instructor, saw he was still talking to other initiates, and then asked, “Well, what about chakra then?”

“I know entirely too much about chakra,” Tobirama said with an amused smile at Anakin’s broad question, “And yet, because of that, I’m not sure I know anything at all.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I’ve been studying chakra all of my life,” Tobirama explained, “And yet, the more I learn, the more insignificant and ignorant I feel. Like every step further I take I realize that the universe is still stretching infinitely before me. Anyone who claims to truly understand chakra, or even your force, is undoubtedly a fool who knows nothing at all.”

What Anakin would say to that even Anakin didn’t know, his mouth hung open but at that moment the instructor looked over at them both in disapproval and Anakin grew quiet, reaching out towards the force and yet doing anything but.
Lee Eru, Qui-Gon had the feeling, didn’t quite know the meaning of the words subtlety or even tact. He couldn’t say he had known her very long, however, for the small period of time he had known her she had always been blunt, abrupt, and rather up front with both what she wanted and what she thought of any given situation.

Whether this was her dislike of the jedi, apparently something that grew by the minute, her attempts to gather information about them, or anything in between Lee had all the subtlety of a stampeding herd of nerfs.

So much so that her apprentice, the boy Obito Uchiha, appeared the master of subtle manipulation by comparison. Which, as far as Qui-Gon could tell, the boy had no motivation to be and generally seemed to approve of his master’s rather up-front attitude and took to emulating it at nearly every opportunity.

At any rate, for all that Qui-Gon had grown to like the pair, and for all that the force screamed in his and every jedi’s ear to keep them closer than they dared, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but feel that perhaps the force was finally rewarding him for having put Obi-Wan through so many incidents of Qui-Gon’s strays.

Because, surely, Qui-Gon who hardly represented the ideal jedi master, could not be in this situation other than by the providence of the force.

“I’m sorry?” Qui-Gon asked, taking in the sight of the pair hovering over data pads in the Jedi library (an acquisition that to the Jedi council had looked as if it was akin to pulling teeth) reading about the history of the Jedi under Qui-Gon’s strict supervision.

They always looked out of place here, not simply their clothing, dark greens and blues amid the jedi simple browns and beiges, but in the very way the held themselves, always on edge, always aware of their surroundings instead of sinking into the force.

Eyes of jedi working beside them would land on them, stare for too long, wariness in the eyes of masters, padawans, knights, and initiates alike.

However, today instead of playing the studious roles they’d assigned themselves for the past few days, Lee had decided to get to the heart of what she and her people undoubtedly wanted. Which,
of course, was the last thing the jedi would ever willingly grant them.

“The crystals for the light sabers,” Lee repeated, setting aside the history of the last great empire which had once ruled over most of what was now the republic, “Do you know where we can find them or at least buy them?”

“They cannot be bought, and you cannot simply find and take them,” Qui-Gon quickly cut in, “The crystals, understand that they are as closely guarded a treasure to the order as any other. You will never be granted that, I would never grant you that.”

Indeed, even padawans were not told where the caverns were and guarded until they were chosen by a master and ready to build their lightsaber.

Lee and Obito didn’t seem entirely surprised by this, likely, given their own culture, they had been expecting this long before now, still Lee sighed, “Pity, I’m rather jealous of Obito’s shiny new toy.”

Qui-Gon, were he a young padawan, would have flinched at that. Still, he stiffened ever so slightly at the reminder of the sith’s duel blade that Obito Uchiha had claimed as a prize of war.

“Oh well, I suppose it can’t be helped,” Lee said with a shrug, and yet Qui-Gon couldn’t help but feel… Not that she didn’t mean it, but that her task, the task of obtaining the crystal for the lightsabers, had simply been made more complicated rather than impossible. That she would go and do it without the council or even Qui-Gon’s approval.

And the force… The force didn’t seem to mind the idea at all.

“You are leaving the temple and Coruscant soon then?” Qui-Gon asked, the pair had spoken about it here and there, really ever since they had returned from Coruscant they seemed to be itching to leave it and see the wonders of the rest of the galaxy for themselves.

The idea made Qui-Gon uncomfortable, or rather, and this was an odd thing to say but it seemed to make the living force uncomfortable. As if the idea of Lee and Obito developing wanderlust, not necessarily wandering with the core of the republic or even the outer rim but wandering further than that grated at it and stirred agitated eddies in its current.
However, they seemed determined to leave, a small trip before returning once again to Coruscant and regrouping with the diplomat.

And for all that the force bled through them, for all the power they both possessed, both seemed entirely deaf to the force’s voice practically screaming in their ears.

Even now, Lee nodded, “Tomorrow, early, we think. It’s time Obito and I saw what the rest of this galaxy is about, we really hung around Tatooine for far too long and there’s more to this republic of yours than the barren desert, swamps, and this hunk of metal you have the indecency to call a planet.”

Qui-Gon’s lips quirked upwards in an amused smile at her thoughtless insults, that, somehow with exposure to the woman, had started to seem more amusing and familiar than simply insulting.

“And what about your diplomat, Tobirama Senju, you’ve only given him a week to learn Basic,” Qui-Gon noted to the pair but they didn’t seem too concerned for Tobirama Senju’s wellbeing or challenges as both simply shrugged in time.

“And honestly, he’d probably be more upset if we got in the way,” Obito said before leaning forward and saying to Qui-Gon, as if giving an aside in a play, “He’s under the impression, somehow, that shishou and I are entirely incompetent.”

“Which is very rude of him,” Lee added with a huff, “I’d like to see him do any better… Actually, that’s half of why we’re going, it will be nice to give the nidaime a chance to crash and burn as he tries to negotiate with the most unreasonable people I have ever met.”

Qui-Gon laughed, he hated to tell them, but for that alone he thought that Tobirama Senju might do better than they themselves would. Certainly, even by taking courses with the initiates as well as Anakin Skywalker, the man had painted himself as a far more palatable alternative to Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha.

Though, Qui-Gon couldn’t help but acknowledge, there was far too much attachment even in that man, deep regrets and festering hatred and anger, than the jedi would be comfortable with in any other situation.

However, for all the force was muddled, for all the future was fragmented and broken, the living force was more overwhelming and clear than it had ever been before and even the council could
not deny the direction it guided (no, almost pushed) them towards.

Lee Eru was important.

“Anakin can translate,” Obito said with a wave of his hand, breaking Qui-Gon from his thoughts, “It’ll be good for him as well as the nidaime, and given that Lee and I really only are headed to the core planets we should only be gone for about a week or so.”

Oh yes, a shinobi and Anakin Skywalker together, the council was sure to be thrilled with that.

“You think it will turn into a hovercraft wreck?” Lee asked, resting her chin on the backs of her hands as she read Qui-Gon’s cringing expression.

“Oh, no, it’s simply that,” Qui-Gon stopped because the answer was really yes, he cleared his throat and then said, “The council reluctantly took Anakin on as an initiate, but it was not with great pleasure or without significant hesitation.”

“You jedi will never make sense to me,” Obito said rather dully.

“We have our ways,” Qui-Gon merely answered serenely, “And under ordinary circumstances Anakin would never have been brought to train at his age.”

“And these are extraordinary circumstances?” Lee questioned further, and now that Qui-Gon thought about it he didn’t know if they had heard or not, that Anakin was the chosen one. They had seemed to merely accept that Qui-Gon would want to train Anakin, that the council would want to train him, if only for his raw strength in the force.

They hadn’t questioned the idea that if Anakin had been even slightly less of what he was, though Qui-Gon would have worked to free him and his mother if he had the opportunity, he would not have offered to train the boy.

“Yes,” Qui-Gon said slowly, “Anakin is very special.”

At seeing their dull looks of incomprehension, again, likely thinking of Anakin’s raw strength
alone rather than the implications he simply explained, “There is a prophecy, written many years ago, about a Jedi, more closely connected to the Force than any other, who will bring balance to the Force and the galaxy. I believe Anakin Skywalker is that Jedi.”

Both looked somewhat taken aback by this, not, apparently, possessing their own prophecies about Anakin Skywalker.

“Perhaps,” Qui-Gon added with a small smile, “Even your coming here, finding Anakin yourselves in Mos Espa, the most unlikely of places, was an act of the Force.”

“Perhaps,” Lee responded, though her tone, her face, revealed nothing, her thoughts hidden out of sight behind those bright green eyes.

“Still, to be the kwisatz haderach, and at the age of ten and not even fifteen…” Lee said, trailing off, her words drifting into the air along with the small particles of dust painted golden in the daylight, “That is the kind of greatness that will destroy a man as well as a galaxy.”

However, Lee did not leave him much of a chance to respond to that, as instead she turned back to her history books and began flipping through pages of the data pad and asking Qui-Gon about long dead homicidal androids and ancient emperors from the edge of space.

Tobirama had many regrets from his lifetime, had had regrets at the time, but then had found them compounded and growing in his strange afterlife. At the time it had been Madara, Uchiha Madara the murderer of his brother and the village, madman and bane of his own people, who had been in the darkest pits of Tobirama’s soul.

He wished that Madara had never been born, that Uchiha Izuna had never been born. He wished that Hashirama, just once, had lacked the faith in humanity to trust the reluctant and wrathful Uchiha Madara when extending his hand to build Konoha. He wished that they had never met. He wished that his father had killed Madara when he was a child. He wished that he had killed Madara just as he had killed Izuna. He wished that he hadn’t killed Izuna and perhaps prevented Madara’s path to murderous insanity…

He wished that his brother had survived and Tobirama had died instead.
And every time he sat over paperwork, threw himself into building Hashirama’s village without him, in every shadow he saw Uchiha Madara laughing.

However, upon resurrection, Tobirama learned that he hadn’t regretted the correct things. Madara yes, Madara always, but ANBU, the segregation and drifting of the Uchiha, and Danzo, those had passed him by at the time only to appear as monsters later.

ANBU, even now, though he regretted what it was and the effects it had on those who drowned themselves in it, he could not say he had made the wrong decision. ANBU was needed, without it Konoha would never have survived, would have been wiped out along with Uzushio until only burning trees remained. He only wished that he could have done better, could have believed fully in Hashirama’s dream, because Hashirama would never accept a world where ANBU was necessary.

Similarly, the separation of the Uchiha, though he regretted it he acknowledged that it had spiraled out of his control and compounded itself after Tobirama had departed this world. He had tried, he had taken Kagami as a student and worked with him often as a jonin, he had given them charge of the village police as they had asked, he had left them to the lands that Hashirama had allotted them and around those lands they had built up all their old clan walls once again and turned inward. And as the Senju disappeared through death and marriage the Uchiha married cousins upon cousins and became a village within a hidden village…

He had never, for all his years of working with Kagami, for all that he had known Madara, truly understood the Uchiha clan.

Danzo though, Shimura Danzo was the knife in Tobirama’s heart that kept plunging deeper. He remembered that moment in Cloud, outnumbered and with no way out, and knowing that it was now or never to pick a successor. He had looked at Kagami and seen the man’s family, had known that with the Uchiha council whispering in his ear, however good a man Kagami was, Tobirama could never pass the title to him. Then he had looked at Danzo, he’d thought, for a moment, perhaps, but he’d thought that Danzo had too much of a respect for power and the concrete, he had never understood Hashirama. And so, Tobirama had looked to Hiruzen, had recognized something of himself and Hashirama inside of him, and had passed on his title and his hat to a man who would be burdened with it for decades to come.

Until, of course, the young Namikaze Minato took it from him.

He had not given it to Danzo, and yet, for a moment he had considered it. Not realizing, not looking and seeing what Danzo was so quickly becoming and perhaps already was. Not merely a war dog, but a spider lurking in the shadows, spinning webs beneath the village and devouring men and children alike as he clamored for power.
He had nightmares now, of what Shimura Danzo might have become, if he had continued year upon year through the war and onwards with all of Konoha at his disposal. Or, worse, if Tobirama had had one moment less to choose, or if Hiruzen had died in the battle and only Kagami and Danzo had remained…

To his everlasting shame and horror, Tobirama could not say that he would have chosen Kagami.

This man, though older than Hiruzen was or Danzo would have been, in some strange way that Tobirama could not place, not in his robes, his genial smile, or even his overwhelming killing intent that creeped on Tobirama’s skin like the legs centipedes and spiders, reminded him distinctly of Danzo.

“Fascinating,” the man said, looking at Tobirama as if he truly was fascinated, “You react even more strongly than the pair of them, I dare say you knew what I was before you even walked into the building.”

Tobirama couldn’t help but wonder why the man was fascinated, when you hated like that and wore it on your sleeve, even the worst of sensors couldn’t help but notice.

“And yet you yourself, just as them, are neither light nor dark but rather constantly balancing on the edge of a knife, neither truly one nor the other,” the man sipped at his wine, a dark red, so dark in the twilight that it resembled blood and Obito’s voice was cold and toneless as he translated, “You know, a *jedi* could never do that for long, if they balance like that, if they dare to tempt themselves they will always fall.”

He then leaned back, smiling genially at the three of them, at Lee and Obito’s forced casual posture as well as Tobirama’s tenseness, and said, “I don’t believe I have ever seen anything like it.”

“I am told I should congratulate you,” Tobirama said, “On your acquiring the chancellorship so very recently.”

The man let out an amused laugh after Obito had translated, “Recently, yes so recently, and yet so many years spent getting here. I do not believe that your friends appreciate how long and arduous the journey was to here. And yet, here I am, supreme chancellor of the republic.”
He then waved his hand, as if to dismiss his own words, “Forgive me, I rarely get a chance to even hint at what’s truly on my mind. I find it refreshing, speaking to you shinobi, one might even say that I’ve come to look forward to our little chats.”

And Obito’s voice was so cold, so professional and toneless, that the words were horribly juxtaposed in Tobirama’s mind.

“Yes, they’re positively delightful,” Lee said rather drily before asking, “And the embassies, when exactly can we expect those to be done?”

“Soon enough, these things take time,” the man said before eyeing her speculatively, “Have you not been kept up to date on the progress?”

“We have, but the timeframe is a bit extreme, isn’t it?” Obito asked twice, once for the man and translating again for Tobirama, leaning forward, something rather accusatory in his eyes as if he knew there was some game being played unseen within this man’s mind.

“For the heroes of Naboo and the republic? Hardly.”

Lee and Obito both frowned along with Tobirama, Lee leaning back and shifting in her chair as she asked, “Can I ask, exactly, how long it will be until you start raping and pillaging this capital planet of yours?”

The man laughed heartily at that, a high-pitched grating noise that did not belong in any human being, a laughter even worse than Madara’s mad laughter had been as he burned down Konoha and unleashed the tailed beast.

“Oh, Lee Eru, you delightfully blunt creature, you do realize that it is not so easy or simple as that, don’t you?” he said, “No need to worry, you have plenty of time before the lightsaber falls, and even then, I think, it would be more beneficial to have you on my side rather than theirs. Such a pity they loathe everything you stand for, isn’t it?”

“Do you not loathe what we stand for?” Obito asked, and Tobirama looked at him in warning but the boy paid no mind, and neither did the chancellor, just as with Lee he was instead amused by Obito’s nerve and bluntness.
“Of course, however I make no pretense of righteousness and do not demand the conversion of heathens to my own philosophy unnecessarily. The *jedi* have grown weak and content, their hubris is so thick in the air that it could choke a man, and when they die they will not even see it coming. Even if, you Lee Eru and Obito Uchiha, so kindly warn them.”

Both paled at that but held their ground saying nothing, and the man just kept smiling, giving all the impression that he viewed the three of them, particularly Lee and Obito, as amusing little foreign toys that he could watch flit about amongst the willfully unaware *jedi*, knowing that not a word they said would ever be taken seriously.

This was a man who had all but seen the future and found it positively delightful.

“Well, so long as you are kind enough to let us know,” Lee said slowly, but without any faith that the man would whenever that inevitable moment came.

“That said, on a completely different note, we’ve been talking to the *jedi* about the crystals in *lightsabers*,” Lee continued, “Now, we talked to the *jedi* and they told us that that, above all other things, was completely taboo. And yet, Obito and I remembered that your apprentice had had a blade of his own, so, clearly, you have some sort of in.”

The man seemed even more amused by that, as if Lee had made some unwitting pun, “Still talking about my spies among the order? I assure you, even if I had the ability that would give them far too much information. More, a certain statement would be lost.”

“Statement?” Obito questioned and the man nodded.

“*Lightsabers* have been lost before along with the precious crystals inside of them. If I truly wanted a blade, if Darth Maul had wanted such a blade, it could be found without venturing into the *jedi*’s sacred caverns. However, the sith choose to create our own crystals synthetically, which gives them that red hue. The red *lightsaber* is a statement of irrevocable separation from the light side of the *force*, of falling into the dark, and of all the old wars that *jedi* have forgotten.”

The man swirled his wine in hand, watching as the light caught inside of it, painting it red and black, “Red is not simply blood, to a *jedi*, not death, but it is instead fear, dread, hatred, attachment, passion, all those roads which they dare not tread upon but always exist within themselves however they try to chant them away. When you see the reflection of the red *lightsaber* in their eyes, you can see how they realize they are not simply facing their end, but their inevitable corruption.”
He then smiled at them, that warm expression so at odds with the killing intent that even now intensified in anticipation, “Needless to say, if you wish to trade or negotiate, I can see that your people are given the synthetic crystals.”

“We’ll think about it,” Lee said shortly, to which she undoubtedly meant no, and yet the man still smiled.

Perhaps even now imagining Eru Lee, Uchiha Obito, or perhaps even Tobirama himself wielding his red blades under his own command as his mindless machines of death and destruction. Danzo, Tobirama thought, would undoubtedly had thought the same thing.

When they left the senate it was dark, the city aglow with neon and fluorescent light while the sky was a cold, flat, and starless black. Tobirama, standing on the steps, stated, “We cannot trust him, if it all possible, and perhaps even in the event of the impossible, we must negotiate with the jedi.”

Lee and Obito said nothing to this, unsaid being the idea that the jedi had their own ideas, and that this man could play them as easily as a fiddle. Lee, he thought, had already given up on this place, and had contented herself to extending a hand to Jinn Qui-Gon, Kenobi Obi-Wan, and Skywalker Anakin.

But that was why Tobirama was here, why they had brought him, because this could fall on his shoulders. Perhaps Hashirama’s shoulders if it was needed, and if worst came to worst, then they could simply leave and never look back.

They walked through the city, jumping on platforms and making their way to the luxury hotel that waited, and as they reached its gilded entrance Tobirama asked, “And you are still set on leaving?”

“We should see Naboo again, check on the progress of the embassy,” Lee noted, “Not to mention see Corellia, which is where many ships are built, and pilots trained. Neither are too far.”

Yes, only a week, two weeks, at most they had said. Still, Tobirama didn’t like it, he would be fine, they would be fine, but after meeting this man in the flesh he was more on edge than he would have liked and could feel the chakra at the edge of the fuinjutsu trap closing in.

He also wasn’t thrilled at the idea of sending Lee and Obito off unsupervised, he thought darkly to himself as they climbed into the elevator. That, clearly, was just a recipe for disaster. Still, it was unavoidable, it was either now or later and though they were both ridiculous they were shinobi and
worthy of their ranks when it suited them.

Besides, if there was one good thing to come of this he thought to himself, it was that the jedi would undoubtedly send some wet blanket third wheel to tag along.

Foreign overly cheerful music, featuring some stringed instrument, a drum, and a man’s voice played over the speakers in a language that Obi-Wan could not even begin to parse.

“Hey, what’s the matter with your head, yeah? Hey, what’s the matter with your mind and your sign and a, oh oh oha?”

Obi-Wan, had been, sooner than he could have ever expected, embarking upon his trials to become a jedi knight. The council clearly thought he was ready, Master Qui-Gon assured him he was more than ready, and so Obi-Wan had to have faith in himself.

Faith in himself despite his strange seemingly simple task, as a mere guide and glorified chauffer and pilot, and yet he could not think of any task that could be harder.

“Hey, nothing the matter with your head, baby, find it, come on and find it. Hey, with it baby cause you're fine, and you're mine, and you look so divine.”

Because it was not anyone that Obi-Wan was escorting, not even a queen, but instead a pair stranger, more dangerous, and altogether more dubious than perhaps anything in the galaxy. A pair that Obi-Wan was to keep an eye on and report on while giving them the illusion of wandering the galaxy unfettered, keeping them alive and out of danger and keeping them from imploding stars or conquering planets.

Namely, for his trials, Obi-Wan had been given nothing less than the task of guarding and guarding the galaxy from Lee Eru and her apprentice Obito Uchiha.

“Come and get your love. Come and get your love. Come and get your love. Come and get your love.”
The pair now, in the beaten-up cockpit of the beaten up thirdhand ship they had picked up from a local Coruscant dealer with the winnings from Lee’s many fights in Tatooine’s gladiator arenas, were blasting Lee’s chosen music in the cockpit, laughing and impressing each other with truly terrible dancing.

“Hey what’s the matter with you, feel right, don’t you feel right, baby? Hey, oh yeah, get it from the main vine, alright,” Obito hopped from one foot to the next, pulling the smiling and laughing Lee into his arms, spinning her, and dipping her so low that she almost touched the floor even while she grinned in delight.

And it was like they couldn’t even remember that Obi-Wan was here, sitting in the cockpit, more than ready to leave and set course for Corellia already. Or that they had bought a ship, not a discotheque.

They stepped in time, suddenly remembering how to dance in a more traditional if foreign manner, skirting across the small bridge of the ship and then back into the cockpit, the dials and buttons glowing down on them like colored spotlights, “I said a find it, find it, go on and love it if you like it, yeah. Hey, it’s your business if you want some take some, get it together, baby.”

“Come and get your love. Come and get your love. Come and get your love. Come and get your love.”

Then the chorus started once again and Obi-Wan felt as if this song might very well go on forever. More, looking at the decorations they had already managed to put up, as well as the music they had brought with them, Obi-Wan had the distinct feeling that this was only the beginning.

And that, this, in fact, might be what hell itself was like.

Finally, he turned off the damn radio, halting the pair in their tracks, and as they stopped and turned towards him he gave a sigh of relief. Honestly, he was starting to feel like something of a third wheel.

“Well, if you’re done now, Correllia I think should be our first stop, it is closer than Naboo and should take a day maybe a day and a half at most depending on port traffic.”

Lee sat in the copilot seat with a huff, Obito hovering over her leather chair, “Sounds fine by me, Kenobi.”
Obi-Wan meanwhile looked over the ship, it was… Jedi did not accustom themselves to luxury, but in some cases, they were more than willing to shell out necessary funds. Lightsabers, ships, speeders, these were kept in top condition. And here Lee and Obito looked as if they had purchased the cheapest ship they could find.

Obi-Wan released his anxiety into the force, touching the machine and reaching out, willing it to fly and fly without issues that would leave them stranded in deep space. Leave Obi-Wan stranded in deep space with these two.

He then began moving forward, setting on the ignition, the blaster shields, the comms and reporting their departure, and readying for takeoff.

“I can’t believe this is your jonin exam equivalent,” Lee said, staring at Obi-Wan’s face as if something about it was truly fascinating, “Do you have any idea what we have to go through for ours?”

“To be fair, shishou, he is babysitting us.”

“Oh, come on,” Lee turned exasperated back towards her apprentice, “They don’t expect stars to explode, do they?”

“Oh, of course not,” Obito said with heavy sarcasm, a grin on his lips, “It’s not as if we have some sort of precedent for things going terribly wrong.”

“I resent that,” Lee said, though clearly not, the look on her face was anything but resentful.

“Lee, please, there is a copilot’s chair for a reason,” Obi-Wan said, motioning to her side of the ship, which she had not even begun to prep for takeoff.

“Oh, right, buttons,” Lee said, turning back to her own console with wide eyes as buttons flashed and dials began to whir, “Right… I…”

“What is it?” Obi-Wan asked, going through the last steps he needed to before he had to wait for Lee to hurry up already.
“I…” Lee looked at him, a blank look on her face, and then seemed to come to a decision, “I will figure out how to fly this thing.”

Obi-Wan stopped, looked at her, blinked then realized what she had just said, “Wait, what?”

Lee’s hand hovered over the ejection button, now flashing a bright red, “This looks important and necessary.”

Obi-Wan snatched her hand away, moved over to her seat, and desperately began fulfilling his own copilot’s functions, “Are you telling me you do not know how to fly the ship?!”

“I figured that I would, quote unquote, use the force,” Lee said, oh so casually, as if she had any idea at all how the force truly worked!

“That is not how the force works!” Obi-Wan said, “And are you really saying that you have no idea, none, on how to fly this?’”

“Kenobi,” Lee said with a long-suffering sigh and a dull almost reproachful look, “I can teleport, why the hell would I need to drive?”

That was… That was an alarmingly good point, more, it made it very odd that they had bought a ship and intended to fly it at all. Lee and Obito could go wherever they wish and leave Obi-Wan in the dust. Had this, in and of itself been some concession to the jedi? And if so, how was Obi-Wan ever to keep up with them if they truly intended on disappearing and causing mayhem?

“Nonetheless,” he forced himself to say, closing his eyes and not thinking about the futility of his mission before it even truly began, “You will learn, we will take the long way and you and your apprentice will learn, or force help me I will…”

“You’ll what?” Obito asked, dark brows raised and the unscarred portion of his brow wrinkling to match the other, “I thought your whole philosophy was on not acting in anger.”

“I will have to meditate far more than any jedi should,” Obi-Wan finished rather lamely, but unfortunately Obito was right, those were the only tools at his disposal.
Still, they had time he thought as they took off, Lee copying his actions and taking his directions as needed, they had miles and miles to go and all the universe before them. And somehow, in some impossible way, Obi-Wan would survive this, triumph, and become a jedi knight.

Anakin, alone, in the room was twitching and unable to concentrate. Everyone, everyone younger than him, and even Tobirama Senju who was way older, were sitting perfectly still with their eyes closed in meditation. Everyone except Anakin, who was stiff and awkward and could even now hear the rushing of the force like a river in his ears.

He opened his eyes and mouth, wanting to talk, then closed them as he realized that at this rate he was just falling further behind. Anakin, even a week in, was a terrible jedi.

“Anakin.”

Anakin startled and looked up, catching the instructor looking down at him with a small frown and something that was almost pitying, “Anakin, there is much fear I sense in you.”

Anakin, remembering the council’s words, flushed in shame and nodded, “I… I’m trying not to be afraid.”

“You’re hesitating, so afraid of yourself that you will become that which you fear.”

“I’m not, that’s not…” Anakin trailed off, more than certain they wouldn’t understand, that he’d just keep standing over Anakin until he shut up and did it already. Let himself go and make nice with the force and hope that it wouldn’t eat him or something.

None of the other initiates had this problem, Anakin thought, they all seemed to get along fine without any issues at all. No, it was only Anakin that was pulled along for what Obito might call “a bad trip”.

Still, he shifted, flushing, waited for the instructor to drift away again and then closed his eyes, maybe it really was now or never. Or, maybe he was just letting his fear control him again even if fear was at least a part of Anakin that he knew belonged to himself. But fear hadn’t brought him
anywhere good, and both Lee and Qui-Gon had always cautioned against it.

Anakin closed his eyes, letting himself go, drift down down down through the stone floor and the jedi temple and down past everything. His awareness shifted, grew larger, moving far beyond the temple or even Coruscant and out towards all the worlds and the stars.

Somewhere, in the great void, a small ship floated like a tin can between worlds, two shinobi and a jedi inside. For now, the jedi was laughing but trying to look as if he was anything but amused, the scarred boy was grinning again, and Lee, Lee was smiling and laughing as well as she finally got around to teaching Obi-Wan Kenobi poker.

In a day’s standard time they would be on Corellia, they would stay there for two days, Obi-Wan haplessly pulled along as the pair caused minor mayhem or else flickered out of sight entirely, and if Anakin left now there would be a ship he could steal in a back lot half the planet away and…

Anakin breathed, forced his inner eyes open and his mind screamed, “No!”

Just like before it stopped, a great river in the form of a dragon encircling all the worlds, and it turned to regard with him with eyes that burned with all the stars and all their cruel light.

Beneath it, Anakin felt so terribly small, so fragile, but he stared up at it and screamed, “I am not a slave! I have never been anyone’s slave and I never will be.”

Not truly, not really, even if Watto owned a certificate with Anakin’s name on it, that did not make Anakin a slave. He motioned to himself, to his human heart, and cried out, “I have my own mind, my own body, my own life, and I don’t want Lee!”

And then suddenly they were on Tatooine, in the great desert where Anakin and the rest had waited while Lee, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan had scoured the ruins of Mos Espa for the queen’s ship. The winds buffeted sand around them, stinging Anakin’s eyes and skin, and standing across from him, dressed in the clothes of a native of Mos Espa, coarse grey and beige clothing, was the illusion of Minato Namikaze.

And his eyes, a pale blue, were just the same as the dragon’s had been.

“All men, all beings,” he said, his voice at once so ordinary and yet only giving the illusion of
something ordinary and human, “Anakin Skywalker, are slaves to fate and the force.”

Then, pointing a pale half-gloved hand at Anakin’s chest, he offered an amused if cruel smile, and added, “And it’s dangerous, Anakin Skywalker, not to know your place in the world.”

“What does that mean!?” Anakin asked, stepping forward, feeling the hot sand crunching beneath his feet just as if they were in the real desert on the real Tatooine. The man smiled, and in it was a thousand desert storms and a thousand blazing suns, and Anakin thought that even looking at this forged shell, little more than a shadow clone, he could glimpse the real face the force wore underneath it.

And he wanted to cower as it looked at him, really looked at him, as if it had never before spent so much time looking at the speck of dust called Anakin Skywalker.

“What do you mean my place in the world?” Anakin asked, forcing himself to step closer again even when all he wanted to do was run, run further than he had ever run before even if it meant running straight to Lee and straight where the force wanted him to go.

“You were a wish,” the man said, but it wasn’t a kind expression he wore on his face (for all that his face, prettier than many of the faces on Tatooine) seemed one predisposed to kindness, “A failed experiment, a prodigal son, and a central thread in the great tapestry of the galaxy.”

Anakin shook his head bitterly, this time stepping back, unwilling to see or even think of what that could possibly mean, “I’m Anakin Skywalker, and I’m not a slave.”

The man smiled then, as if he thought this was cute, and said cryptically, “There are only so many paths, Anakin Skywalker, and even if you choose the one you think is less travelled it is still a path carved out before you. You cannot run from what you are, and you do not possess the capacity to try.”

“Oh yeah?” Anakin asked, feeling himself burn beneath the suns, and something inside his soul bitterly burning with them, “Well that doesn’t mean I’ll go running to Lee either!”

“Lee does not exist on any path that I created,” the man quietly agreed, and something in him shifted then, stared out longingly into the horizon and then past the atmosphere and to the stars, where the small beaten ship sailed through the stars, “She is not from my world, is outside of my control, and if I wish to reach her at all I have to…”
The image faded, the stars withdrew, and the man looked down coldly once again at Anakin, “I need a pair of hands, and there are none more suitable than yours, Anakin Skywalker.”

Anakin stepped backwards, clutching his hands to his chest as if to deny them to the thing that wore Minato’s face, and said, “Well I’m using them, get your own pair.”

“It is not that simple,” the man said, stepping forward and looking almost put upon as his shadow extended to overtake Anakin, “I have tried and failed once already.”

His hand reached out towards Anakin, blocking out the twin suns, his fingers growing transparent as if to reach into Anakin and remove him from his own body.

“Try harder!” Anakin said, scrambling backwards and falling back onto the burning sand, sand that now burned far hotter than it ever had on Tatooine, “You’re doing it now, aren’t you? The world’s yours, isn’t it? So build your own and leave me alone!”

The hand stopped, retreated, and Minato Namikaze looked human once again as he stared down at Anakin in shock and awe, as if struck by an idea he had never considered. Then, all at once, he and Tatooine disappeared and Anakin was falling flat on his face onto a floor mat in the jedi temple laughing hysterically, tears pouring out of his eyes as he tasted not only the air but freedom and victory as Tobirama Senju helped lift Anakin off the floor and took him into his arms.

And he knew, that in the depths of space, in some unnoticed corner of the cockpit, where even now Lee and Obito were spending their first late night at the controls while Obi-Wan meditated and slept in a corner, a solid illusion of a man, a shadow clone, wearing Minato Namikaze’s face appeared out of nothing but the breath and chakra of the universe.
“Look at you Minato, you flakey blonde beautiful princess,” Uzumaki Kushina greeted the four of them with her trademark bright and jagged grin, “All grown up and with your own adorable tadpoles, the pervert sage must be proud.”

Minato, twenty then, flushed and rubbed at the back of his head with embarrassment as the newly designated team seven passed by Kushina and Minato’s favorite haunt, and the soon to be go to meeting place for the team seven, Ichiraku’s village-famous ramen stand.

Obito, for his own part, ten and just graduated dead last from the academy, placed on a team with the beautiful Rin and the strange idiot sage Hatake Kakashi, flushed with embarrassment and bristled across at Kushina. Of course, Obito hardly knew it at the time, but this only served to delight Kushina further.

“Kushina, please, you know Kakashi’s been my apprentice for ages now,” Minato said, earning something of a side-eyed glance from Kakashi, who really had been Minato’s chunin apprentice for an age and a half, but whatever comment Kakashi might have made was instead shown only through the slight rolling of his eyes as Kushina jumped from her stool to lunge forward and squeeze Minato’s flushing cheeks like he was a little boy.

“Oh, Mina, you’re so cute when you pretend you have authority,” Kushina said, her smile growing three times as impossibly large while Rin and Obito just watched this interaction with a sort of fascinated horror.

Well, Obito also with some indignant embarrassment, as the bell test had only been that morning and whatever ego he did have had been grinded into dust by Minato-sensei. Worse was Minato-sensei’s declaration at the end that they had simply not failed the bell test, but they hadn’t passed it either.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Obito had asked, wiping dirt off his face as he glared balefully at Minato-sensei, his stomach still growling from the lack of breakfast and half a lunch that Rin had sympathetically shared with him (Obito had decided to pass on Kakashi’s horrific lunch of mysterious protein bar).

Minato-sensei looked at them with this cheerful, oddly polite, smile and simply said, “Why, to pass the bell test, Obito, you have to get the bells.”
And now this same man who had destroyed Hatake Kakashi, chunin by the age of six, with ease was now being absolutely manhandled without any shame whatsoever by this overly loud red-headed woman.

“I have the same authority you have!” Minato-sensei said, now looking at least slightly irritated as Kushina proceeded to squeeze the life out of him in a bear hug, “Actually, I have more authority than you have, I have students!”

“That’s nice, Mina,” Kushina said, hands beginning to wander, much to Minato-sensei’s complete mortification given that they were standing right in front of his students, “But I’ve been busy doing real things like kicking ass and taking names. So, I think I win, no matter how many adorable children you collect.”

“Kushina,” Minato said, now a slight undertone of tension and anger to his words, “Please take your hands off my ass.”

Kushina backed up, but not before slapping him on said ass rather loudly and with a cheeky grin, “Shame, it’s such a fine ass.”

At Minato’s utter mortification and humiliated anger, she just laughed and returned to her seat and ramen, looking like she was having an utter blast. Obito, for his own part, ten and tiny and so very unfamiliar with the village’s jonin, desperately wanted to run home and never look back from these crazy people.

Minato sighed, brushed himself off and tried to pretend he hadn’t just lost all of his dignity in front of his new students, giving the woman a rather reproachful look, “Must you embarrass me in public, Kushina?”

“Always,” she said without even the slightest hint of regret, “Your ego gets entirely too large otherwise, my adorable rival, and Lee’s such a damn yes-man that she’ll never smack you down when your head inflates.”

“Why do I date you?” Minato asked, rather dully and flatly, as if he truly meant the question. Except at this point even Obito, who was so very new to this dynamic, could tell that this was a tried and true routine between the pair of them, just a part of the dialogue that was said the way some people said hello and asked about your health and the weather.
“Because you’ve got a thing for red-heads with a strong personality and a whole lot of firepower who could kick your ass to Iwa and back again,” Kushina answered, as if she’d given the answer a thousand times before and would give it a thousand times again, and at the way they smiled at each other Obito knew there were a thousand other words they might say in this moment that didn’t need to be said at all.

They suited each other, even then Obito thought it, though the idea wouldn’t really cement until later and he’d gotten used to, well, Uzumaki Kushina. They were not quite opposites, but certainly close enough to it to fill in each other’s gaps, solidify the strengths, and nullify the weaknesses. Kushina was the strong, burning, passion and confidence while Minato was something cooler and more temperate though no less powerful or impressive for it.

At the time, even with his face burning and turning to look at Rin to see if she was seeing the weird shit he was or if even Kakashi was, he’d thought that he could see exactly why they had gravitated towards one another.

Then, of course, came the first time Obito met Eru Lee in person.

“Holy shit,” Kushina breathed in wonder, spark entering her violent eyes as she stood, waving across the street to where another, taller, red-headed woman was walking by, “Speak of the devil and she appears from the wastelands of Kusa!”

The first thing Obito thought, was that they didn’t really look alike, Kushina and Lee. The reds were different colors, Lee’s lighter and more golden whereas Kushina’s was that darker vibrant red, their faces though both pale were such different shapes from one another. They didn’t look related at all, but if you were to take their surface features, the red hair, the skin, maybe even the way they walked, and described them with that alone they would sound like they were twins.

“Hey, Lee!” Kushina called over, the woman stopped, glanced over at them blinking, raised a small pale hand in greeting.

“Minato, you didn’t tell me Lee was back,” Kushina chided, stepping up to whack him across the back of his head. Minato however barely seemed to notice, his eyes instead distant as he looked across the approaching woman, his voice small as he said, “I didn’t know either…”

Rin at this point was a petrified mess, standing in place and breathing shallowly as she realized exactly who was approaching them, feminist idol, ninjutsu and genjutsu master, and S-ranked kunoichi Eru Lee.
“Hey, Lee, look at you in Konoha for the first time in forever,” Kushina said, pulling the stiff and awkward Lee into a bear hug even tighter than the one Minato had been trapped in, “You just get in?”

Lee pulled back, nodding, looking as worn around the edges as many of Obito’s older cousins did when they returned from the front, like her mind was still out there in the field somewhere and had to travel many miles to be present with her body.

(Except later, years later, looking back on this moment Obito would think that perhaps Lee was lying. That perhaps Lee had gotten in hours before or even the night before and had simply let them believe what they wished. After all, by that point, Lee and Minato hadn’t been living in the same apartment for years.)

“Did you hear?” Kushina said, motioning to Minato, “Minato’s got himself two brand new students, a real genin team.”

Lee looked down at them, met Kakashi’s eyes for a longer moment, a smile on her lips, but that then faded as she looked down at the star-struck Rin and then finally to Obito himself. Her eyes met his only for a moment, nothing truly interested in them, and yet he couldn’t help but stiffen under that bright and unnatural green.

Finally, she turned back to Minato, and it was as if some wall within her shattered (no, as if a familiar mask slipped on into place) and she reached across and hugged him, arms circling around his shoulders and waiting as his arms slipped around her back as well, “Congratulations, Minato.”

He smiled, and even then, even that first afternoon with the three of them Obito had stared at Minato’s face, at that soft, tender, smile as his fingers curled into red ringlets, and he’d felt the seeds confusion planted inside him.

“Thank you, Lee,” he said, and his smile grew as he released her and pulled back, hands still lingering on her shoulders, fingers buried in her loose hair, “Still, I think the congratulations should go to them.”

“They passed sensei’s bell test?” Lee asked, looking distantly surprised and rather impressed.

Minato laughed, a cheerful bright thing, as he shook his head and with a wry and sly smile said,
“They didn’t fail.”

“Hey, you said we worked together and that’s the real point!” Obito finally said, shouting for everyone and their neighbor to hear while Rin looked over at him in mortification for embarrassing them in front of Eru Lee of all people and Kakashi just looked over with raised eyebrows.

Lee looked down at him, red eyebrows lifting ever so slightly as she considered Uchiha Obito, self-proclaimed future hokage of the village, and she said, without any shame at all, “The point, oh terribly young and naïve genin student of my friend, is to get the bells.”

Obito’s jaw nearly dropped to the street, watching as Lee gave a rather self-satisfied smile to the now chortling Kushina and the amused Minato, offering them a small waive and half-salute as she began to saunter down the street with all of the confidence that only an S-ranked shinobi can truly have, “With that, I think I will leave you to your victory lunch. Congratulations, Minato, Kashi, and new students.”

“Hey, come on Lee, you won’t intimidate them that much!” Kushina called after her, looking fairly upset at the prospect of Lee leaving them in the dust like this, “I promise, the entertainment will be worth their broken spirits!”

Lee did not even look back, just kept walking towards the center of the village as if there was nowhere else in the world she had to be.

“They have names, Lee!” Minato called after her retreating figure, darting out into the street and shouting over the various conversations going on in the ramen stand itself as well as the street around it, “Nohara Rin and Uchiha Obito, use them next time!”

She didn’t say anything, didn’t even acknowledge that she heard it, but the next time she did run into team seven, she did call Obito by his name. Of course, like most things at the time, Obito hadn’t realized how much she should have appreciated that gesture.

Or, how much this one moment, this casual, first, unimportant meeting, could so easily represent the strange, elaborate, and heartbreaking circles that Namikaze Minato, Eru Lee, and Uzumaki Kushina could all dance around each other.

But he was young then, and even though he had both eyes at the time, both belonged to Uchiha Obito, neither had the sharingan yet, and both had already been committed to the image of Nohara
Rin.

He might as well have had no eyes at all.

“My real question, shishou,” Obito said as he bit back a yawn, staring down at the flashing control panel as well as the great expanse of space awaiting them from outside the cockpit, “Is how the hell does Anakin know how to fly these things when he’s never touched one before?”

And how space did stretch, endlessly into the horizon past where even the sharingan could see. They were taking the long way to Corellia, according to their friendly jedi guide Kenobi, if only so that Obito and Lee had to sit down and learn how to fly a goddamn space ship. As a result, the trip that should have taken a day, likely half a day, was now going to stretch on to two as he and Lee sat each with a flight manual in hand.

“I’m sure he uses the force or something,” Lee said, head in her hand, not even looking at anything anymore but instead looking as if she’d like nothing better than to drift off right here and there. Probably would have if Kenobi hadn’t taken that option out of their hands by disappearing to go meditate or sleep or do something that, with anything but an emergency, forced Obito and Lee to be on the bridge.

Well, forced one of them to be on the bridge. With a sigh he looked at her again, looked at the way her hair was falling out of her braid, the way her skin seemed even paler than usual, and her eyes only ever half open, “Lee, I can handle this, you should sleep.”

Lee sighed and gave a small laugh, moving her hand away from her face and repositioning herself, “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” Obito said before shrugging as if he had this all handled, “And besides, I have magic eyes and an eidetic memory to go with them, learning this will be nothing.”

“That if you use too often causes blindness,” Lee retorted with a shake of her head and a wry smile, “Besides, it wouldn’t be much rest anyway. No, I’d much rather sit in here with you, staring out at the infinite cosmos while we try to figure out how to fly this damn thing…”

Obito wanted to argue with that but Lee, for all that she looked like she might drift off any minute,
also looked as if she wasn’t leaving anytime soon. Still, watching her, as her head drifted to the side and her eyes fluttered shut, he wondered if she wouldn’t compromise and end up sleeping in the co-pilot’s seat.

With a sigh he stood, looking out at the dark vacuum of space, for now devoid of any large asteroids or moons or chunks of rock that needed anything other than autopilot, and then retreated into the main hold of the ship where all their supplies were stored. There, only glancing at the meditating and or sleeping Kenobi sitting cross legged in a booth, he rummaged through his own pack until he found one of the thicker dark jackets he’d shoved in there after their last pitstop in Konoha.

He returned to the cockpit, throwing the jacket over Lee so that everything below the neck was covered, and spent a moment just watching and letting his eyes linger on the curve of her face and her slightly tilted neck. He curled a piece of her hair, still so red and so bright even in the dark, around his finger and smiled at the sight of it burning against his skin.

Then, with a sigh, he turned back to his own seat and the abandoned flight manual, gearing himself up to learn all about the exciting world of engines, accelerometers, gravity suspenders, and more all written in lovely Basic.

Or at least, that was the plan, but he stopped before he was even halfway to the chair, hands instinctively moving together for a jutsu, legs into a more stable stance, words halfway out of his mouth along with hand seals until he stopped in horror and confusion as it wasn’t simply a stranger out of nothing, out of the void, sitting in his chair but Namikaze Minato looking across at him with a fond and familiar smile.

“Sensei!” Obito cried out, fingers twitching, eyes wide, but then moved into action as his sharingan flickered on, illuminating the dark cockpit in waves of chakra and light even as, half out of this dimension and into some other, he moved towards this thing that wasn’t Minato-sensei at all.

It wasn’t genjutsu, it wasn’t a henge either, Obito might not be much of a sensor on his own but the sharingan came with a lot of benefits and seeing through those easier than most were just two of them but…

“Shadow clone,” Lee said her hand falling on Obito’s, suddenly alert and standing next to him, looking across at the shadow clone of Minato-sensei with dark, serious eyes, “So, you’ve finally decided to show your face in the real world.”

Minato-sensei smiled, and it was sensei’s smile, that cheerful, slight, ever so polite and pleased
smile that he had given out so often to Obito. Every detail of it was perfect, so that Obito would almost think it was sensei, not even just an imposter’s clone, except that sensei couldn’t possibly be here. But, with that same thought, in the middle of a great black void, neither could anyone else.

Obito’s sharingan kept burning, spinning, with a power far beyond even an ordinary fully developed sharingan, and yet Minato-sensei did not flicker back into particles of light, dust, and chakra.

“Lee,” Minato said, and god it was not just his voice but even the inflections, that strange undertone that ran underneath the underneath of his words every time he caught sight of Eru Lee, “I am glad to see you.”

He moved towards her, walking with Minato’s legs and feet and wrapping her into his arms with Minato’s hands, Minato’s pale, bright, blue eyes closing shut as he almost nuzzled against her face, ignoring the way that Lee’s arms fell uselessly and limply to her sides or how her eyes burned in the dim lighting.

He then turned to Obito, still smiling, and drew him in for a hug as well, performing nearly the same actions, the eerie closeness, his pale smooth face against Obito’s rough and scarred cheek and goddammit he’d even gotten the smell. All Obito could think as he stiffened was that the bastard had even gotten the smell right.

Obito moved his hand upwards against Minato’s clothing, strange foreign clothing that was far more at home on Tatooine than Konoha, willing chakra to his fingertips, to act as a knife as he moved his hand through Minato-sensei’s heart and out through his back but Lee, across from him, with that weary and stony look just shook her head.

“Wait,” she whispered, the memory of this strange, tense, fearful moment now engraved forever in Obito’s mind via the sharingan just as Lee’s death would forever be etched out on the inside of his eyelids.

Then, tilting her head towards the false Minato-sensei she said, “It’s considered quite rude among the mortal peons to not introduce yourself.”

At that Minato-sensei stepped back, released Obito and gave Lee a puzzled, almost hurt look as if he couldn’t quite parse what she was saying. He then glanced over at Obito, that hurt looking a little more severe, as if Minato had just been stabbed in the stomach and only now was glancing down to the knife wound, and looking at Obito, hesitant pale hand stroking the corner of Obito’s face he said, “I’ve… concerned you.”
Obito darted backwards, far faster than civilian speeds would allow, so that he was standing next to Lee. Lee, herself, didn’t move an inch, as she instead explained, “Obito doesn’t do well with strangers.”

No, no he didn’t, he thought to himself as his heart pounded in his chest and the drums of war and battle in his head as his chakra and adrenaline almost demanded he cut this thing down already, not since Madara.

“Obito…” the man said slowly, and here, here his alien nature showed. He tilted Minato’s head so that it was almost bird like, looked over at Obito, eyes moving up and down and taking in all of him, until finally with a slow and partially understanding nod he said, “You call this fragment Obito then.”

Lee didn’t answer, just waited, watched as Minato-sensei bowed towards Obito, towards Lee, almost as if in apology, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize I’d be so unexpected, but I didn’t want to wait until you landed in Corellia.”

Obito, taking in the man’s harmless (but when was Minato-sensei ever really harmless) position as well as Lee’s relaxed posture, and allowed his sharingan to flicker out into the familiar dull and safer black, “Shishou, who the hell is this?”

“I’ve told you about him before, that he likes to wear Minato’s face,” Lee said, nodding towards their strange new companion, but her eyes always on Obito’s something unsaid and dangerous prowling within the forests of her irises, “This is a shadow clone of my new friend, the force.”

“The…” Obito trailed off, looked across at the man, the clone, cheerfully smiling at them both now that Obito’s tension had faded into disbelief, then back to Lee, “The force?!”

Obito motioned to Minato-sensei, to his beige, desert clothing, to his familiar smile and bright blue eyes, “This is the force?!”

“The one and only,” Lee said with a sigh, now looking slightly put out, as if this whole encounter was just solidifying this conclusion, as well as fueling her own irritation.

Granted, Obito wasn’t an expert on shadow clones or anything, or avatars of great vats of chakra, but it didn’t… It didn’t feel like enough. It just felt like, well, the amount of chakra you’d put into a
goddamn shadow clone! There wasn’t the overwhelming presence of Lee or Kushina or even Anakin inside of that thing.

“Clone, Obito,” Lee insisted, as if something about this distinction was very important, should trigger some thought or conclusion inside Obito’s head, “It’s not a body.”

“No,” Minato echoed, looking down at his hands, Minato’s hands in the light of the stars and the dials and buttons of the cockpit with an almost resigned and bittersweet look on his face, the kind of look that Minato-sensei would sometimes give to Lee, “No, it is not a true avatar. Only a small shadow I can cast on the world, not even a prophet…”

He then looked over at Obito and smiled brightly, Minato’s truly delighted smile that he spared for Naruto, for Kushina, for his students, and for Lee, “But it is more than I have ever had before. Thanks to you, of course, I had… never realized I could shape myself this way before you.”

“Wait, what?” Obito asked, rubbing at his forehead and feeling dreadfully confused and now more exhausted than he had felt even that morning.

“He’s saying he picked up shadow clones from us,” Lee said, now crossing her arms and tilting her head to look at Minato’s clone, “From you on Tatooine.”

“But I never taught…” Obito said, but by the look on Lee’s face, on Minato’s face, teaching had never been necessary, merely creating the shadow clone had somehow been enough for the man, no, the force, to emulate just as he had picked up Obito’s native tongue…

“Yes,” Minato said, a distant and wonderous expression on his face, almost rapturous as he looked at them, “I’ve learned so many things since you arrived in my wastelands.”

What else had he learned, Obito couldn’t help but wonder in sudden, chilling fear and apprehension. What else had they unintentionally given… Given the sentient chakra that permeated the universe itself?

Lee’s hand fell on his, stroking against his skin, warm and reassuring as she gave him a small smile. And in her eyes were the words not to worry, that it can’t be helped, what’s done is done and this was something none of them could predict or even prevent.
And that it would be alright, no matter what Obito feared, what fear he couldn’t even name, it would be alright.

Minato walked towards him, slowly, as he might a wounded animal caught in trap, and then equally slowly placed his hands on Obito’s shoulders before moving them up to cup his face once again, tilting Obito’s head so that he was staring into the depths of Minato’s eyes.

Only, only now he could see up close that they weren’t Minato-sensei’s eyes, they were the right color, the right shade, but they were the wrong depth. There was something beneath these eyes that Minato didn’t have, a great expanse of oceans, deserts, rivers, and light that didn’t belong in human eyes.

“Do not be afraid,” he said with a smile, fingers tracing the sides of Obito’s face (the scarred and the smooth) the way Minato-sensei’s might trace Kushina’s, as he said, “I was afraid, but only because I didn’t know you, couldn’t recognize you… But I am not afraid anymore and I would never hurt you. All of my worlds, all of my suns and my stars, they are yours, Lee.”

“Shishou,” Obito said, voice edged with a slight trace of panic, “Why is he touching me?”

Lee moved to carefully pry Minato’s fingers from Obito’s face, placing them into her own with a strangely soft and sympathetic smile, shaking her head, “Obito also doesn’t do well with unexpected touching.”

Obito nearly balked, he’d like to see someone who did, but the force seemed to need those words as he slowly nodded, storing that information somewhere inside… No, not inside the clone, inside whatever the hell it was that existed outside of this clone.

This was only a puppet, artfully manipulated, with a grace and elegance that made it almost seem human, but a puppet of chakra nonetheless.

“So, you’re here then,” Lee said, clearly waiting for Minato-sensei, no, the force to explain.

The man nodded, his smile returning but this time with a somewhat wry twist to it, his hands still in Lee’s, “I was always here, Lee, I am in everything.”

“You know what I mean,” Lee said meaningfully, squeezing his hands to give him a hint.
His mouth made an oh, his eyes widening in realization, and then the smile was as bright as one of Naruto’s instead of his father’s, “Yes, yes I’m here! I had thought… But no, this is enough for now, will be enough for now.”

“So, you mean you’re coming with us, dressed like this, in Namikaze Minato’s skin?” Obito asked, his eyebrows raising against his will as he took in Minato-sensei in all his strange Tatooine garbed glory, “To Corellia and Naboo?”

“Of course,” he said, as if there was no question that he could appear out of the vacuum and impose on Lee and Obito’s road trip to the stars, and Obito suddenly wanted nothing more than to slap this man wearing sensei’s face in the teeth.

And Obito decided, though he had put up with quite a lot of ridiculous bullshit in his life, he could only handle so much of it at a time and he had officially hit his ridiculous bullshit limit for the day.

He threw his hands in the air with a laugh, tilting his head back and merely saying, “Wonderful, that’s just… Goddammit, I need some tea.”

Unfortunately, this just led to the force following him, making Minato-sensei edge like a nervous child behind him, “I really have offended you, haven’t I?”

Obito said nothing, dearly wanting to spit back that the universe itself was offending him, except that was the crux of the matter. The universe, dressed as his sensei, touching him and Lee and appearing out of a literal vacuum, was offending him.

“You haven’t offended him,” Lee said with a patience she did not truly deserve as she narrated what Obito was and wasn’t thinking, “Obito simply takes his time on some things more than others.”

Obito paid them no mind at all, suddenly all too aware that it was wearing Namikaze Minato’s face, of all possible faces, and that one sole fact grating on his mind more than it had any goddamn right to.

Something about Minato and Lee’s relationship had always, secretly, grated him but with his newfound honesty with himself and his feelings there was the knowledge that Minato-sensei had been there first, since the beginning, and had been more than Eru Lee’s Rin and probably still was.
And the deep growing fear that, maybe in choosing Minato’s face, the universe hadn’t made a bad guess at all.

Lee moved in front of him, all cool, confident ease and restless power, summoning her usual four tea cups and kettle out of the nothingness she kept it in, walking over to Kenobi and with a sigh noting in Basic, “Kenobi, it’s time to wake up, we’ve got company and neither Obito nor I are in any shape to handle the bridge.”

Kenobi startled into alertness, bright blue eyes blinking once then twice as he tried to get his bearings back on the mortal plane once again, then widening as he caught sight of the force. He opened his mouth, closed it, looked over towards Lee and asked, “What is that supposed to be?”

Obito couldn’t help but laugh, at least, he thought, the jedi was clearly alarmed as well.

The thing wearing Minato-sensei’s face didn’t even seem to notice the words or pay attention to them, not even as if he was ignoring them, but as if they were so far beneath his notice that they simply had not registered.

So, it was left to Lee to answer with something of a grimace, “That depends on how much of an existential crisis you can handle while flying a ship.”

“What?” Kenobi asked, now giving her that look that he’d been giving Lee and Obito for the past day and a half, as if the shenanigans they put him through was not in his job description.

Lee just poured herself and Obito a cup, pushing it towards Obito even as his chuckling turned almost into helpless giggling, Kenobi’s unimpressed look just fueling it further while Minato-sensei was cocking his head again as if that would help him understand just what made Uchiha Obito tick.

“Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Lee said, motioning over to Minato-sensei, “Meet your maker.”

Kenobi blinked over at Minato-sensei, who was still choosing this moment to stare at Obito rather than look anywhere at Kenobi, just watching as Obito tried to drink his tea without choking on laughter at the same time.
Kenobi then looked back at Lee with a sigh, rubbing at his temples, as if he was going to go and blame this on Lee-shishou, “What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that the Lord your God, the thing you call the force, has decided to make a puppet out of chakra and shadows on this lowly plane of existence you call reality,” Lee said, motioning over towards the force, who, now looking towards Lee again like a lovesick puppy, was not living up to his name, “And he’s stopped by to join us on our quest.”

Kenobi at first laughed, a short almost amused thing, but on Lee’s seriousness he stopped laughing, looked instead towards Minato-sensei and disbelief then back again while he shook his head, “No, no, Lee, that’s not how the force works.”

“Well, it is now,” Obito said as he sighed and sat down in the seat, suddenly wanting nothing more than to close his eyes and sleep, pretend this was all some weird dream he was having.

“No,” Kenobi said, shaking his head with a smile, calming down now that the situation was proving itself to be ridiculous, “The force flows through all things, it guides certainly, and some might argue that it intervenes on occasion, but it does not dam itself into the shape of a human being or any other kind of sentient. I don’t know what this thing is, but I can tell you, whatever it says it is not the force.”

It, Obito did note how he used it, as if Kenobi Obi-Wan could easily tell that whatever this thing was it was hardly human if only by the shape of its chakra alone. Just as Jinn had so easily been able to tell that Obito’s shadow clone on Tatooine was not really a little boy.

Lee said nothing, merely raised her eyebrows across at Obito, took the seat next to him, and poured sipped at her tea as if Minato-sensei’s shadow’s pale eyes were not watching her every move.

Kenobi glanced at the thing again, this time with a bit more hesitation and irritation, “Now, my guess, is this is some monstrosity you’ve concocted, Master Eru. No one else would ever think of manipulating the force the way you and your apprentice do.”

“You’re right,” Lee said with a shrug, eyes cast down on her tea and her reflection in the liquid, “But old dogs can learn new tricks, and shadow clones are very useful.”

Obito watched as the force slid in next to Kenobi and across from Lee in the small table, paying no mind to Kenobi’s clear irritation and discomfort with the action, again only seeming to notice
Kenobi as much as he would a chair or a light fixture.

“It doesn’t bother you,” Obito asked Minato-sensei’s clone, now swirling his own tea with an idle look of curiosity on his face, “That your own jedi doesn’t believe you?”

Minato-sensei glanced up, looked, for the first time, over towards Kenobi, and then glanced back again as if a touched amused by Obito even having to ask the question, “The piece called Obi-Wan Kenobi? No, why would it?”

As if concerning himself over the thoughts of someone like Kenobi was not even a question.

Lee, however, seemed to grasp more of what he meant than Obito did as she said, with that tone she used when something strange and profound slipped past her lips, “Even if they’re only a part of you, only a piece, that doesn’t make their voices, concerns, or thoughts any less legitimate. Perhaps it should concern you, if your people can’t even recognize their god when they meet him face to face.”

And it clicked, Lee’s words from earlier, her words now, as well as Kenobi’s and Jinn’s. The force was in everything, moved through everything, the force did not concern himself over Kenobi Obi-Wan’s opinions because for all intents and purposes he was Kenobi just as he was everyone and everything else.

And Lee, Obito, and Tobirama were the only things that weren’t and never had been.

Even now, by the look that he wore on Minato-sensei’s face, he had no idea the point Lee was trying to make.

“But you know who I am,” Minato-sensei said, almost reverently to Lee, and with a soft, pleased, smile added, “Then that’s more than there ever has been before.”

“Whatever it is you two are doing,” Kenobi said with a sigh of irritation as he stood, as if he was so incredibly put upon by the two of them and their hijinks, “Someone should be on the bridge, and with me there we can make up for lost time. Do try to get rid of your new friend by the time we arrive in port.”

They watched as proud Kenobi, vaguely reminiscent of what Obito imagined a young Senju
Tobirama might have been like, walked towards the bridge and the cockpit as he washed his hands of Lee and Obito’s shenanigans.

Obito wondered how he would handle it when, at whatever late date it was, he’d be forced to handle the truth and just how he’d manage to do that when right now he could dismiss what was right in front of his face so very easily.

“If you don’t mind,” Obito said, closing his eyes and gratefully switching back to his mother tongue, “I’m a bit tired, and you’re very distracting. If you could give shishou and I some space for a few I would be very grateful.”

“Space?” Minato asked, almost bemused again, and so easily slipping back into Obito’s native tongue, “But I am in everything, even the vacuum between the stars, I can hardly give you space.”

“Then the illusion of space,” Obito said with an aggrieved sigh, “Please, if you have any respect for my boundaries or for shishou then… Then an illusion of space, for a few hours, is all I want.”

“An illusion of space,” the puppet Minato said, an odd look on his face, as if he was knowingly indulging and humoring Obito, “For a few hours, Lee, you can have your illusion.”

And with that Minato finally flickered out, as if he had never been there in the first place, leaving Obito to give a final sigh of relief as he slumped into Lee, muttering into her hair, “I hate your new friend.”

“Yes,” Lee said slowly, eyes now closing as she too breathed out, “But I can’t really blame him, he’s… He’s what you would expect, given that this is essentially the first time he’s stepped out of his basement.”

“He’s going to be back in the morning, isn’t he?” Obito asked with a slight groan, of course, according to the force, he was here with them even now so perhaps it wasn’t all that much of a difference.

Although the idea of having some sort of omniscient and omnipotent voyeur hanging around was not doing wonders for Obito’s paranoid imagination.

“Of course,” Lee said, moving into Obito and resting her head on his shoulder as she even now
began to drift into sleep, “But look on the bright side, we now have two jobs. One, see the universe and what have you, and two, coach the force on how to act like… Well, not the force.”

Obito laughed slightly, drifting away even as he muttered, “Why does that sound like so much fun?”

It, the shadow clone, this strange still ball of force in the shape of a human man, was not gone in the morning. No, it was there, as cheerful and seemingly solid as ever, grinning across at Lee and Obito who were staring wearily back at it, no sign of acknowledgement once again for Obi-Wan.

No, it stayed, even moving hands with an eerie competency and dexterity, guided by the force as he aided Obi-Wan in docking the ship, all while holding a conversation with Lee and Obito at the same time, landing successfully without even having to glance at the landing pad.

Once again, Obi-Wan couldn’t help but think that even for his trials he had not signed up for this. He knew Lee was powerful, Obito as well, and he knew that Master Qui-Gon had mentioned some skill Obito had used which resembled this, but it was different to see it in person. More, that Obito and Lee, in their own way, seemed just as upset and irritated about it as Obi-Wan himself was, putting on this show that they weren’t responsible for his appearance.

The force, the force guiding itself into the form of a man, honestly, how dumb did they think he was?

No, he thought even as they aimlessly moved through one of Corellia’s major market places next to the gleaming port in which they’d landed, Obi-Wan keeping an eye out as well as feeling out in the force for spare parts for their clunker of a ship, they would confess to this ridiculous practical joke soon enough and it would only be entirely too soon.

Still, with acts like this, no wonder they were such good friends with Master Qui-Gon.

It was a beautiful day, the kind not seen on Coruscant, there was some nature left on Corellia after all and in the breeze one could smell distant trees in some park or another as well as the salt of the sea. In the sunlight, the buildings were white and silver as they towered above the air field, and the clear day only seemed to serve to make Lee Eru, and her blonde puppet, brighter for it.
However, far more noticeable and irritating than this, than the sheer detail and care they’d put into this thing they’d made, was the conversation she insisted on having with it.

“You and your Obito Uchiha are close,” the man noted, in a clear voice, the force inflected in every word so that even Obi-Wan was forced to listen, “You speak with him often.”

“Yes, Obito and I are quite close,” Lee said simply, ignoring Obito’s own rather dubious and unamused look at the question, notably walking on the other side of Lee from the puppet.

“I do not understand it,” the puppet said with a sigh, “I have never been inclined to speak directly to any of them, didn’t realize I even could, until you arrived. Your habit of talking to your own hands… It’s very strange.”

“My hands?” Lee asked, raising her pale hands in the bright sunlight, her expression one that was quite dubious.

“Your sentients,” the puppet corrected, but with a wry smile, as if he might as well have said hands or feet or any other body part. Obito scoffed, looking away from the scene, black eye dull and baleful even while his green eye gleamed.

Obi-Wan, after a moment, let out an almost amused laugh, “Ah, I see what you’re getting at.”

Obito looked over his shoulder at Obi-Wan, dark eyebrows raised in a rather unamused manner as he asked, “Oh good, Kenobi, what exactly are we getting at?”

Obi-Wan just smiled serenely, now in a better mood that he had caught on to their strange little joke, “You imagine that the force would have no regard for sentient will or thought, that, flowing through us, dictating our actions, we would be little more than hands are to you and I, simply pieces of himself working towards a higher unseen goal no matter our individual thoughts and suffering. That’s quite clever of you.”

“And the force wouldn’t think like this?” Lee asked, something in her voice, something Obi-Wan couldn’t quite recognize.

“The force doesn’t think as you or I do, as any sentient would,” Obi-Wan said dismissively, more than done with this strange little thought experiment they’d put on for his benefit, “You’ve been reading entirely too many of those strange science fiction novels you chatter on about.”

To that, Lee only said a single, stoic, “Perhaps.”
At that Obi-Wan finally felt the tug, that pull towards a stand and opened his mouth to say as much when the puppet beat him to it, pulling Lee with him delight, “Here, Lee, for your ship.”

The puppet then moved, pale hands whirling, as he sorted through the equipment to grab the correct one, at a speed almost uncanny and far faster than Obi-Wan would have managed even with the force guiding him, and handed it to Lee. Then, with barely a thought at all, he summoned their collective wallet into his hand with the force and, with significantly more credits showing on the screen than should have been there, exchanged the credits with the nodding shopkeeper.

Lee merely looked down at the silver cylinder now in her hands, “Oh, thank you, I’ve always wanted…”

Obi-Wan opened his mouth again, in irritation again as he prepared to explain exactly what the part was and what it was for, but again the puppet beat him to it, “It’s for the shield generator, unnecessary, we will not see combat unless you wish it, but yours will fail within a week without this upgrade.”

“Oh, shields sound good?” Lee asked, and it truly was a question, as if she had no idea but the man just gave her a beaming delightful smile, one well-suited to his rather pretty features.

He then tugged on her sleeve again, pointing off into the distance, down the crowded streets and past the milling sentients in their worn Corellian clothing, where even now Obi-Wan could feel the magnetic pull of the force, “Up there is another vendor who, at a low price, will sell us everything we need for the engine.”

They walked swiftly, the blonde puppet pulling them along like an overeager child, “You should have asked me what ship to buy, Lee, there was a far better one on the other side of Coruscant that you could have bought with only half of your winnings from Tatooine. You picked the one that I never would have.”

“Perhaps,” Lee said with a touch of amusement as she eyed her pale hand in his, “That was why I picked it.”

The puppet laughed at that, a bright joyous thing, as if Lee’s every words were an utter delight to him. The force itself seemed to sing with the noise, as if it too were laughing in delight, unnaturally heavy on Corellia and this very moment and yet growing murkier by the minute for every moment they lingered. At the sound of it Obi-Wan gritted his teeth and, much like Obito Uchiha, decided he
had had enough, “Lee, surely, even you realize the joke has worn thin.”

Lee glanced back at him, something alien and powerful dancing in her eyes as she looked at him, even as the puppet pulled her along.

“Whatever you thought was funny is now simply irritating,” Obi-Wan said, stopping in the street and folding his arms into his robes, “Please, dismiss it.”

Lee just smiled, a cold, bitter, resigned, and amused thing as she said, “I have no control over him, Kenobi, and even if I did I’m not sure I would stop him now. This is all he’s ever had, Kenobi.”

The puppet, seeing them stopped, turned back to frown at Lee, hand reaching out to trace the side of her face as a lover might, “Lee?”

Obi-Wan stared, watched as it then turned its attention onto Obi-Wan himself with narrowed eyes, as if realizing that yes Obi-Wan had said something to him and to Lee and wasn’t merely a speck of dirt. Then, then the force seemed to fracture, to prowl in place like a wild cat, and Obi-Wan suddenly felt himself shivering as if every eye in every world was turned on him.

He froze and only released himself when the puppet gave him a coldly amused smile before turning back to Lee, a look of chagrinned apology on his face, “Sorry about that.”

Obi-Wan moved closer, mouth half open despite himself to retort with something, something very unlike a jedi when he should be releasing his irritation and anger into the force when Obito’s hand fell on his shoulder.

Into his ear, Obito whispered, “Kenobi, ask yourself, how and why would Lee Eru know anything about parts needed for a space ship and where to find them on Corellia?”

She wouldn’t, hadn’t, it had been the puppet who…

Suddenly, Obi-Wan felt very cold, cold, and alone, and anything but the serenity he had been chasing since he was a child. Slowly, too slowly, he looked at the golden, glowing, puppet in front of him, pulled by the same strings which tugged on Obi-Wan’s awareness, on the awareness of every living thing in some regard or another…
Then they were walking again, Obi-Wan trailing further and further behind them, listening to their conversation as if he was in a bubble or else drifting down a river far away from them, the force ringing in his ears.

“Naboo will be interesting,” the puppet, the force wearing this puppet like a human face, said with a grin to Lee, “You’ve offended Padme Amidala quite gravely, I have no idea what she’ll say when she sees you.”

“Really, none at all?”

“Everything except you, Lee, is my domain,” the force said, almost sounding pleased by this, as he motioned out towards Corellia, simply another world he owned, “I have written the past, present, and futures of everything except you. You exist far beyond my humble game board.”

They passed through the mob with ease, the puppet instinctively guiding them through at an alarming, almost impossible pace given the throng of people.

“After Naboo, you planned to head back to Coruscant and your Tobirama Senju,” the force then said, but it was a statement not a question, and he did not wait for Lee even to nod, “I could take you somewhere else. Beyond the outer rim, beyond the edge of the republic and the jedi’s domain and knowledge, there are caverns where force conducting crystals, the kind used in lightsabers, of quality never seen before grow.”

“Oh?” Obito asked, as if himself now truly interested, speeding up and leaving Obi-Wan walking in a daze by himself, the word crystal pounding in his head like a drum beat out of rhythm.

“It will take many months, even in a ship far faster than yours and on the golden path, but you will have your crystals, the great treasure of the jedi, and nothing will happen to you and yours on the journey with my good will.”

And all Obi-Wan could think was that he had to comm back to the temple when they got back on the ship, he had to use the comm and talk to Master Qui-Gon or any master at all, and that he somehow had to get them to believe him. Except, he thought to himself, how could he ever get them to believe him?
Predictably, after Kenobi Obi-Wan’s existential crisis and melt down, it took an age and a half for him to give up the comm and the bridge. He’d secluded himself in there for half a day, walking back early while Minato the force dragged him and Lee on a ridiculous shopping trip to pimp out their ride for the coming journey to god even knew where, and when he’d finally exited his eyes had been dry and red and he looked like he’d been run over by a herd of Maito Gais.

Obito felt for him, he really did, but at the same time there was something nice about seeing someone out there taking all of this so much worse than Obito himself was.

That and, even if Kenobi had had a devil of a time panicking with his jedi, had likely convinced them of nothing and thus unwillingly joined Lee and Obito’s club of the jedi never listening to a word he said, Lee and Obito really did have to talk with Tobirama.

Granted, it would be nice if the force, casually wearing Minato’s face with a rather pleased expression as he set about installing software upgrades to their pile of shit of a ship, wasn’t sitting right there but Obito supposed that even if he vanished he’d still be in the room.

Omnipresence was something of a bitch like that.

So, with the force happily typing away at the console, fingers flying at an unnatural speed as green letters in basic danced on the screen, Lee and Obito huddled together over the small speaker and the rather fuzzy sound of the nidaime sighing in exasperation.

You could practically hear the scathing disbelief in the man’s voice as he said, “So, you leave for two days, and the sentient anthropomorphism of all the chakra in the universe has decided not only to join your minimal crew, but also change your course from Naboo to some unknown planet where lightsaber crystals can be harvested without the jedi breathing down our necks.”

“And he’s also in the room as we speak, since, you know, he’s everywhere,” Obito added bitterly, not that the force seemed to be paying much mind at the moment, engaged in doing… Well, whatever the hell it was he was doing.

“Two days,” the nidaime repeated, as if there was something very telling about this, “Two days, with *jedi* supervision, and you’ve managed this.”

“Not our fault,” Lee cut in, “Besides, I warned you about this already.”
“Cryptic dreams aren’t…”

“Well, it’s all the warning I got,” Lee interjected with a huff, “Besides, that’s not the point, what are your thoughts, Tobirama?”

There was a thick, rather telling, silence on the other end of the transmission. Obito could imagine the nidaime hokage hunched over the radio back in their suite on Coruscant, staring at the wall even as he frowned, fingers tapping lightly against the table in agitated thought.

“It smells like a trap,” the nidaime finally said, “A ridiculously blatant trap that’s almost an insult.”

“Yes,” Lee said, rubbing at her face and looking over Obito’s shoulder to stare at the force himself, now looking over with an adorably innocent smile at Lee’s attention, “But I think because of that it’s not a trap at all, at least, not in that sense. More, this buys you time for research on Coruscant, for whatever preparation is needed, and for Kenobi to prepare the jedi to come to grips with the new world order. This is not an enemy we can outrun, more, I don’t think it’s one we would want to.”

Plus, a few months on this ship with the force wearing Minato’s face, that was a lot of time to gather intelligence not just for Tobirama but for Lee and Obito as well. Even if, Obito suspected, the force was likely doing this for a similar reason.

“I say we do it,” Lee finally said, “We pitstop at Naboo, check on progress of the embassy for a few days, gather supplies needed, and venture forth into the great unknown with the universe as our guide.”

A sigh on the other end, one defeated before it had even begun, and then the nidaime wryly noting, “I hate that I can’t disagree. However, as your superior officer, you’re teleporting your asses back to Coruscant then all of us to Konoha the second things get out of hand.”

Well, it was a bit late for that, but the sentiment, in general, was appreciated. Lee similarly smiled, asking, “Have we ever done anything else, nidaime-sama?”

“Don’t make me regret this,” Tobirama simply said, and then the line was dead, leaving only Lee, Obito, and the force wearing Minato-sensei’s face.
Why was it always Obi-Wan Kenobi? Anakin thought even as he wandered in his own dream, why was it always Obi-Wan, standing above him and surrounded by fire, heat, and death, as he screamed down at Anakin about the high ground.

And every time Anakin stood before him, rage, desperation, and giddy delight bubbling inside of him, it was as if he didn’t even care that Obi-Wan Kenobi, his mater and brother, would destroy him.

As if, even then, a part of Anakin had wished that Obi-Wan Kenobi was capable of destroying him.

Anakin kept walking, walking and walking through memories of a world that didn’t exist, might not ever exist again, until he was in a world unlike anything he’d ever seen before. A place where great trees, the kind Lee described in Konoha, stretched as tall as sky scrapers up into the blue sky, light falling down in golden sheets to the soft, green, earth.

There, like always, standing there as if she had been waiting for him rather than him having tugged on her unconscious mind as he might her pale hand, was Lee sitting cross legged beneath the greatest of the trees.

And, like always, Anakin wasn’t Anakin at all in his own dream, but instead the force that chose to wear Minato Namikaze’s face. Anakin just a small speck, a tiniest sliver, of the shadow of the fourth shadow of fire.

“Lee,” he said, a smile curving across her lips, curiously human and learned from her and all her iterations far more than his own sentients. In the sound of her name was the sweet breeze off the coastline of the seas, carrying with it the scent of salt and orange blossoms.

“This isn’t Konoha,” Lee said, not opening her eyes but instead leaning back against the tree, tilting her head backwards so that her pale neck was exposed, “Although it’s very close, you’ve captured some of its spirit.”

“No,” the force said walking on the moss, footsteps so light they might as well have been air, until he was sitting next to her, his shoulder resting against hers and his fingers sweeping her hair back from her face, “This is Endor, this is my own world, one of my many forest worlds… I have many worlds, Lee, that are very like your Konohagakure.”
She opened her eyes then, her own as green as any tree here, as green as the trees from her beloved home world even as she smiled and asked, “But did Senju Hashirama make yours?”

“I made them,” he said, insisted, fingers now pausing against the skin of her face, willing her to look at him and see at once the shell he’d made for her as well as the great overriding spirit beyond that.

“It’s not the same,” she said, capturing his hand in hers with a sigh, looking at once more exhausted than Anakin ever thought she was capable of being, but to the force there was a familiar pang with the look, as if he knew that he was driving her mortal form into this state yet could not quite help himself from doing so.

How she clung to it, he thought with wonder, so stubbornly and with such pride… But then, he had never managed to make one himself, and if he had he too would have guarded it as his greatest of treasures. This mortal skin and spark of life that housed her mighty spirit.

“I’m tired,” she said with a sigh, still holding onto his fingers in hers, “You make me very tired sometimes.”

He frowned down at their fingers, the sensation of tracing her fingers with his, even the illusion of his, a powerful enough sensation that Anakin himself was shuddering at the sensation, “I am sorry.”

She did not look as if she believed him, but as he was, at once so vast and yet so small and vulnerable in front of her, he could not think of the words a sentient might say to persuade her otherwise or at least to open a window into his own heart, the heart of all his worlds, and show her what those words meant.

That he was a being capable of regret as any sentient might be.

Instead he asked, pondering her words, this idea of her Hashirama Senju and his village hidden in trees, “Why is it not the same, Lee?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” she said simply, and winds at the outer rim of the galaxy, in the great desert worlds, howled at that answer for how he could not deny it and how apt it was. No, he wouldn’t understand, he would never understand. Still, she continued, almost as if despite herself, “It is different because Senju Hashirama, against all odds and all doubts, performed what couldn’t
be done.”

“You could bring them here,” he said instead, no, they said, Anakin’s desperation and yearning hope joining this greater representation of himself as he, wearing Minato, leaned closer to Lee, leaned onto her so that he could cling to her as he said, “To Endor, to any world of forests and light and rivers, or I could make a new Earth for you, a better Earth…”

Her hands rose to settle, like small light birds, on his shoulders, even as his puppet, him and yet not him, never truly him in the way Lee’s mortal body and mortal sentience were truly hers, clung to her more tightly.

They sat like this for a long moment, Endor’s many birds chirping with the early morning light, while Anakin in his shadow looked and stared in wonder at a world he had never known, never even imagined, and yet now knew so intimately…

Finally, Minato’s voice almost rough with the force, with the true nature of the universe in its light and darkness, violence and serenity, cracking through his mortal guise said, “I am afraid, Lee, I have never been afraid. Fear, rage, hatred, they drift within me but as I have never been I have never been afraid before, but I am afraid now. I can’t see, you leave me so terribly blind, and I am afraid that you’ll leave.”

He pulled back to look at her more fully, frame her face with Minato’s hands, force her to see the desperation engraved in Minato Namikaze’s eyes as they had been engraved when he faced down the nine-tailed fox on a day that had never happened, “I blink, even once, and you are gone and never return. And I… I will be more than alone, I was alone when I myself knew nothing and no one, I will become desolation.”

Her hand moved through his yellow hair, a calming gesture, but her fingers sunk further than that, as if she was combing through the universe itself, through the sand storms, the ice storms, the hurricanes, and the raging meteor storms and calming them with only the touch of her fingers.

He smiled, leaning into her touch, lips murmuring against her skin, “No, even before then, I had the feeling, the seed of a thought, that I could be more than I was, have more than I did… And its name was Anakin Skywalker, and I planted him in the desert of Tatooine… But he never sprouted, so full of life and light, and he never sprouted.”

He looked at Lee almost in wonder, all the worlds in his eyes again as he asked, “How did you do it, Lee? How do you bear eternity with so much grace when all I can do is drift and drift and drift forever?”
“I manage,” was all she said, perhaps all she could say, “And I embrace free will for all its painful glory.”

“Free will,” he whispered, but the word had no meaning to him as he was, meaning among the sentients, to be sure, but no true meaning on these higher planes of existence where, before Lee, he had once seen all there is and all there ever could be.

“You’ll get it eventually, my friend,” Lee said with a small smile, one he couldn’t help but wish to return, both on Minato’s face and in all ways he could manage, all flowers turning towards her and Endor itself rustling with delight.

“The first step though,” she said, tapping him on the nose with a pale index finger and a mischievous smile, “Is to get you some sort of a name.”

“A name?” he asked, thinking of those things that sentients wore and gave to his worlds, creatures, and matter.

She nodded, grin growing, “Sure, if you want to be then you need something to call yourself and have others call you. I’m thinking…”

She trailed off, hand moving beneath her chin as she tilted her head to look at him, look past the guise of Minato to the force raging beneath it. Finally, with another grin, she settled on the syllables, “Haruki, I think, for all of your suns and all of their brightness.”
Chapter 16

Occasionally in England, when they weren’t representing Konoha in some official capacity at the ministry or Konoha wasn’t extending some favor to the auror corps via Lee and Obito’s services, they would meet with the English nin.

Obito had never met the man when he had been imprisoned in Konoha. Obito had been too young when he’d first been pulled out of the seal in Lee’s forehead and by the time he was Lee’s chunin apprentice the man had long since gone back to his mother country and reclaimed his English title of Voldemort as well as the civil war that came with it.

So Obito had never seen him dressed in Senju Hashirama’s traditional yet flamboyant clothing, witnessed his biting wit and bitterness in the English lessons that Lee and Minato had given years ago, watched as he and Senju Tobirama argued around one another over a pot of tea inside of the Senju compound echoing with the loss of Uzumaki Mito, or seen him anywhere in Konoha’s walls. Obito, instead, only met him when he was perfectly in his element and back among his English sycophants at the helm of this English guerilla rebellion.

Still, despite not having seen the difference himself, Obito was certain that the man made it a point to be exceedingly English. He wore their traditional and luxurious robes, flaunted the Slytherin blood limit that marked him as a clan heir among clan heirs, held to their traditions and mannerisms that seemed at times more stifling than anything the Uchiha had indulged in, and most of all held himself as if he had been born a king and it was their fault that they had not recognized him as one yet.

Beneath that Obito had the suspicion that once he had been closer to a man who could have been called Ren even if he hadn’t been born in Konoha. He didn’t really hold himself like a clan heir, but instead as something far more ragged. A civilian orphan stared out of his pale eyes and no amount of debonair charm or ancient English jutsus could take that out of his soul.

Obito would know. After all, no one knew clans and the marks they left on a human being better than an Uchiha.

As usual they met in the grandiose Malfoy estate, a place built to impress even the wealthiest, most elegant, and most noble and ancient of guests.

The Uchiha at the founding of Konoha had settled for a compound, (of course it was the single largest clan compound in the village so that helped to soften the blow that the Senju and Hyuga had compounds too), the Malfoy settled for not only this same amount of land and then some but
had built only one grand baroque manor and decorated the remaining land with vast gardens, fountains featuring unbelievably muscular naked men wrestling among dolphins, a forest for hunting unfortunate rabbits and foxes, and artfully placed albino peacocks which would stupidly cluck as they strutted about.

Obito was more than sure that they thought this made them look not only exceedingly wealthy and important but also exceedingly suave and sophisticated. Nothing screamed sophistication like filling your yard with decorative chickens. Of course, having come from an absurdly wealthy clan himself, Obito mostly found it a little absurd and more than a little sad.

Lee, for her own part, just took it as another sign that the world had probably ended a long time ago when no one was looking. That, or they really were trapped in Madara’s genjutsu and that he just had a weird thing about peacocks that he’d never gotten around to telling Obito. Honestly though, between the eye of the moon plan and the harem of plant zombies built with Senju Hashirama’s remains, Obito wouldn’t have put it past him.

However, if it was bad for him and Lee, Obito couldn’t help but think it was worse for the Malfoys. He had the feeling that the English nin hadn’t just made his headquarters at the Malfoys for the convenience and luxury but also because he enjoyed watching Malfoy Lucius twitch. Each time the Malfoy clan head was forced to invite Lee (Eru Lee, brash civilian orphan kunoichi and the overpowered antithesis of everything Malfoy believed in) and Obito (foreign scarred child-soldier blood traitor and ten years younger than his own childish clan heir who still hadn’t managed to grow up even with a civil war raging) into his home, he died a little.

They didn’t have much reason to meet with England’s rebels, the self-proclaimed Death Eaters, this time around, no real topic of dire importance, just the thought that it was probably about time that they checked in. The meeting in the expansive Malfoy private library with just Obito, Lee, and the English ninja himself featured a pot of English tea accompanied by small sandwiches and pastries. That was about the most exciting thing about it as it quickly wound its way from pleasantries and greetings, to reminiscing on Konoha and those early days of returning to England, and finally to rather predictable news of England’s hidden village crumbling at its foundations and relying more and more on those few loyal wizards and witches left.

Specifically, on the shoulders of the class of 1998’s golden trio: Longbottom Neville, Granger Hermione, and Weasley Ron.

Voldemort, with a smirk, announced that he did not have high hopes for their success even if they were now nearly ten years out of Hogwarts.

Then, predictably, Lee reminded the man that until he officially held the government and had a solid and stable kingdom Konoha would still send its support to the ministry and auror corps.
Which, of course, the man groused about but as always didn’t protest too much. He’d heard the same thing for years and seen the rather lackluster results of Lee and Obito’s support for the system. The trouble was that the English really didn’t want to use shinobi to the full extent they would have to in order to win the war, they were much too squeamish for that. Plus, if they’d had that kind of resolve, they wouldn’t be having this rebellion in the first place.

With the meeting virtually done Obito left Lee and the English nin sitting across from one another in leather armchairs over a chess board, Lee getting positively trounced but seeming mostly indifferent and amused while the English nin gave her a rather exasperated and almost nidaime-esque look. He wondered distantly, even back then, if perhaps the pair of them could have been friends in some other world. If he had grown up in Konoha or she had stayed in England he imagined they would have naturally gravitated towards one another. Instead though, here, a strange sort of acquaintanceship had settled between the pair of them, manifesting itself in a chess board. Obito, for his own part, ran his fingers over the leather-bound books on the shelves lining the walls as he looked for something to read.

Some he’d flipped through before, almost all of them containing details of old jutsus, clan techniques, and recipes to craft secret dark amulets and potions to be used at the Malfoy clan’s discretion. They made for rather dry and difficult reading, often written in rather artistic penmanship and in older nearly incomprehensible versions of English. That wasn’t even getting into the fact that the jutsus they described were often morbid and almost entirely useless in direct combat, more useful in a true-blue ANBU assassin’s or clan era kunoichi’s repertoire than Obito’s.

Still, for all that Obito hadn’t bothered with most of these jutsus (especially since anything with an English wand required a ridiculous amount of hand seals, chakra control, and sometimes even fuinjutsu to pull off) he was sure the Malfoys were grinding their teeth at the thought of him or Lee having access to it.

This time however his hand stopped on a lighter, slimmer, volume at the edge of the shelf. This one was somehow more worn down than the others, not by age, but instead by use and lack of care. The edges of the pages were instead dog-eared and sometimes torn, the cover scratched, and the title faded but still reading, “The Tales of Beedle the Bard”

He flipped idly through the pages, noting that the chapter titles were not only English but the kinds of things only English Wizards could come up with (Rabbity Babbity being a prime example). More it looked like a collection of folk lore or else children’s stories. Finally, he stopped somewhere in the middle of the book, eyes lingering on the title, “The Tale of the Three Brothers” but more than that a word in the middle of the page, in the story itself, the name of a character caught his eye, “Death”.
“There were once three brothers who were travelling along a lonely, winding road at twilight…”

Suddenly he looked up to see Lee leaning over his shoulder, reading aloud, her green eyes skimming the page and her chess game entirely forgotten, “The Tale of the Three Brothers, you’d think I’d have heard it a thousand times by now.”

“Shishou?” Obito asked, watching as Lee took the book from him and flipped through it, ignoring the English nin’s rather piercing gaze from the abandoned game.

“It’s about the Shinigami, you know,” Lee said, distracted as she flipped until she landed on a page with an illustration featuring the three titular brothers as well as the hooded skeletal figure representing the English reaper of souls, “Well, about three fools and the god of death.”

Obito was already fourteen, but more importantly, Naruto’s birth had come and gone. He’d already seen the fires of Konoha that had never happened as well as the shadow of Namikaze Minato summoning the Shinigami and bargaining with his very soul. More, he’d seen that the Shinigami had been wearing Lee’s face, even when Minato-sensei hadn’t seemed to see anything at all. All of this a testament, of course, to Lee’s strange a casual claim of being the god of death.

Stories starring Death as a central character… They probably held more weight with Obito than they should.

So, quietly, even with the English nin looking at them both with those cutting blue eyes, he asked, “Well, what happens?”

“Three brothers meet Death on a bridge in twilight over a raging river,” Lee said distantly, eyes staring at the words on the page and even further than that, as if by looking at the ink she could see into the world they contained. The river, the bridge, the three brothers, and even death were all reflected somewhere in her pupils, “Essentially they’re offered three gifts for managing to survive the river, but in the end they each return to the mortal coil in a fashion befitting their flaws and their wishes. Then, of course, life goes on.”

Obito gave her a rather dry look as he suspected she’d skipped quite a lot in that summary of hers, probably the entire point of the story. At seeing his dubious and unimpressed expression, she gave an exasperated sigh and elaborated, “The moral is that no one can really cheat Death, even if you’re a wizard. When he comes and smiles at you the best thing you can do is smile back.”
She paused then, looked slightly pensive as she noted, “You know, Dumbledore, the old Hogwarts headmaster, apparently was quite obsessed with this thing and thought it had some basis in reality. Sent Granger, Weasley, and Longbottom on this ridiculous quest to gather them all together. Didn’t end too well though.”

Some basis in reality, he wondered what she meant by that. Just looking at her he couldn’t tell if she meant that there were three gifts floating around out there, that they had met Death, or perhaps that three brothers at some point in time had met Eru Lee in the guise of death over a river.

The trouble, he thought, was that his life had gotten so surreal that it was hard to tell one way or another.

Instead he chose to ask an easier question, “Why didn’t it end well?”

It wasn’t Lee that answered, though she opened her mouth to, but instead the English nin.

He was sipping at his tea, giving them both a rather pointed look as he stated, “Because they were idiot school children chasing fairy tales. More they missed the implications if it is true.”

“The implications?” Obito asked, feeling that exasperated note coming into his voice at whatever the hell it was the English nin thought he was doing.

The man was not to be dissuaded though as he leaned forward, that spark of interest in his eyes as he noted, “If it is true, if one can gather the wand, the ring, and the cloak and achieve mastery over death, then these are divine objects and can give one untold powers. More, such powers couldn’t be gained by any ordinary human being, the fates themselves might connive to stop you. It hasn’t happened before, after all. Something always stops one from getting past one or even two at any given moment.”

Lee herself shrugged her shoulders, shifted so that she was leaning against the book case in her usual casual manner, and mused, “Well, I don’t know if I’d put it like that, but they did manage to drop the resurrection stone into the sea which put a real crux in that whole plan. Well, you know, after it had killed off Dumbledore when he put it unchecked on his finger. Though I guess they sort of agreed with you in the end, they figured only Death could have all three at a time.”

They figured, that was a very specific way to say that, Obito gave her a pointed look and asked, “But what do you think, shishou?”
“Me?” Lee said, considering it, thinking back not on the story but instead somewhere further than that, as if the truth was lurking somewhere inside her memory, “Three brothers, a bridge, and a river in the twilight… I think that, perhaps, it wasn’t a gift and wasn’t clever revenge either. Dead is dead, after all, in one day or twenty years, it wouldn’t make a difference to the Shinigami. You can’t really cheat a god, even if you can make a bridge. No, I think it was a bargain. I think that Death got something very important that the Peverell clan chose to forget. Something that we all chose to forget…”

She trailed off, tilting her head upwards towards the vaulted ceiling and exposing her pale throat, and her profile looked…

She looked somehow, despite the midafternoon sunlight and the setting of this elegant English library, like she had that night that Konoha hadn’t burned beneath the kyuubi’s wrath.

Then the moment was gone and she just shrugged again with a smile, “But I guess it doesn’t really matter one way or another. If no one can tell the difference, the consequences or the price, then it might as well not exist at all.”

“Skywalker,” Anakin glanced up from his tray of food in the temple’s cafeteria, pristine and so different from the worn and sandy home he’d known all his life, and tried to hold in his surprise as the nidaime hokage sat across from him.

They were alone at the edge of one of the many gleaming silver tables, away from the idly chatting jedi knights, masters, and initiates on breaks from their studies before the afternoon session. Anakin was seated so far from the others that the sound of their voices was virtually indistinguishable from the gurgling of the nearby fountain in the center of the great hall. This wasn’t unusual though, Anakin had mostly been sitting by himself since he’d arrived at the temple.

If Qui-Gon had the time or was in the building he’d usually seek Anakin out and find time to eat with him. Anakin liked that, liked Qui-Gon, but since Anakin wasn’t his padawan yet these moments were few and far between. Otherwise, well, Anakin really wasn’t at a great age. Everyone who was just an initiate without a master was years younger than him, plus they’d all known each other forever. Then anyone close to eight, nine, or ten was already a padawan or in the medical division or something and didn’t really eat regularly. Then, when they did, it was always in these preestablished groups, reminding Anakin that these people had known each other pretty much since birth.
More, Anakin was different, he’d been brought it much older than everyone else and everyone knew it. It was like… Like Anakin was this sort of half-jedi, not really an outsider but not an insider either, caught instead between worlds.

However, if anyone looked more out of place than Anakin then it was Tobirama Senju dressed in his dark clothing, metal blades on his hip along with storage scrolls upon storage scrolls, thin red lines drawn on his face, and red eyes looking everywhere and seeing everything. Though the man didn’t seem to mind for all that Anakin was sure he noticed everyone staring at him all the time.

At the second’s unwavering attention, even more nerve-wracking than Obito’s or even Lee’s sometimes was, Anakin straightened and couldn’t help but ask, “Mr. Senju?”

“Are you busy this afternoon?” he asked, Anakin thought it over, tried to think of just what he was supposed to be doing after the lunch hour finished.

“Well, not after lightsaber classes …” which also brought up the question of what Tobirama was doing here. The nidaime didn’t participate in the more practical classes that Anakin was taking, only the theoretical ones that were in the mornings and the language classes every other day or so with initiates even younger than Anakin’s classmates.

Otherwise Anakin never really saw him, presumably because he was out and about in Coruscant, probably doing whatever Obito and Lee used to always do whenever they wandered around Mos Espa. That or in whatever hotel they were staying at taking apart and building droids or maybe meeting with all those diplomats helping them set up the embassy.

Still, Tobirama didn’t look as if he thought he was out of place, even with people staring at him wide eyed and the way the force shifted around him and thrummed like a wire that had just been plucked. No, he looked like he barely even noticed the stares at all, like meeting Anakin really was the only thing he was here for, and Anakin’s answer was deathly important because of it.

“After that ends, and for the foreseeable future, you will be teaching me how to read and write in Basic,” the man said, without a hint of doubt that as a shinobi he might not have the authority to tell Anakin what to do with his time or that Anakin even had the time to do this. “More to the point, we will be doing a heavy amount of research in your jedi archives, which means you will have to do all the reading and translating for me… Can you write?”

“Write?” Anakin paled, tried to think if Obito or Lee had taught him any real characters in their own writing system. He’d seen their reports a few times, glanced at the foreign symbols on scrolls of flimsy, and Obito pointed out the characters that formed both his and Lee’s names, but he didn’t
think either of them had taught him anything about how to read or write.

They’d probably been waiting to get him into Konoha for that.

“Even simply,” the man said, leaning forward, and at once Anakin thought his eyes were perhaps a bit too red and intimidating. Eyes, human eyes, weren’t supposed to be that color, he was sure of it, “I’ll settle for hiragana or katakana if you know nothing about kanji.”

Anakin blinked, flushed, and tried to answer, “I…”

“Then I will settle for orating and try to learn quickly,” the nidaime finished with an exhausted sort of sigh, reaching onto his belt and pulling out a small paper scroll, opened it on the table, and with a flash of chakra reached into the seal to pull out an ancient tape recorder that looked like it belonged in a museum or some ancient junkyard, “Use this.”

Anakin took it, looked down at the unfamiliar symbols inscribed on the different buttons. However, like with everything in his life, a few seconds of staring and he had an idea, an impression at least, of how this was supposed to work and which buttons he should be pushing.

The force, he’d come to realize since he’d come to the temple, was responsible for that.

Anakin, clutching the alien looking recording device, couldn’t help a pang of intuition that something was wrong, that Tobirama Senju really wouldn’t come here and ask Anakin all of this just out of curiosity, and with eyes widening he asked the second hokage, “What happened?”

Tobirama snorted, gave that wry smile he usually gave when Lee or Obito were making a mess somewhere and he’d have to go clean it up, then said, “Lee and Obito were left alone for a week with only a jedi *chunin* for supervision, that’s what happened.”

“Obito and Lee?” Anakin asked, feeling something cold and almost guilty sinking in his stomach at the thought of them, already so far from Coruscant, “Are they alright? And Obi-Wan?”

Anakin had…
Since that day, right after they’d left and he’d… confronted the force, he guessed he could call it, he’d felt… It was like something was lifted off his shoulders, or like something that had been looking at him was suddenly looking elsewhere and Anakin could breathe again. Suddenly Anakin could meditate now like everyone else, or well, close enough to everyone else. He could just skim the surface rather than be pulled in and sucked down to the point that he was hardly even Anakin Skywalker anymore.

Sure, he thought, he still dreamed about it and the future every night and every time he closed his eyes he could still see the three of them (no, no not three, three and a half, three and a puppet now, a clone of shadows) drifting along through the great emptiness of space. He still heard the force, all the chakra in the whole galaxy and further, pounding in his head and focusing on Lee in a way that it’d never been able to focus on anything before, full of joy, hope, passion and fear and all those things Anakin was supposed to be forgetting...

But Anakin had kept his hands, his body, and his own hopes and dreams. He was able to sleep again, or at least sleep slightly better. More importantly, he was able to at least pretend he was a normal jedi like everyone else, and for now he’d more than take it.

He just hadn’t realized that that meant someone else was paying a price for him. Or that, at the end of things, of course that someone else would be Obito and Lee and even Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Worse though, he thought, as that cold feeling slithered further into his gut, even with that knowledge he wouldn’t take it back.

“I’m not sure,” Tobirama said, eyes distant after having considered Anakin’s question for far too long, “However, if anyone can keep their head above water in the strangest of circumstances, it’s Eru Lee. And she’ll ensure that her apprentice, and even your jedi friend, Kenobi, keep their heads up as well.”

“But what happened?” Anakin asked, leaning forward, fighting against the temptation to look into the force for himself. To let himself be dragged along its current to wherever Lee undoubtedly was. That, he thought, was the last thing he needed because then even if Lee wasn’t drowning then Anakin would be.

Tobirama considered him, pale hand beneath his chin as he looked into Anakin’s eyes, like he could read every thought passing through there, “The natural chakra of your universe, the force as you call it, seems to have decided to not only become startlingly sentient but produce a shadow clone based off our memories. More, he has promised great gifts for Lee specifically, one being a natural supply of the crystals used in lightsabers beyond the jedi’s reach.”
He said it like it was a joke, almost, but his eyes were grave and deathly serious. Anakin realized that the nidaime, at least, seemed just as afraid and wary as Anakin himself was (as Anakin wasn’t supposed to be). The only one as afraid and wary as Anakin himself was, no, had been, because…

Because he’d thought this problem had gone away, or that it wouldn’t be Anakin’s problem anymore. Even now he couldn’t help but wonder if this was really his problem at all. After all, this wasn’t really news to him. He’d told the force, or, whatever the vision of the dragon-man had been, to get his own hands and then he’d gone and done it.

All considering, it could be much worse, or at least, certainly worse for Anakin. More, it wasn’t like anything had really changed just… Well, he didn’t realize that the force would be taking Lee and Obito anywhere. Anakin hadn’t been thinking about anything beyond self-preservation.

“Are you sure… I don’t think he decided,” Anakin said, slowly, tasting the words and their meanings even as he said them out loud, “I think he always wanted to, that… I think maybe he only can now, because before now, he didn’t…”

“He’s using Lee as a template of sorts,” Tobirama finished for him, with a nod, though by the look on his face he found this just as if not more alarming than his previous one. Like the idea that it, the force, could only do what it did because it now had Lee as a strange mentor and role model was beyond disturbing.

As disturbing to him as the memory of the burned remains of Mos Espa still was to Anakin.

“So,” Anakin said, forcing himself into the serenity that his instructors were always talking about, the serenity Anakin struggled so hard to find no matter his instinctive connection to the force, “What are you going to do?”

“Lee, Obito, and I assume Kenobi as well, will follow him to this far off world of his. They’ll gather intelligence and stall the consequences as best they can,” Tobirama said, fingers now tapping against the table even as he stared off into space, as if just by looking at the air he could see Lee, Obito, and Obi-Wan Kenobi out there in the wastelands between worlds, “And in the meantime I will read through your whole damn library if I have to. More, I will do my best to prepare the Jedi for whatever this could possibly mean.”

Anakin was sure he knew the answer already, didn’t even need the force whispering in his ear, the words coming from the bottom of his soul, “They don’t believe them, do they?”
“Kenobi contacted them before Lee and Obito contacted me,” Tobirama said with the slightest of shrugs, “And as far as they could tell at the time, he’d been unsuccessful in convincing them of our brave new world as Obito coined it. I’m sure they’ll have some more colorful and detailed story when they check in again.”

“But you believe them?” Anakin pressed.

That smile returned, something a little too bitter to be joyous but a little too soft to be anything but genuine. It made him look younger, Anakin couldn’t help but think, like somehow for all his frustration and exasperation and worries Lee and Obito also brought him some measure of youth and life, “I have known Lee far too long to doubt her word on this. No, especially on something as bizarre and surreal as this. If anyone can turn the world upside down by merely walking through it or see past whatever illusion we’ve believed in all our lives with nothing more than a five-second glance it’s Eru Lee.”

“No, it’s always coming to grips with the implications of the truth we never considered, that’s always the hardest part.” Tobirama said as he closed his eyes shut, leaned forward, and at once his age seemed to collapse onto him again so that he seemed far older than he looked. Like all those years that Lee had said he’d spent dead and in limbo had settled on his shoulders.

“What do you mean?” Anakin asked, now poking at what was left of his food.

Tobirama was very quiet for a moment, looking as if he was attempting to think of how best to put it, and the silence seemed more strained and heavy than it possibly could be. Tenser, even, than that pause before the jedi council had told Anakin that he hadn’t passed the exam, or the pause after they asked him about his mother and his fear.

Finally, he said, “If chakra, all chakra, your force, is sentient then it is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. By all definitions it is not merely a god, it is God, everything that ever is, was, or has been except the sliver of Konohagakure that Lee, Obito, and I have brought with us.”

“They…” Anakin started, thinking about his instructors, about Qui-Gon, and even Lee, “The force flows through everything, is in everything…”

“Yes, like chakra, except more pervasive than anything I’ve ever known. Even now, even here so far from Lee, it’s almost like standing on the edge of a hurricane,” Tobirama said for him, his eyes drifting upwards as if he could somehow see the force even now pumping through all the worlds like blood inside of veins.
Anakin considered that for a moment, the force, allowed himself to drift on its current and grasp at the sense of Lee and Obito in the cockpit, instructed on how to fly the ship by the shadow clone wearing Namikaze Minato’s face and hands.

Except she called him, not just the clone but him, all of him, Haruki now…

The stars, Anakin thought, were ringing with that name like great, distant, bells.

“Do you understand what that means, Anakin?” Tobirama asked, startling Anakin out of his slight trance, as if waiting for Anakin to grasp some vital thought (no implication) of everything he’d said.

However, whatever it was, despite Anakin’s own uneasiness, escaped him.

“Shinobi, as a rule, find the idea of fates, of gods, let alone an all-powerful god absurd. Certainly I had never seriously considered it. Religion… that was for monks, beyond any real application of summoning or caging greater powers than ourselves through fuinjutsu, it was something that never crossed our minds. We didn’t concern ourselves with luxuries like philosophy, not when we always were fighting wars without beginning or end. However, there is something, from Lee’s homeland, called the Riddle of Epicurus,” Tobirama said slowly, “More simply, it’s sometimes called the problem of evil.”

“The problem of evil?” Anakin quoted, that cold feeling morphing into something even colder, into guilt combined with dread.

Tobirama held Anakin’s eyes as he quoted, “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”

Anakin opened his mouth to answer, then closed it, watching as Tobirama leaned back, giving Anakin a rather amused look as if he understood every thought in Anakin’s head and had had all of them himself a long time ago.

“The force, by its very nature, is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent or at least close enough to this trinity to be called God. Yet, the riddle stands, but with a more ominous and practical cast than ever before. There’s war in this universe, famine, slavery, murder, rape, every evil that I could
think to recognize, and yet there is also the force.”

“What does the force want?” Anakin breathed, remembering his own desperate question he’d asked his instructor, and earned a bitter smile from Tobirama.

“Precisely. If it is not human happiness or the good of mankind, then what is it?” Tobirama folded his hands together, looked down at them, as if they could somehow provide him with an answer.

“Is it… Isn’t it like that where you’re from?” Anakin asked slowly, but Tobirama just laughed slightly and shook his head.

“No, I only know one god where I’m from and she…” he paused, looked almost fond again as he thought back on his own memories, “It’s strange, many would hardly label her as benign, but I truly believe she is. Or as benign as one could truly expect. For all the violence, the death, and the pain, she has an unconditional respect for free will and that same hope my brother has always possessed. Sometimes she lacks certain understanding, other times she understands but steps back and gives us the freedom to damn ourselves. But your force, I don’t think, is like Eru Lee. Perhaps, your God, Skywalker Anakin, is simply not benign at all.”

“But…” Anakin paused, tried to come up with the words, to summarize his own feelings as well as everything he knew, “I think everyone knows that, or… The force, it has two sides remember. There’s the light, but there’s also the dark.”

Except, Anakin wondered, why was that answer, that well-worn answer of duality and balance, not at all reassuring?

Naboo, like Corellia, was still considered one of the inner core planets of the republic and because of this was only a day’s flight away. Of course, three days on Corellia had been spent waiting for Obi-Wan to get off the damn comm so they could brief Tobirama, then upgrading the ship with the entirely too eager clone of Minato-sensei, checking out the port and buying parts, supplies, and anything remotely of interest with the apparent unlimited budget of the force acting as their sugar daddy (manipulating the bits and bytes of their republic credits with ease), and then babysitting Kenobi and seeing if he’d get his act together and follow along with them on their joyride through the stars or not.

Not that they were behind schedule, or anything, they’d planned to spend roughly half the time on
Corellia anyway (back when the plan had been only a week to a week and a half before getting back to Coruscant) but all the same Obito was… restless.

Only a few days in, only halfway to Naboo and not anywhere close to wherever the hell they were headed after that, and Obito was already feeling like he needed to crawl out of his own skin.

It was as if time made the Minato-sensei shadow clone just wear more on his nerves rather than less. Like seeing Namikaze Minato’s face on whatever that thing was only became more jarring and surreal with each passing day.

Especially when he made both every effort and no effort at all to impersonate Minato-sensei. All of Minato’s habits, his smiles, the way he walked, how he held himself, how he hunched over the console of the ship the way Minato-sensei would have hunched over his fuinjutsu scrolls, and sometimes even the way he’d speak to them were there… Except when they weren’t. Every so often he’d slip, some graceful, strange, inhuman motion that made it all too clear that whatever was directing the clone was only a sometimes-clever actor, and the god behind Minato’s face would shine through.

Or, perhaps it was just this moment, startling awake halfway through the flight from Corellia to Naboo with a dozing Eru Lee slumped against him and the Minato-sensei in the white clothing of a desert prince sitting two inches from their faces, that was dancing on Obito’s already frayed nerves.

He and Lee were back in the only bedroom of the ship, a small cramped place that perhaps reminded Lee-shishou a little too much of a cupboard she’d once lived in and Obito of a cave he should have died in, but good enough for the money they hadn’t been willing to pay for a ship neither knew how to fly. However, because of this, it really was barely large enough for one person, let alone two, and three was just entirely too many.

Especially when the third bastard had this look on his face like he had no idea why any of this would be a problem.

Obito wondered if it knew, on Obito’s eyes flying open and his sharingan instinctively flaring into life, that he was two seconds from getting gutted. Of course, he thought bitterly as the situation registered in his head and he remembered where he was and what was happening, he didn’t think the natural chakra of the universe quite understood concepts like being gutted like a fish.

More, even if it did, it was only a shadow clone.
“Must you?” Obito spat out, shifting ever so slightly against Lee so that he could glare more fully while also slumping back against her. In turn Lee shifted against him, eyes fluttering but remaining closed, turning her face into his shoulder to block out the light.

The force just cheerfully smiled, the kind of smile that Minato would sometimes give when in a particularly good mood, “Good morning, Lee.”

There were many things he could say to that, Obito thought, so many things he could say to that. The Zetsus had been fond of doing that. He’d wake up, cold and chained and dying, and there’d be the grotesque, pale, humanoid thing leering down at him with yellow eyes and cheerfully greeting him, “Good morning, Obito!”

Good morning, Obito, how does it feel being one day closer to death or madness?

He shuddered, breathed out, and forced his mind to be anywhere else, “For the last time, I’m not Lee.”

As always, just like every other time, it looked torn between being amused by this insistence and being very confused by it.

Obito really didn’t want to sit up for this bullshit, he didn’t even want to be awake for this bullshit. However, sparing Lee a glance, sparing the circles under her eyes a glance, he figured he didn’t have much of a choice.

With Lee facing weeks of sleep deprivation, Kenobi muttering to himself on the bridge and barely managing to fly the ship as his world fell apart, it’d have to fall to Obito to try to get something through to the force.

Carefully he shifted himself out from under Lee, leaving her to curl further into the warm spot he left behind, then rubbing at his face he sighed, stood, and motioned for Minato-sensei’s clone to follow. From there, he shrugged on a thick sweater as they entered the hallway to the main hold of the ship, ignoring the icy feeling of the floor against his bare feet and opened a cupboard to reveal the tea cups, kettle, and the tea bags all bought on Corellia at bargain prices.

For a moment he hesitated, hand hovering over only one of the cups, then against his instincts he pulled out a pair of them, set up the kettle on the table and the burner, and practically fell into one
of the seats and tiredly motioned for the force to do the same.

The force just smiled at him as he practically glided into his own seat across from Obito, familiar blue eyes landing on the tea kettle with fondness as they waited in silence for the water to boil.

Obito’s scarred fingers restlessly tapped against the metallic surface of the table, eyes locked on the shadow clone while his brain tried to fully move from the world of sleep to the land of the living, the shadows of Madara’s cave still haunting his every thought.

Finally, when the tea was done and he poured a cup for each of them, he said, “So, we have a few things to discuss.”

Obito held up a hand and his index finger as he began to list off his points of complaint, “First, I have a name, and it’s not Lee.”

The force’s brows furrowed, that amused and exasperated look returning, the kind Minato-sensei had often given Kakashi and Obito as he said, “Right, Obito, yes, this sentient is called Obito.”

“This sentient,” Obito spat out, motioning to himself in a rather grandiose manner, “Isn’t just called Obito, it is Uchiha Obito. It has worked very hard to be Uchiha Obito, even when no one in their right mind would ever want to be Uchiha Obito. It wouldn’t want to be anyone else, even mistaken for anyone else, not even Lee-shishou.”

The force actually had the nerve to look towards the ceiling, the way Minato-sensei would look at the sky as if praying to the gods for the patience needed to deal with Bakashi’s bullshit, “I realize this, Lee, you give your Uchiha Obito unprecedented attention, but that does not change that he is…”

Obito rubbed a hand through his hair, shaking his head and cutting him off before he could even get started, “No, no, you’re getting very confused again.”

Obito sighed, drank some tea to calm his nerves, then held up his hands to stop whatever the force might say and started again, “Look, we’ll start from the beginning. Lee is… a god, a very powerful god, like you, right?”

The force paused, thought this over, then nodded, “Yes, that’s right.”
Obito waited for a moment, let that thought sink in to the universe’s thick skull, then continued, “And I am a lowly mortal sentient human named Uchiha Obito, right?”

The force nodded, crossing his arms and shifting to a more comfortable position in his seat, “Yes.”

“Now, Lee may be a god, may… encompass more than her own body, may in some sense be a… Oh, I don’t know, a patron god of Konohagakure, but that doesn’t mean that I’m some sort of sub-manifestation of her.”

A pause, uncomprehending staring and an oddly blank look for Minato-sensei’s face, then, “I don’t understand.”

“Oh, for the love of Christ,” Obito cried in despair and exhaustion, “Lee doesn’t flow, Lee doesn’t… circulate. Lee just… stays there, inside of Lee, without any chakra necessarily touching anything else.”

This was accompanied by dramatic hand gestures, representing blood flowing through the body or else the universe the way the force was supposed to, and as the force watched it raised Minato-sensei’s eyebrows higher and higher.

“Lee’s chakra, Lee, doesn’t go into Obito. She and Obito don’t blend, don’t touch, but stay in their own cozy sacks of meat. Two entirely separate people, entities… She and I are not the same thing!”

It continued looking at him, now tilting Minato-sensei’s head with an open mouth, until finally, pointing at Obito it said, “Yes she does.”

“What?” Obito asked dully but the force seemed more confident now, his bearings returned and his eyes containing a spark of brilliant starlight as he leaned forward with a growing smile.

“Blend. I’ve seen it, on Naboo in the palace and again in your Konoha, you entered her and…”

Obito’s head hit the table, his hands clawing at the surface, and he let out a low moan of despair as he realized that he now had to explain how having sex, having the force apparently watch him and
Lee have sex, did not make him and Lee the same person…

Which meant that, apparently, in the force’s mind them having sex was basically just Lee divinely masturbating and using Obito as some sort of kinky sex toy.

With far too much effort he lifted his head, stared dully at the force, then said, “Let’s move on, shall we? Second, whatever you’re doing to shishou when she’s sleeping, your weird philosophical conversations, you’ve got to stop it.”

It blinked, regained its confused and almost hurt look, and asked, “What?”

“I realize she’s immortal, that she’s not really… human, but you’re killing her by inches,” Obito said, watching as the force’s eyes looked away, looked down instead at the table almost as if in guilt.

Which, at least, was a sign that it understood some of the problem and had some concern about it.

Leaning forward, hands on his tea, Obito noted, “You, of all people, should appreciate the fact that she’s trying to take care of a human body.”

He looked up at that, biting on Minato-sensei’s lips with a guilty nervousness that Obito had never seen in his sensei, and after a moment’s hesitation said, “I… I don’t like it when I can’t see her.”

Then, more forcefully, Minato-sensei’s hands curling around his own cup of tea he said, “I don’t like it when she leaves.”

It was a challenge, Obito thought, and they both knew it. Obito and Lee would go back to Konoha, Tobirama with them, and if the force kept this up then Lee would have to spend a week there just catching up on sleep. The threat of departure was everywhere.

Obito just watched him for a moment, taking him in piece by piece, wondering what he was supposed to say to that. Lee, he thought, had something of a soft spot for this thing or at least a sense of kinship that Obito couldn’t quite understand. Obito, on the other hand, found it very hard not to stab first and ask questions later even days after its first appearance.
So, he was likely far less understanding than Lee as he noted, “If you don’t let her leave sometimes then one day you’ll never see her again at all.”

The force paled, and Obito wondered if it had realized that was an option, maybe it had feared it in its heart of hearts but hadn’t really let itself believe it. He wore Minato-sensei’s expression from that other world, that other Konoha, on the night his wife had died and the nine-tailed beast had been unleashed. That same horror, dread, and disbelief as Konoha’s destruction sunk in.

They sat in uncomfortable silence for a few moments, the quiet only interrupted by the soft whirring of the ship’s components and creaking of metal. Somewhere, in the pilot’s chair, Obi-Wan dutifully drove them closer and closer to Naboo and the capital city. For a moment, Obito thought, the force made Minato-sensei look… So small.

Smaller than Obito had ever seen him, whittled down to the base of what he was and even further than that. Small and lost in the vacuum of space… And there was, Obito thought, some sort of kinship with Lee within him.

The fire of Obito’s indignation, his anger, his fear began to slowly burn out. As unwillingly he saw what Lee must have always seen inside the force. Obito found himself sighing, almost against his will, and then softly saying, “You know, you can talk to me instead.”

It looked up at him, eyes wide and so blue with that innocent surprise that made Minato-sensei look years younger, “What?”

“If you’re convinced that Lee and I are pretty much the same thing, or that I’m derivative of Lee, then it can’t make much of a difference talking to me rather than talking to her,” Obito said with a stiff and awkward shrug, “Give shishou a break and enter my dreams or whatever the hell it is you do.”

“You don’t mean that,” the force said with a rather knowing smile, apparently being aware enough to know that he and the sentient Uchiha Obito were not on great terms.

“I mean it, I just don’t necessarily like it,” Obito admitted with his own rueful smile, “All the same, shishou needs it, and you and I could probably use some sort of heart to heart.”

Not that Obito didn’t cringe at the very idea of it, but if it got it off Lee’s back then Obito could hardly complain.
He stared at Obito for too long of a moment, eyes cool and assessing, then the smile grew broader and he said almost slyly, “I see why she favors you so highly, Uchiha Obito, you truly are a right hand.”

A right hand, he’d been upgraded from skin cell to right hand, it was probably the highest compliment anyone had ever given him.

Obito grimaced, forced himself to blandly respond, “Well, I do try.”

The force reached across with Minato’s tanned and calloused hand, that smile just growing wider, “Call me Haruki.”

Obito eyed it, then took it, squeezing it a little too tightly and responding with his own strained smile, “Only if you actually start calling me Obito, you creepy son of a bitch.”

(No one could ever say that Obito was particularly good at making any sort of peace with God.)

It was and was not a relief to finally land on Naboo and step off the metallic ship and into the warm sunlight. It was a beautiful planet, a serene one of slowly flowing rivers, fields of flowers and forests, and the gleaming capital city which had retained its ancient splendor and beauty which so many other planets in the core of the galaxy had lost.

There was still beauty in it, even now, perhaps more than there had ever been before. Everything seemed so much brighter, the light clearer and cleaner than it had ever been, as if the light itself was singing in joyous rapture and life itself blooming like a rose.

The force hummed with contentment, joy, and life in a way that it never had before and it was reflected even on the landscape of Naboo.

And Obi-Wan wished he could flow into it himself, allow himself to find serenity and enlightenment within it, but he… His soul, in these past days, felt so heavy and so bitter, juxtaposed to the force in a way that he had never been before.
And afraid, because if this wasn’t the dark side, the ultimate path to the dark side, paved in the bricks of doubting and fearing the force itself, then Obi-Wan didn’t know what was.

Turning around and looking at the ship (already so improved by the puppet’s purchases and work on Corellia) he saw the three of them, the force’s puppet once again pulling on Lee Eru’s hand like an overeager child in a man’s body and Obito trudging along behind, each looking as foreign as the next on Naboo’s green soil. Without his connection to the force he would have no idea the strangeness, the unnatural strangeness, of what he was looking at.

Indeed, without any other jedi on Naboo, as they walked through the city to the palace where Queen Amidala would greet them the only glances they received were fond ones over the puppet’s antics with Lee, respect and a hint of fear over recognition of Lee and Obito, and curiosity at the foreign clothing of each of them. No one seemed to notice that they weren’t looking at a man at all.

He closed his eyes, even as the palace grew closer, and it felt as if his heart was beating so loud inside of his chest that it was deafening. Too soon they were inside of the regal golden and red palace, greeting the queen who despite her valor and her wisdom was so blind, so hopelessly blind just as the jedi on Coruscant insisted on staying blind.

Even though they, as much as Obi-Wan, must notice that everything had changed. Everything and nothing had changed.

“Greetings, Obi-Wan,” Padme said with a small, gracious smile from her throne, “It is good to see you.”

“And us as well?” Lee asked with raised eyebrows, knowing full well that Padme was certainly less than thrilled to see her. At once, Obi-Wan was reminded how young the queen was, as her expression turned into one of distaste before she could stop it.

“It is… always good to see you, Master Eru, as well as your apprentice,” Padme finally said, though her lack of enthusiasm was apparent in every note of her voice.

“Don’t worry, we’re not staying long,” Obito said drily, giving her a sly sid-eye from the unscarred half of his face, not facing the queen directly but instead positioned at an angle so he was half facing the throne and half facing Lee, “Just checking in on the embassy status and gathering supplies.”
“Oh,” Padme said, relaxing slightly at the idea that they would not be staying long at all, and Obi-Wan couldn’t help but notice how even her guards lining the throne room seemed to sigh with relief, “The embassy is coming along quite nicely. It is, of course, slow progress given the need to pour funding and time into rebuilding Naboo’s necessary structures but I expect it will be one of the first buildings completed after the hospitals, defense systems, and farms are rebuilt.”

“I suppose that’s the best we can hope for,” Lee said with something of a sigh, “Do you have a time estimate for that?”

Here Padme’s affront, and the affront of the guards, returned as Padme bit out as if she was only just stopping herself from shouting, “We are recovering from war, Master Eru, don’t think us ungrateful but…”

“That was not a complaint,” Lee said, holding up her hands in defense, “Just a question. Obito and I will be heading out to parts unknown shortly and it’d be nice if we had some idea of when it might be done by the time we get back.”

The puppet, Obi-Wan couldn’t help but notice, did nothing during all of this. He hovered beside Lee and Obito as always, content to spend his time looking at them, paying as little attention to Padme Amidala as he had Obi-Wan. Likely because, to the force, Padme was just another drop of water in the sea as Obi-Wan himself was.

Only important, in this moment, because she was speaking to Lee Eru and her apprentice.

“Parts unknown?” Padme asked.

“Literally,” Obito said and then motioned to the force for the first time, “Our… friend and copilot here, Haruki, has offered to drive us somewhere beyond the republic’s borders where we can pick up supplies of interest.”

Yes, the crystals for lightsabers, there was that too. That the force could so freely bestow upon shinobi, murderers and assassins embroiled in darkness, when it was something so precious to the order… something in Obi-Wan quaked at that.

He remembered when Qui-Gon had taken him to the cavern for his own crystals, he remembered it guarded by members of the order, he remembered the thrum of the force inside of the cave and
how each crystal seemed to almost glow with the force, as it would glow when the blade was built. He remembered his hand hovering over each and finally over a single, clear, blue shard and how he had felt such… Clarity, clarity and serenity, as his hand had curled over it.

“Padawan Kenobi?”

Obi-Wan looked up, caught Padme’s worried look as well as Lee and Obito’s darker understanding as if they knew exactly where his mind had wandered. The puppet though didn’t look at him at all, just continued to stand in the light, painted golden by the way it fell through the arching windows, and looking almost divine for it.

“Sorry, my mind wandered,” Obi-Wan said, “You asked something, your majesty?”

She looked at him fondly, far more fondly than she looked at Obito or Lee, as she undoubtedly repeated her question, “I asked whether you were chaperoning our shinobi friends yet again and if Qui-Gon was with you.”

“Ah,” Obi-Wan said, “I am actually on my trials for knighthood for this, I’m afraid Qui-Gon is on Coruscant as far as I know. If I succeed, then he will be taking Anakin for a padawan soon.”

Strange, how only a few weeks ago, that had seemed the most pressing issue on Obi-Wan’s mind. Now the worry of Qui-Gon and Anakin Skywalker seemed so very far away and drifting further with each passing moment.

At Anakin’s name her smile grew even fonder, “I’m glad, I am glad that he’s, that you, are doing so well.”

It was almost like being cut with a blade, he thought, because he should be. If things were as they were supposed to be then he was doing more than well, they all were, and yet…

“Are you travelling with the shinobi then to… outside of the republic,” she hesitated on this last bit, likely could hardly comprehend the idea of it, but appeared unwilling to question Lee or Obito too much about it.

Likely because Obito and Lee too must come from somewhere outside of the republic.
Obi-Wan opened his mouth, then hesitated, because he didn’t know. He had commed back to the council but they had thought him mad, some had suggested he come home after Naboo no matter Lee and Obito’s plans to return home to meditate. Master Yoda though had suggested, even with his doubt about the force-puppet, that Obi-Wan continue on with them as his trial was not about the length but about the task.

Keeping an eye on Lee and Obito no matter the chaos they might cause, even if the chaos they caused was… Well, this.

More importantly though, he thought, that even beneath the force’s muddled joy and singing he thought that the force was guiding him to this. Somewhere, where the force remained sane and true and all that it ever was, it pushed Obi-Wan to complete this journey no matter where it led.

And Obi-Wan must have faith in something.

He swallowed, opened his mouth again, and with a confidence he didn’t feel said, “Yes, I will be helping to pilot them as well.”

Something, in the force, clicked into position and a ghost of the force’s serenity and peace filled him. As if, for just this moment, Obi-Wan had made the correct decision. Of course, he wondered, with the force being what it was it was hard to know if there was a correct decision anymore…

Obi-Wan, for a moment, allowed himself to doubt, and feared himself for it.
Obito’s grand voyage to dimensions untold and unnumbered with Eru Lee was not the first time that him, Lee, and the nidaime hokage had been stuffed together into the same place and same time. It was just the first time that it involved an active mission as well as alarming scrutiny regarding Obito’s bizarre love life.

It wasn’t even close to the first time. The first time was very early into his apprenticeship and was around when Obito realized that Lee had been perfectly serious when she had said that the shodaime hokage was probably dying to make Obito an honorary grandson. She’d just made it sound more like an either-or thing when she’d offered the fourteen-year-old Obito his apprenticeship. Obito, at the time, having just been disowned by his family and never spoken to the shodaime hokage in his life had found it dubious at best and written it off as some strange attempt by Eru Lee to lift his sinking spirits.

He had yet to discover that, on the whole, Lee didn’t really do pep talks and would certainly not stoop to something like lying for the sake of Obito’s ego.

He quickly found out about two weeks after he’d gotten out of the hospital, a week and a half after Lee had shanghaied him into being her apprentice, that Eru Lee hadn’t been making it up, and that if it was up to the shodaime then Obito was both going to become Lee’s apprentice and become honorary grandson.

There Obito was, minding his own business in the Sunday marketplace as he waited for either Rin or Kakashi to appear from the ether to join him. He looked at the assorted stalls with his single remaining eye and reminding himself regretfully that he couldn’t rely on the Uchiha dime anymore and it was in poor taste to borrow from the Hatakes more than he already was. Even if that dango smelled divine, he could use some new sharpened kunai, and Hatake Sakumo was generous and grateful enough that he’d probably shell out the cash needed even though he was already effectively paying Obito’s rent. The fact was that he probably couldn’t afford it until Lee-shishou started taking him on missions.

Which, he’d thought with a rather annoyed sigh, might never happen given the constant shrugging Lee partook in whenever Obito had brought the topic up. Last time, the day before, she’d just sort of shrugged and said something about England or maybe if the world exploded and that it wasn’t quite desperate enough yet to start badgering Minato-sensei for work and if Obito wanted petty cash he’d best get to those D-ranks.

He realized he probably wouldn’t be doing anything else if she hadn’t come along, nobody was about to take the dead-last ex Uchiha on as an apprentice and he still couldn’t believe that Lee had gone out of her way for it, but it’d still be nice to start collecting some cash for himself without
Or, for that matter, just having something to do to take his mind off the sheer surreal feeling of being home again. He kept waking in the middle of the night in the dark, hopelessly confused and afraid, and convinced for a second that it was all just some clever genjutsu and that it would crack any moment under the sharingan and he’d be back in the cave. It hadn’t really sunk in yet that he’d never be in that cave again.

Or, for that matter, that he’d likely never step foot inside the compound again or his grandmother’s house. Only what they’d thrown into the street had been given to him, his grandmother’s belongings, those few items left from his mother and father were gone now, distributed back into the clan to never be seen by Obito again.

The small home away from home that he’d made for himself in the Hatake compound was all that he had left.

It was thinking on things best left buried, the money he didn’t have, the fact that neither Rin nor Kakashi showed any time of appearing yet (typical for Kakashi, as he insisted on being fashionably late to everything, a bit atypical and rather hurtful that Rin forgot) that he found himself running into a tall, tan, humanoid brick wall of chakra.

Obito stumbled backwards, blinking with his one remaining eye, and craning his head upward to catch sight of the eternally young shodaime Senju Hashirama beaming down at him like Obito was the greatest thing he’d ever seen since sliced bread.

Obito opened his mouth, looked to his left and right wondering if there was someone else the man was looking for, and then on seeing nobody obvious looked back at the shodaieme and asked, “Um, can I help you, shodaieme-sama?”

It wasn’t quite as formal as it should have been. If it was anyone but a Senju the elders would have been appalled at Obito’s lack of tact (and even then probably still would have been slightly miffed as Senju Hashirama was still more or less considered the Senju that wasn’t a complete bastard), but Hashirama just grinned wider, “Obito-kun, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Obito blinked, felt his eyebrows rise and his mouth twist into a confused sort of half smile and half grimace as he asked dumbly, “Meet me?”
As far as Obito knew, no one had ever been dying to line up and meet the one and only Uchiha Obito. Summarily ignored by his clan, summarily ignored by his classmates, the only one who was his number one fan was probably Hatake Kakashi. Except Bakashi was kind of a freak that way and was more likely making use of his and Obito’s odd friendship to make a statement.

Or, at least, so Obito had sometimes suspected before the Kannabi bridge.

That, apparently, was all the shodaime needed for words to just start flooding out of his mouth, “Well, I was going to go and see you in the hospital, but it was family only, and then they were barely letting your sensei or teammates visit. Plus, Tobi said that it probably wasn’t the greatest idea for me to go and visit given that you gave your eye to, well, you know. I am so sorry about that, I wish things could be different, I really do, but…”

He paused, caught himself and shook off what looked like genuine grief for the way the clan was, as if Senju Hashirama had any control over what the Uchiha did and didn’t do, and continued to ramble, “Well, then you were moving into the Hatake compound. Which was very nice of them and I’m glad, otherwise I would have offered since we certainly have enough room. Not that Lee wouldn’t have either, but her place is a bit small for even one person. Then Lee was taking you on as an apprentice and, well, I didn’t really have a chance until today.”

Finally, the words stopped. Obito, with his empty eye still itching like always beneath the headband, his scarred side aching from even the slightest breeze, could only stare and ask himself what was even happening. More, what he was supposed to do about it.

Was he supposed to say thanks? He supposed he should, except he’d never talked to the shodaime hokage before today, he hadn’t even realized the man knew his name and here he was babbling he’d actively gone looking for Obito. Obito certainly hadn’t expected an invitation to come and crash at the Senju compound of all places after getting the boot from his own clan.

Which, wouldn’t that have been awkward? Running into his cousins in the street was bad enough, dealing with that on top of moving in with the Šenju brothers, Obito didn’t even want to think about it.

So, all that came out of his mouth was, “A chance to do what?”

Hashirama hardly seemed offended as he instead lunged forward, took Obito’s hand in his, and began pulling him down the street, “Have tea of course!”
“Wait, what?” Obito asked, now pulling backwards but to no avail, the shodaime was on what Lee-shishou would probably term a mission from God, and as it was neither Rin nor Kakashi were anywhere in sight to save him.

“It’s great, you can meet Tobi, he’s been dying to talk to you too. Then of course you have to show me the mokuton, and hey, I can teach you how to carve furniture! It’s surprisingly useful and a great hit at parties.”

“Look, that’s great but I’m kind of meeting some people and…” Obito tried to pry his hand out of the shodaime’s but then had to skid to a halt as the man came to a sudden stop. Hashirama turned back to look at him, eyes somehow suddenly larger and looking genuinely hurt as he tried to smile, “Oh, right, I forgot that you probably have plans and…”

Why did Obito suddenly feel like he had spent the past ten minutes gleefully kicking this man’s puppy?

Obito, against his better judgement, found himself sighing and relenting, “No, it’s alright, they’re both late anyways and probably not coming.”

Well, maybe Kakashi would but Rin...

Looking back over his shoulder mournfully at the market, empty of her presence, he was starting to think that she might have never intended to show up at all.

So, it was probably for the best that the shodaime just grinned and pulled Obito up to the Senju compound, sat him down at a too wide table next to Senju Tobirama, and started pouring tea. Which…

While Senju Hashirama was a bit too… buoyant to live up to his reputation, Senju Tobirama, even just sitting there quietly and drinking tea somehow more than lived up to everything both the textbooks and the clan had ever said about him. There was this air, Obito thought, of quiet competence about the man and a shrewd overpowering intelligence that, combined with his chakra and his exotic features, was simply intimidating.

Still, the first thing the man did when he glanced at Obito, other than making some note of sympathy about Obito’s kidnapping by his brother, was to offer him a small, approving, smile and a strange comment that, perhaps, Uchiha Obito had surpassed his potential in a way that even
Uchiha Kagami hadn’t.

And it was there, awkwardly describing the limits of his latest and greatest blood technique, wondering what the hell was even happening anymore and if Rin really did show up to the marketplace, that Lee eventually found him.

And while it wasn’t perhaps the start of a beautiful friendship, Obito liked to think it was the start of something. Even if that something was somehow, inconceivably, becoming an honorary Senju.

For someone who could barely read Basic, Anakin thought bitterly, the nidaime hokage sure could rack up the ancient jedi records.

Anakin, slumping in his seat, glanced around again to make sure that he really was the only one close to his age in the archives yet again. He was, the only others there was that ancient jedi that seemed in here about as much as Anakin as well as a few other jedi knight regulars.

And they weren’t even glaring at him anymore as he spoke into the recorder Tobirama had left for him. Like Anakin was just another part of the scenery.

Worse, he thought glancing glumly at the data pad in front of him, filled with the collection of archive records Tobirama Senju had gathered, Anakin wasn’t even halfway through yet.

At this rate he was going to be spending every spare minute of his life in this place reading through transcribed boring old scrolls from jedi who’d died centuries ago. He’d be stuck in here until he was as old as Master Yoda, maybe even older.

Anakin probably shouldn’t be thinking that. This was probably really important, the nidaime certainly seemed to think so with the way he kept sending records Anakin’s way and how much time he seemed to devote to studying Basic. All the same…

Anakin didn’t know, but he just hadn’t expected it to be so boring. That sense of urgency and unease from lunch with the nidaime had worn off and as classes had gone on, the ghost of Minato Namikaze had yet to reappear with any real significance, and Lee, Obito, and Obi-Wan were off on Naboo with Padme, Anakin just found it that much harder not even just to concentrate but to care in the first place.
As it was, he kind of wished that he was off with them right now on Naboo. Sure, he didn’t want to step anywhere near the puppet of Minato Namikaze, not after last time, but the idea of being on Naboo again with Padme already instead of waiting the force only knew how many years to see her again, of being off on an adventure again with Lee, Obito, and even Obi-Wan, maybe seeing his mother again… Well, it was hard not to want that.

Besides, Anakin thought with another pout towards the data pad, the bane of his existence, it wasn’t like they were going to find anything in these glitchy ancient records anyways. Anakin sincerely doubted there’d be some giant neon sign in one of the texts saying, “So, you want to know what the force wants? So, you want to know what to do about? Well, sit down son, and let me hand you the answer.”

Not that he was, days later, even sure what the nidaime really wanted from this or what he was expecting. He just said go read, kind of glared a little, and then Anakin nodded his head and sat down and read even though it was all pointless and stupid and Anakin could barely remember who was supposed to be who in these nerf-herding things.

Anakin, rubbing at his face, read through the words again in as interested a tone he could manage (which at this point was just sort of a dull monotone), “Revan had many masters, Zhar, Dorak, Master Kae before Kae left for the Wars. Toward the end of his training, he sought out many to learn techniques. It is said that he returned to his first master at the end of his training, in order to learn how he might best leave the Order.”

Anakin paused the tape as he groaned and hit his head against the desk. This just had to end soon, it had too, or Anakin would go as crazy as some of the slaves who’d been too long in the spice dens or had his head bashed in too many times by hutt masters.

Lifting his head in despair, Anakin forced himself to read on no matter how blurry the characters were getting through Anakin’s exhaustion and boredom, “When the Mandalorian threat first arose, Revan and Malak were eager to defeat the enemy of the republic. But the council thought it best if we moved with care and caution. The true threat, the council feared, had not yet revealed itself. But Revan would not be dissuaded. Charismatic and powerful, it was inevitable many of the Order would flock to Revan’s seemingly noble cause. Malak was the first to join his closest friend. Others followed, many of our youngest and brightest, intent on saving the galaxy from the Mandalorian threat.”

Wait, Mandaorian threat? And who the hell was Malak? Wasn’t he just reading about Revan’s training or something with the jedi? With dawning horror Anakin realized that he must have skipped about thirty paragraphs. Once again, his head fell to the table and he clawed at the wooden surface trying to muffle his scream of frustration and despair.
He’d probably get yelled at about that too, not by Tobirama who probably wouldn’t give a bantha shit, but by his array of instructors in the morning. Somehow his teachers could always tell when he wasn’t releasing his feelings into the force properly. Which, Anakin dared them to put up with what he had to right now, he just dared them.

Between realizing that the jedi probably weren’t ever going to let him see his mother again and he had no idea what happened to her, only the distant relief that at least she wasn’t going to die on Tatooine like he’d always envisioned, being stuck here while Lee, Obito, and Obi-Wan were off on Naboo with Padme, becoming the nidaime hokage’s translation gofer, and being just about the only jedi in the galaxy who believed the force was kind of crazy, Anakin thought he was dealing with his feelings pretty damn well.

Lee and Obito, he couldn’t help but think a bit ruefully and with a touch of regret, never would have said that Anakin could handle it better by pretending he didn’t have feelings at all. Or like meditation and wishing his feelings away into the force would somehow solve all his problems.

They certainly would have agreed that the force trying to take over Anakin’s body that one time (or whatever that whole thing was supposed to be) was something Anakin should be really worried about.

Feelings never would have even come up in the first place.

“Anakin, my young friend, has your data pad done something to offend you?”

Anakin looked up, blinked, and straightened as he caught sight of Qui-Gon Jinn staring down at him in amusement. For the first time in weeks Anakin felt himself break out into a grin, “Mr. Qui-Gon!”

“Please, Anakin, Master Qui-Gon,” Qui-Gon corrected with that fond smile that he was always giving to Anakin, Obi-Wan, or even Lee and Obito when he thought they weren’t looking, “And perhaps a bit softer, we are in the archives after all.”

Anakin flushed slightly but his smile didn’t dim, instead he leaned forward and whisper shouted with glee, “I haven’t seen you in ages.”

This wasn’t true, it’d only been a few weeks, but it’d felt like ages. Given that Qui-Gon was one of
the few people Anakin knew here, and the jedi he knew the best, when he’d disappeared with Obi-Wan for the first few weeks Anakin had felt somewhat adrift. The closest thing he’d had to a lifeline, so far, was Tobirama Senju who Anakin had only known through stories from Lee and Obito.

“Yes, things have been… busy,” Qui-Gon finally settled on, looking almost as exhausted as Anakin felt.

Anakin probably should have felt bad but all he could do was sort of slump with relief, watching as the light shone through particles of dust coming through the holo windows of the temple, and said, “Oh, good, so you guys are dealing with it.”

“Dealing with it?” Qui-Gon asked, a dark brow raising while Anakin just shrugged haplessly.

“Well, you know, the force,” Anakin said, then on Qui-Gon’s rather blank expression expanded, “The masters, the council, must be dealing with it, right?”

For a moment Qui-Gon said nothing, then he was smiling again, like Anakin had just said something adorable and said, “I’m afraid, Anakin, that I am always dealing with the force in one manner or another. You, my young friend, are as well.”

“No,” Anakin dismissed in frustration, “I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about, you know, the force recently.”

“The force recently?” Qui-Gon repeated dumbly, but here, at least, a note of some wariness entered his expression. Like he had some idea what Anakin was talking about, that there was a difference between the force of today and the force of even a month ago.

“Mr. Senju said Obi-Wan commed the council,” Anakin said, then slowly as he remembered that though a master for a number of years Qui-Gon wasn’t on the council himself, asked, “Did they… not tell you?”

It was probably too awkward to ask, if the grimace on Qui-Gon’s face was anything to go by. Still Qui-Gon just rubbed at his beard somewhat awkwardly and admitted, “Well, Anakin, the council does not always divulge comms from missions, even to masters of padawans currently in their trials. Especially, in fact, to masters of padawans currently in their trials.”

Which meant they probably hadn’t told anyone, because, like Tobirama suspected they probably
hadn’t believed a word of it. Just the same way that Anakin’s instructors kept writing off Anakin’s overactive imagination and his unorthodox questions, insisting he pay attention to his studies on the history of other orders of force wielders on ancient planets, on paradoxes and heretical beliefs in the force.

Except, Anakin didn’t want to have to be the one to tell master Qui-Gon that everything had changed and that no one was ready to believe it. Or, maybe, that nothing had changed but just the way they were looking at it had.

Although I assume they would have told me if something had happened to Obi-Wan,” Qui-Gon now muttered to himself, that concerned look on his face growing, and Anakin had to quickly interrupt before he got the wrong idea.

Oh, he’s fine I think. Or at least, Tobirama said he’s fine and he’s been talking to Lee and Obito pretty much every day,” or at least, as far as Anakin knew they were debriefing pretty much daily. It sounded like Obito and Lee were constantly in some kind of a war with Obi-Wan for the comms with the victor always a bit uncertain. Still, Tobirama hadn’t said anything had happened to Obi-Wan, just that he was a bit frustrated and kept trying to talk to the jedi with little to no luck.

“It’s just… Well,” Anakin paused, rubbed at his head, and decided there was no helping it except to just say it, “I think the force has kind of shown up in a fake body to pal around with Lee and Obito and nobody’s really sure what to do about it.”

Qui-Gon’s brow furrowed, he blinked once or twice, then still looking completely baffled he said, “I’m afraid I don’t understand, Anakin. What are you trying to say?”

“The force,” Anakin said slowly, feeling very stupid as he enunciated every word, tried to get the non-concept solidly across, “Showed up in a copy of a body, a shadow clone, and is on Lee and Obito’s ship with Obi-Wan and he… won’t go away I guess.”

It was more than that, a lot more than that, but Anakin didn’t really know too many of the details himself. Or he did but they somehow just seemed less important, like the force itself didn’t really consider it all that important except that it was apparently what Lee wanted. The crystals weren’t the point, even getting Lee to travel way outside the republic in a broken-down ship wasn’t the point, the point was just…

Anakin didn’t know, but whatever the point was you weren’t going to go and find it in the details.
Qui-Gon didn’t seem to be getting it though as he leaned back, looking at Anakin, and repeating Anakin’s words slowly, “You’re saying that the force has created a body…”

“A shadow clone, like… You remember that thing that Obito made on Tatooine, that looked like me in Watto’s shop?” Anakin said, watching as Qui-Gon grimaced then nodded.

“Yeah, well, the force made one of those so that he could go and talk to Lee.”

Now Qui-Gon looked really confused, his face a mess of furrowed wrinkles of thought, he rubbed at his forehead and asked, “The force, you’re saying, is trying to reach out to Lee Eru specifically but felt the need to do it in a… false body?”

When he put it like that it did sound kind of silly. Anakin and other jedi reached out to the force all the time, and Anakin was pretty sure if the force really wanted to get a message specifically to Anakin then he’d have no trouble hearing it. Hadn’t, in fact, when the force had singled him out that one time in class before Anakin had driven him off.

You’d think that the force reaching out to Lee would be as easy as pie. Except, well, it was a bit more complicated than that.

“Well, he’s managed to do it before without the body, but you know Lee’s not really a part of the force so it’s kind of difficult. Plus, he doesn’t really just want to talk to her like that, he wants…”

Well, that was the trouble, Anakin both knew and didn’t know that answer. Even though he’d been a part of the force in those moments, had felt overwhelmed and swallowed whole and perfectly understanding of what the force did and didn’t want, of everything the force was and wasn’t, the memories always faded when Anakin returned back to himself. They were like… Not like real memories, but like things someone had told you that you pretended you could remember.

Like his mother telling him about a day when they still were slaves of Gardulla, when the sand had been this vibrant mix of yellow, red, and purple in the sunset and she had thought it was the most beautiful thin she’d ever seen.

Anakin couldn’t remember that day, and yet, his mind painted a soft memory of what it was supposed to look like. Memories of being the force, of seeing Lee through the thousands of stars that served the force as eyes, was kind of like that only ten times fuzzier.
“I would hardly call the force a he, Anakin. More, Lee, strange as she is, is connected to the force as all life is,” Qui-Gon said, and Anakin could see he was trying to be funny but was more disturbed than anything else. The force, if Anakin chose to listen to it, was whispering all sorts of things of the seeds of Qui-Gon’s fear, of Anakin perhaps being too old and too strange after all and…

“Right, sorry, I just…” he trailed off, turned back to the data pad and the saga of Darth Revan, “I guess it doesn’t really matter. It’s stupid, I shouldn’t have bothered you.”

He didn’t look up to see Qui-Gon’s regret, to watch whatever apology he’d say to Anakin to brush this moment under the rug or make it somehow a seed of something more enlightening where Anakin was wrong and everyone else was right. Instead, his eyes wandered down the page and caught onto a passage he hadn’t read yet, a quote from Darth Malak himself that had somehow wormed its way into the jedi archives, “Savior, conqueror, hero, villain. You are all things, Revan… and yet you are nothing. In the end, you belong to neither the light nor the darkness. You will forever stand alone.”

They were leaving Naboo far too soon, or maybe it was that they weren’t leaving Naboo soon enough, Obito couldn’t quite decide.

On the one hand, Naboo while beautiful, was also filled with swamps, mosquitos, reconstruction, desperate poverty brought about by war, and a queen who mildly tolerated their presence at best. Obito supposed he could appreciate that she was anything but a despot, was doing her job with a vigor and commitment that one shouldn’t expect from a girl her age, but it was still slightly grating to essentially be all but thrown out of the kingdom after only a few days of gathering supplies and visiting the embassy.

(Though he supposed he should make that mostly visiting the embassy. Most supplies they’d gathered on Corellia for good reason, although Naboo was making a recovery it was only about a month or so since the reclaiming of the planet and the scars still showed. Anything brought here was redistributed for the people of Naboo and mostly consisted of emergency food rations, construction material, and medical supplies all sent by the benevolent senate. The same senate who, while being too busy sitting on their asses to supply troops to drive off the invaders, had not apparently been too busy to look good by sending aid to the ailing planet.

Padme didn’t seem to mind so much though so long as it got the job done.)

On the other hand, space was both vast and cramped. Obito enjoyed being able to walk on a planet
and see trees and fields again along with a bright blue sky. More, the sooner he got on that ship the sooner he’d be back to close quarters with Lee, a rather morose Kenobi who now spent every other second either glumly staring into space and questioning his existence or else meditating, and Obito’s latest and greatest friend Haruki the living representation of all chakra in the known universe wearing his sensei’s body like a glorified costume.

It didn’t really matter how he felt about it, Obito supposed, because one way or another Kenobi Obi-Wan was back in the copilot’s seat along with Haruki, copilot extraordinaire and they were off to infinity and beyond once again. Only this time heading a little bit further out than good old Naboo.

God, Obito wished he could drink some tea right now to calm his nerves, or else go straight for the sake. He was even tempted to, except landing and takeoffs in this hunk of junk he and Lee had bought were unbelievably rough, even with Haruki being the best possible pilot who could ever possess a human body.

That bit actually, Kenobi had told them in one of his recent moody existential dazes. The kind that had only started coming after they’d landed on Naboo and he’d made his rather depressed announcement of continuing with them as a guide on their quest.

They’d all been sitting in the main hold of the ship after sunset one night, eating the cheap Corellian variety of instant ramen that Lee had bought far too much of. Past them, on the bridge Obito could see Namikaze Minato’s fingertips glowing eerily pale in the dim light of the controls as Haruki once again flew through hundreds upon hundreds of system upgrades to what he had gleefully termed the worst ship they could have bought on Coruscant.

Obito, as always, with the brief glimpse of his sensei’s hunched form, golden hair, and the tanned sliver of his face, couldn’t help but find the whole thing damned unnerving.

And, since he had for that moment the barest illusions of privacy, he decided to comment on it, “Does anyone else find it… really unnerving how he just… does that?”

“Does what?” Lee asked, her now chronic exhaustion making her entirely uninterested as she continued to shove noodles into her mouth.

“That he can just sit down like that, for a few hours, type streams of garbage on a keyboard and make this well… Not this…” Obito said motioning to their ship. Because while he certainly wasn’t an expert, and was only about a quarter of the way through that damned flight manual, even he could tell the difference in how the ship felt flying after the force had even spent a few hours
working on it on Corellia.

Kenobi snorted, looking entirely unimpressed and almost as exhausted as Lee, as he continued to swirl his noodles counter clockwise with an even rhythm. Kenobi’s hanging around with at the shinobi loser table, and not even looking forced into it, was a new development. However, Obito guessed that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, that or Kenobi needed to commiserate just as much as Obito did and since the jedi weren’t listening he was finally joining the bandwagon of “the jedi suck”.

Obito wasn’t sure this made them friends or not, but it was as Lee would put it, perhaps the start of a beautiful friendship.

At seeing Obito’s raised eyebrows Kenobi just sighed and said, “Of course he can.”

“Of course?” Obito asked, wondering why he wasn’t supposed to be kind of shocked by this, or at least not mildly unnerved.

Obi-Wan didn’t even motion over towards the shadow clone, didn’t even glance at it, just calmly said, “Consider, for a moment Obito, exactly what he is. He is the truest incarnation of the force that has ever existed, more so than even Anakin Skywalker.”

“And?” Obito couldn’t help but ask, feeling like he was missing some larger point that was apparently obvious to a jedi.

“Haven’t you ever wondered how Anakin was so mechanically inclined, so gifted with languages, so coordinated and intuitive, to the point where he almost seemed to know things before they would happen?” Kenobi asked.

Obito supposed he had, and he had figured chakra had something to do with some of it, but he’d also just assumed part of that was just who Anakin was. Anakin was just a mechanical genius, could probably make a hell of a seal master one day if he had any inclination. Not so much like Minato-sensei but more of that off the wall sort of instinctive genius you saw in Uzumaki Kushina’s fuinjutsu work.

“That’s the force,” Kenobi said, looking for a moment like his old serene and self-assured self no matter the fact that he was willingly eating cheap dinner with shinobi.
"That’s the force?" Obito repeated, feeling his eyebrows raise and somewhat insulted by the idea that the force, chakra, was going to take credit for all of that, “Look, I get that the force is great and all. I have chakra too, but it’s not responsible for…”

“The force is,” Kenobi interjected, “It is not merely a guide, not merely a host of the knowledge of all beings, of all souls that have passed from the mortal plane, the blood and drive of life itself, but even more than the sum of those parts. The best and brightest, Obito Uchiha, are always connected to the force.”

Obito considered that for a moment, realized he was supposed to be getting something out of this larger point Kenobi Obi-Wan was making. Which, mostly he was still insulted by the idea of it, as if the civilian counterpart of Obito would have been a drooling idiot just by virtue of not having enough chakra. He supposed this was a different universe, and the force clearly was the force and different enough from chakra but…

Obito glanced over at Lee to see if she was parsing any of this, she gave him the slightest of smiles and the slightest of shrugs, as if to say it wasn’t making too much sense to her either.

Obito just shook his head, “And that means?”

“It means that he is far more than what even Anakin Skywalker is capable of,” Obi-Wan said, and now something flashed in his eyes, a restrained thunderstorm, “It means that he is the force. Thus, he is all knowledge of slicing that has ever existed, of piloting that has ever existed, of mechanics, biomechanics, any and every development of sentient knowledge exists within him. At everything he does he will be the best by his very nature. This is less than child’s play for him. That he even bothers to upgrade this ship by hand, rather than manipulating the bits himself through the force, is only because he enjoys playing he part of a human man.”

After that particular tirade Kenobi had forced himself to breathe out, to let go of whatever frustration and anger existed within him, and looked up dully afterwards with a wry sort of smile, “My apologies, I have been... frustrated as of late.”

And at that, it was Obito’s turn to laugh at Kenobi’s dead-pan humor and rather dry wit. Because frustrated as of late was, perhaps, the understatement of the millennium.

So here they were now, days later, with a jedi and the best damn pilot who could ever possibly exist. And the pilot in question, all grins and looking over his shoulder as they took off, once again not even bothering to glance out the windshield or at any of the controls, looked nothing like the part.
“I will show you all the wonders of my worlds and creations on our way, Lee,” he said, excitement lacing his voice the way it would Minato-sensei’s when he was too caught up in fuinjutsu work on and on the verge of a break through, “The forests of Endor, the auroras and glaciers of Hoth, and certainly the mountains of Alderaan before we leave the core planets…”

His eyes were so blue, Obito wondered if they were bluer than Minato-sensei’s were, and if they somehow appeared more devoted and shining with light when they looked at Lee than Minato-sensei’s had. He looked at her… Well, the way Obito imagined he had so often looked at Rin, like every cell in his body was turned towards her like a sunflower’s head towards the light.

“That’s nice,” Lee commented rather drily, once again looking more awkward and unimpressed than anything else (certainly a balm to Obito’s ego if nothing else), “But you know, I would like to get to this mysterious unknown planet of yours at some point, Haruki.”

He flushed, and god did he have to pretend to be human enough to flush or do it just like a chagrined Namikaze Minato would, and said, “Right, yes, of course.”

He was silent for a few blessed moments, allowing Kenobi to glare out of the windshield while they exited the atmosphere, slowly cruising them forward wordlessly in tandem with Haruki as the force undoubtedly directed Kenobi wherever it felt like they should go.

Which, apparently, was going to be this Alderaan if Haruki had anything to say about it.

Of course, before a minute was even up, the force cracked, “You know, Lee, I could simply tell you what’s happening in Coruscant, Naboo, or anywhere at all. There’s hardly a need to go there yourself.”

“That’s not a reason not to go,” Lee pointed out with raised eyebrows and a rather disapproving expression, one matched by the growing panic on Kenobi’s face. It seemed to be sinking in for their jedi guide that he would be stuck with all of them in what had to be his personal hell until they finally did get back to Coruscant.

Which, the lord his god, had no inclination of doing.

The force considered Lee’s response for a moment, tilted Minato’s head sideways in thought, flicking controls casually to set the ship into hyper speed and autopilot, and then, turning his seat to
face them fully said, “Actually, it is.”

“I can’t see you, Lee,” he said, directly staring at Lee, deathly serious and oddly somber for the persona he’d tended to take on in the brief time he’d joined their pitifully small crew.

“What?” Obito asked, and god it hadn’t even started talking and Obito was already lost in the cryptic bullshit the force insisted on using.

“You are not derivative of me, I did not make you, you exist outside my greater pattern. I can’t see the paths you take or paths that merge with yours,” the force calmly expanded, “Time spent on Coruscant, Naboo, any place at all means that it becomes… muddled. I can’t see Coruscant, Lee, if you’re on Coruscant.”

That, at least, seemed to grab Kenobi’s attention enough so that he too turned away from the windshield to stare open mouthed at the force. However, there was also a dawning realization on his face, as if everything was finally after weeks only now clicking together.

Obito, unfortunately, was still very lost, “What?”

Haruki leaned back in his chair, pressed his fingers together as he closed his eyes in thought, and for yet another moment Obito was ten again watching Minato-sensei as he considered a particularly tricky problem of seals or ninjutsu design.

Finally, a grin, then his eyes flew open and with a few typed commands a pale blue holographic display of what looked vaguely like a chess board appeared between the four of them. It flickered as Haruki’s hands ran through the pixels of light, motioning towards the pieces, “Consider a game board.”

He motioned towards the pieces with his hands, all eyes locked on him as he explained, “There are certain rules that bind any given piece, a limited board, and only so many possibilities, so many paths, that exist within the game. Every sentient, then, is something like a game piece. Though it contains many possible paths that it might take, any given move in a single moment, it is constrained by the laws of the games and the possibilities within the game. Left, right, forward, backwards, these are the actions available to any given piece on the game board of the universe.”

Here his eyes brightened, and he leaned forward, plucking one of the holographic pieces from the board and holding it in a hand, “But let’s pretend, for a moment, that there is a piece from an
entirely different game with entirely different rules. It can move in the same directions as the other pieces, can take similar possible paths, however it can also do what no other piece can. It can move up.”

Here Haruki lifted the piece off the board, grinning wildly as it hovered above the other pieces locked to the grid below it, “The game has changed, there now exist possibilities unforeseen outside of the limited realm of the game, an entirely new dimension if you will. The future is uncertain because assumptions that have existed for billions upon billions of years are suddenly false, the rules are gone, and any move made even by ordinary pieces after a move like this has to be recalculated based on the old rules and what little is known of these new rules for this strange alien piece.”

With a typed command the holo disappeared, leaving Haruki sitting in front of them like a particularly proud lecturer, “Except, of course, that I don’t know the rules of the new piece. I can guess, do guess, based on what I’ve seen before, but I don’t know the rules of the other game or even how these moves might affect my own pieces. So, any time the piece makes a move I can’t predict, which might be any time at all…”

“Then everything is in flux,” Lee finished for him while he just nodded, evidently quite pleased that Lee had managed to put two and two together.

Kenobi, leaned back in his seat, looking like he’d been hit by a brick wall, “So the reason the force, visions of the future, have been so muddled isn’t because of the Sith, it’s because any time Lee makes a decision…”

Kenobi then realized once again that the force paid minimal attention to him and looked with annoyance over towards Obito who, with a nod and a wry smile, repeated the jedi’s words, “So the reason that the jedi can’t predict the future at the moment is because Lee has been mucking up all of your predictions just by existing.”

“More or less,” Haruki said with a shrug of his shoulders, apparently unconcerned by his sudden lack of prescience, “It’s… easier, the longer you are here, and while you quarantined yourself to Tatooine it was almost unnoticeable. However, it’s still very difficult especially when I have to… guess, especially for… central events. I have never had to guess before, never had to calculate, when everything began I knew all possibilities. It was a closed system and the universe was already written…”

He stood then, stepped out of the seat and towards Lee, ignoring the way Kenobi’s eyes tracked his movements or how Lee leaned ever so slightly backwards with an alarmed look in her eyes, “Miracles, that is the word in Basic for it, you are capable of miracles, Lee. Of paths that cannot exist, cannot be traversed, by the laws I have written for the universe, and yet now exist all the
Obito, politely, coughed as Haruki stared off happily into space, contemplating the divine majesty that was Eru Lee and her ability to royally screw over even an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God’s plans.

“Right,” Obito drawled, “So, you were saying about Coruscant?”

“Oh,” the force said, blinking, apparently remembering how to operate the clone again as he looked over towards Obito, “Just that if you want news on the jedi council, on the chancellor and the senate, then it’s far easier if you’re not on the planet. Although I don’t see why you don’t just gather intelligence from your Tobirama Senju.”

“Tobirama Senju is busy and is still learning Basic,” Lee responded blithely, not getting into the fact that they had been contacting the nidaime at every opportunity, and that he’d been spending his time badgering Anakin into pouring through the extensive jedi archives for him.

That and Lee didn’t bother to explain that just as Obito wasn’t Lee, Tobirama also wasn’t Lee. A concept that, even days after their little heart to heart, the force seemed to have little to no understanding of.

Still Haruki only shrugged for a moment, as if he didn’t quite understand but was willing to accept the answer. It was another odd, human, movement that didn’t need to be performed by a shadow clone of something that was far beyond human. A sort of strange quirk to make Haruki look and act more like a human than he really was, yet another Namikaze Minatoism slapped on for either their or his own benefit. Like Kenobi Obi-Wan said, as if he was enjoying this charade of humanity perhaps a little too much.

“I wish I could see your world, you know,” Haruki said with a drawn-out sigh as he glanced for a moment out the windshield before turning his attention back to them. His eyes were soft, his smile tender as he looked across at the pair of them, the way Namikaze Minato might a particularly entralling sunset, “I see so many bits and pieces, small snippets but… I wish I could travel outside of myself, the way you do, and see your world and its wonders.”

And for a moment Obito could almost picture it, not with him wearing Minato-Sensei’s face but some other golden visage, wandering the streets of Konoha and looking about with an almost comic tourist’s delight. However, as the force’s smile grew duller, more resigned and sorrowful, Obito felt the image and it’s possibility fade.
The force, in Namikaze Minato’s skin, motioned out towards the great void of space, glittering with freckles of stars and distant galaxies, “However, this is all I have. Showing you the expanse of my galaxies, of my stars, moons, and planets, all my pride, my joy, and my craftsmanship is the only thing I can do.”

It was strange, Obi-Wan thought to himself, that as the days wore on he found himself instinctively growing closer to the shinobi more than the force. You’d think, as absurd as the situation was, that it would be the opposite.

Lee and Obito, as the force pointed out, were alien. Alien in a way that Obi-Wan could barely comprehend, the force itself seeming to believe they… existed outside the bounds of not only the galaxy but the universe itself. As if Lee herself, for all she glowed, was not a part of the force at all and that she and Obito had come much further than simply the outer rim.

However, for all of that, Obi-Wan found himself often standing next to Obito, sighing when he sighed, gritting his teeth when he did, and trying and failing to release his growing frustration and mounting despair into the force while envying that Obito somehow had not yet fallen prey to his own.

Obito had never released his feelings, had not even truly submerged them in his soul, but instead clung to his grief, rage, fear, bitterness, joy, and love as tightly as he could. He was in an odd state of serenity if only because his emotions seemed to conflict with one another, matched in strength. So that, for all that Obito Uchiha allowed himself to feel, for all that teetering and that moment on Naboo when it seemed he had plunged straight into the dark side, he had not yet fallen even with a revelation like this one.

And even Obi-Wan could respect and envy that. Could, perhaps even, attempt to emulate that as he came to terms with the new structure of the universe and everything he’d known. He now understood Obito Uchiha in a way that he had never wished to.

Somehow, he had the strangest feeling that it would be the shinobi who would keep him sane during all of this.

He sighed, sitting alone in the cockpit once again and reaching out to the force as he tried to determine what to do. He felt his lips twist at that, why was he bothering reaching out when he could just ask it himself, or rather have Obito Uchiha or Lee Eru ask for him.
Still, visions of Coruscant and the jedi came easier than they had before, as the force had assured, there were still muddled portions, mostly around Anakin as well as Master Qui-Gon, but the council was clearer than ever. More, it was clear that it was far more likely that they would continue to rebuff Obi-Wan’s warnings.

After all, there were no visions of the force’s clone of shadows, the body that Lee now affectionately referred to as Haruki, within the force. Without that, without that verification, it was a small wonder none of them believed him.

Only the living force screamed about this moment, and that, as always, focused primarily upon Lee herself with Obi-Wan, the clone, the ship, and everything else as a mere after thought. Lee, they would agree grudgingly, was far more important than they’d dared believe but they wouldn’t accept more than that.

Not, he thought almost with a wry sort of resignation, without seeing it for themselves.

Instinctively he allowed his rage to dissipate, to fall back into the force as he stared out ahead, wondering if perhaps he wasn’t overreacting. After all, the way he was thinking now he was starting to sound like Master Qui-Gon when the man was at his most bullheaded. The force was still the force, even if it wore a mask of a man. If anything, it seemed more joyous, more filled with life and passion as well as serenity, than it ever had before.

As if Lee’s arrival had somehow made the force more itself.

For now, they had a day or so before they arrived in their next port of call, the beautiful garden world of Alderaan. The urge to fly there instinctively in Obi-Wan’s head every time he reached out to the force. Like a constant whisper, or the ringing of a soft high-pitched bell in the back of his head so that the force’s avatar didn’t even have to whisper the name for Obi-Wan to know where they were going.

Sighing he figured that one benefit of all of this was that the force guided this journey as it likely had no other, and would certainly alert him or else move himself should they need to exit hyper speed and autopilot. He stood, cracked his back and neck, and made his way back to the common area and kitchen where he could perhaps entice Obito to a round of venting about their absurd problems and how neither of them deserved this over tea.

However, on reaching the edge of the room he stopped.
Obito was not alone.

Lee was absent, likely attempting to catch sleep once again, and in her customary place looking across at Obito with fondness was the clone, as always wearing the face of the man Lee and Obito called Minato Namikaze.

“So, Haruki,” Obito said as he poured the pair of them cups of tea, his mismatched eyes flashing as he stared across at the force as he might an opponent on the battle field, “You said you know what’s going to happen, at least, if Lee doesn’t touch anything.”

The force nodded, taking the tea from Obito and blowing on it, watching as steam rose from its surface, “That’s right.”

“And that you have a better idea of what’s going to happen to Coruscant now that Lee and I are on your wild goose chase.”

Again, the force nodded as he sipped from the tea, a motion that was at once entirely too human. And Obi-Wan, if he closed his eyes, could feel the amount of effort the living force was putting into this. Not simply to appear human but to envelop the manners of this sentient man from a world he did not know and take them and forge them into something of his own.

As always, the force did not seem to notice Obi-Wan. Or, rather, had already noticed Obi-Wan’s movements and stored them away as unimportant, on some lower plane of existence that only mattered to the likes of Obi-Wan Kenobi and mortals like him. Obito, for his own part, either did not notice or intended to continue this conversation regardless of Obi-Wan’s presence. Perhaps, even, intended Obi-Wan to hear this given that they were speaking in Basic rather than Obito’s native tongue.

Obi-Wan thought he could likely walk right up to them and sit next to Obito, his strange brother in arms in this absurd battle, and neither would even blink. Still, for the sake of the illusion of eavesdropping, Obi-Wan hovered in the doorway.

“How long do the republic and jedi have?”

Obito’s question didn’t echo, didn’t reverberate even through the force, and yet Obi-Wan felt the words the way he might the echoing of one of Obito’s metal blades clanging against steel.
“At best,” the force said without hesitation, without a hint of emotion or preference one way or another at all, “Without Lee’s intervention, thirteen years.”

Obi-Wan felt himself hitting the doorframe, sliding to the floor as visions the future he had never conceived were suddenly echoing through his head, of an older Anakin Skywalker he did not know whose eyes burned yellow on Mustafar, an army of clones on so many different moons, Master Dooku dressed in the dark robes of a sith…

“Thirteen years…” Obito said trailing off.

The force, however, just kept talking in that smooth calm voice as if they were discussing the weather on Coruscant, “Ten for a separatist faction to fully form and three for a civil war to divide the republic in half. There were other possibilities, before Sheev Palpatine claimed the chancellorship, but those paths are lost now and the path of survival for the jedi as well as the republic in their current forms is so narrow it may as well be nonexistent.”

The force, shrugging then as he drank tea, noted, “Far more likely, the pieces being set as they are, things may spiral out of control even quicker than that.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t help but rush in then, walked over and slammed his hands down on the table and ignoring Obito’s utter lack of surprise at Obi-Wan’s appearance and the force’s complete lack of reaction as he cried out, “We must warn the council!”

He took the force’s fake face in his hand, ignoring the tingle running through his palms at touching the force’s construct so directly, like running his hands over a live wire, and forced those pale eyes towards Obi-Wan’s, “Listen to me, we have to return to Coruscant now!”

The force blinked, blinked again, and for the first time seemed to see Obi-Wan instead of a piece of furniture. His eyes widened, pale and blue and containing all the cosmos inside them, and then crinkled with a small strange fondness, “Why?”

“Why?” Obi-Wan asked, “What will take the republic’s place? What will take the jedi order’s place if they disappear?! If this is the end of the order, in thirteen years or less, the sith will be entirely unchecked and the entire galaxy will fall into darkness!”

The force considered him for a moment, looked deep into Obi-Wan’s eyes, and then slowly his
hands came up to circle Obi-Wan’s wrists. It felt as if a sun had grabbed hold of him, “Obi-Wan Kenobi, you must know that this journey we are on is of far more importance than a mere republic and an order.”

Obi-Wan heard his voice distantly, as if Obi-Wan had somehow sunk underwater and kept sinking into a great crevasse beneath the waves.

“The galaxy abided before the jedi order as well as the republic, it will abide long after they pass from this world. There have been empires and republics aplenty, jedi and sith too numerous to count, these are nothing but dust motes in my eye.”

Then a smile, almost mischievous, “Besides, hasn’t Lee warned your people several times already?”

Obi-Wan felt himself hurled back into the present, a stabbing through his stomach as if a lightsaber had just gone through it. Suddenly, all the memories of Lee casually speaking of Palpatine, that the sith master was none other than Palpatine, that the chancellor was eagerly waiting to devour them all and pillage the great planet of Coruscant, that they had all blindly given him the path to supreme power, and Obi-Wan being even more willfully dismissive than Qui-Gon of what he saw as typical paranoid shinobi nonsense.

Just another sign that, one way or another, both would likely stumble and fall into the arms of the dark side at some point or another.

The force released Obi-Wan, allowed him to stumble backwards with a small, fond, smile. Obi-Wan looked over at Obito and somehow, the sympathetic, the understanding glance he saw there was worse even than the force’s serene expression.

One so devoid of… of attachment to a peon such as Obi-Wan Kenobi.

Obi-Wan stumbled back out of the room, sat in the cockpit once again and stared numbly into space, fingers twitching as he yearned to reach for the comm and say… And say something that the jedi council would never believe.

Master Qui-Gon perhaps, he hoped, but… But perhaps it would only be Obi-Wan Kenobi, a padawan not yet even a knight, with the most unlikely of allies in Obito Uchiha and Lee Eru who could face this threat. A threat that was further and further behind them as they went anywhere but
Coruscant. And all he could hope was that the force itself was wrong, that miracles were possible, and that a future that seemed so certain was anything but.

It wasn’t Lee this time.

It was a thought so surreal, so jarring, that it almost threw Anakin out of his dream completely. Still, he felt himself settle into the shadow of the force as always, standing in a desert world that was not Tatooine, was instead made of something red and ancient and even older. Jakku, the force whispered in his ear.

And, in the place of Lee, Obito stared across at Minato Namikaze who was not Minato Namikaze with that strange bitter half-amusement that he would so often wear. The one that twisted his scars even further and made him look so terribly old even on the unscarred portion of his face.

“Was Tatooine not sandy enough for you?” Obito asked in greeting, though beneath this was the scent of nervousness and trepidation at finding himself here, and a stronger overpowering relief that it was not Lee Eru in his place, that for now, at least, he could give her this much.

The clone, who insisted even to himself to don the given name of Haruki, grinned at the boy as he walked down the red dunes towards Lee’s sentient.

“I have many desert worlds, Lee,” he responded, “They are the cradle and grave of sentient civilization. Tatooine is one of many.”

(Anakin hated sand, he had always hated sand even before he’d left Tatooine. It was so course, so rough, so violent and there was never any getting rid of it…)

“Well, it’s very pretty,” Obito said, stepping closer to the force as well. He looked like he was forcing himself to, with everything in him screamed discomfort, but he stepped forward all the same.

Haruki kept grinning, somehow liking that about Obito, this small strange aspect of Lee Eru. It was, he thought, not quite her dark side but a counter balance to herself. This was the portion that bore the scars, the youth, the bitterness, the despair, the portion that edged and watched with baleful eyes and raised fur for the jaws of the wolf. It was the part that did not trust, could not trust
so easily, and yet travelled here and trusted all the same for love of the greater whole.

Obito Uchiha, the force thought, would do anything for Lee and again the winds of his world whispered as they rustled through the pine trees they stated that they could understand why he was favored above all other sentients.

“Although, I have to tell you, deserts aren’t really my favorite place in the world,” Obito motioned to his face, to the pale skin, “The Uchiha, I’m afraid, weren’t built for direct sunlight.”

Haruki laughed, a delighted cheerful thing borrowed from Minato Namikaze, and said only, “I know, I remember.”

Obito paused, then rubbed the back of his head, forcing himself to be chagrinned rather than alarmed, “Right, yes, omnipresent and omniscient, you probably saw all of the fun shishou and I had getting out of your goddamned desert.”

He had and he had not. They had been… An odd flicker at that point, a strange itch inside of himself that he could not quite place. He had not watched their trek through the desert, had not had the eyes to, but had as an after thought sent the seed he had planted in the desert, Anakin Skywalker, to wait for them. He had not realized they would be so strange, so important, back then.

“More than that,” the force said, motioning for Obito to join him as he sat down on the edge of a dune, overlooking the desert and staring into the face of the twin full moons, “I have seen bits and pieces of your Konoha as well.”

Obito stiffened, any hint of amiability gone. He sat down almost mechanically, did not turn to look at the force, but instead stared out at the horizon. When he spoke, his voice was rough and harsh, “I thought you couldn’t see Lee.”

“I can’t see Lee, but you, my friend, are less opaque than she as a great whole is,” the force said, and indeed he was, while he was not quite as accessible as those sentients that belonged to the force he was a more familiar construct than Lee herself, “There is so much of her, in that small body, that it’s like hitting a brick wall. Uchiha Obito, Senju Tobirama, these smaller portions, while difficult, are not nearly so hard to sift through.”

“Like what?” Obito asked, and again there was no hint of anything casual, of any growing comraderie, but the force hardly seemed to notice. This was simply what Obito Uchiha was, the
smaller self-defense of Lee, the hackles rising, and fangs bared as he faced what had the potential to be a threat. His was the face that had been burned before.

And he wished that Lee had not needed to develop this, to keep it so close and rely on it so much, but he could not say he did not understand the theory behind it.

“Flashes of Uchiha Obito, moments of importance and definition. His grandmother, the clan, Nohara Rin, Hatake Kakshi, Namikaze Minato, the Kannabi Bridge, Uchiha Madara… And sometimes what he could have been.”

“What I could have been?” Obito pushed, and this time he did turn his head. His green eye was burning the way that Lee’s sometimes did but the black eye… It wasn’t black any more, but instead red bleeding into black jagged pinwheels, spinning as he stared across at the force.

“An orange masked puppet, the puppet master of a despot figurehead as well as the nine-tailed fox, a man with no name but monikers of Tobi the fool, Madara the banished shadow of the village hidden in the leavess, jinchuuriki of the ten-tailed beast, and Uchiha Obito the ghost that Hatake Kakashi could not bring himself to forget. The destroyer of not only Konoha but…”

“That’s enough!” Obito closed his eyes, brought one hand up to his black eye as if to hold it in place, breathing in and out while the dream, Obito’s chakra inside it, stabilized itself.

Finally, Obito opened his eyes, the black eye now a flat black again, as he said almost bitterly, “I get the idea.”

“Are you ashamed?” the force asked, truly curious as it watched Obito flicker through emotions, not releasing them into the force or else Lee herself but instead categorizing them and labeling them in shelves upon his head to be dealt with at a later date that would never come.

Still, Obito’s voice, worn and harsh, cracked as he admitted what he likely never would otherwise, “Yes.”

The sand, beneath Obito’s feet, caressed his skin in a soft and foreign manner that was alien to sand of a desert world. The sentient Obito Uchiha did not even seem to notice as he kept staring forlornly at the moon.
“Why?” the force asked, “It is what you are.”

“No,” Obito said, shaking his head, and something in him must have returned to the moment as he turned his head to look at the force, as if this small sentient understood something that the force in his vastness could not. “It’s not. You said it yourself, Lee was there, and because she was that path doesn’t exist for me anymore.”

Ah, he thought, and it was a great sigh throughout the cosmos. Because that was an idea he more than understood at this point. That in Lee, all the old possibilities were no longer remotely possible.

Then, forcing his lips into a rather strained grin, Obito said, “Now that was way too personal and deep way too fast and I can see why shishou is having the absolute worst time of her life in these things. How do you feel about less talking and more games of shogi? You like games, don’t you?”

“I’ll win,” Haruki said with some bemusement, watching as the sentient Obito summoned the board from the ether, as Lee herself might in this situation.

“Winning is not the point here,” Obito dismissed, “It’s about the journey, my creepy friend.”

The journey, the force thought, once again finding this sentient oddly perceptive in a way that he had no right to be. Such a strange creature, Haruki thought to himself, and at times so oddly unlike the many sentients that Haruki himself had crafted.

The desert landscape of Jakku slowly transformed into the foothills of Alderaan’s expansive mountain range. The wild flowers blossomed beneath them and a breeze rolled through the hills, rustling the vibrant green stalks of grass as well as the bluebells and daffodils.

And the force, in the form of Haruki, thought that in its own way it was like Konohagakure and that, if she only looked, truly looked for a moment, that perhaps they could stay on this world or any world of his…

In the form of Obito, however, she did not even bother to comment.
"Obito."

He breathed in, breathed out, felt his mind move from the world of dreams and memories and back into reality. Instead of the rough floor of the cave against his bare feet, it was grass, cool with dew, soaking through his socks and pants.

There was the scent of pine trees, of grass, flowers, different from the lingering scent of mold that hung about both Madara and the Zetsus, of something festering and growing in dark forgotten places.

And pinned underneath him with a kunai to her neck was not Black Zetsu, White Zetsu, or even Madara himself, but instead Eru Lee, jonin of Konoha and his own master.

Quickly he rolled off her, and with shaking fingers fit the kunai back into the pouch on his belt, reminding himself to breathe and remember where he was once again. He was not in the cave, he was not in the cave, there wasn't even a cave anymore but a smoking crater that Lee had left in the mountainside…

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Lee moving to the fire, stoking it into life with a silent and sealless jutsu. She raised her pale hands towards it, rubbing them together vigorously for warmth, while staring into the now bright flames.

Slowly, always too slowly, the memories trickled back. He was on a mission, B-rank, inside the land of fire on his way to guard the eligible daughter of some ambitious courtier in the daimyo’s court. He had paid for a week of service, during the Spring festival, and Lee and Obito should reach the capital by early morning.

It was…

It was the first time he had spent the night out of the village since coming back from the Kannabi bridge mission.

With a final shudder and a sigh, Obito moved to the fire so that he was on the other side of Lee, could stare across the fire to her eyes, one of his own now matching.

For a long while they sat in silence, the fire crackling between them, a luxury they could afford being on home territory (though being the apprentice of a genjutsu master and S-ranked menace generally certainly helped). Few would see through Lee’s illusions to their campsite, and those who did and recognized their caster would run as fast as they could in the other direction.

They were off the road, in a clearing shrouded by trees, but more or less out in the open. Looking past Lee, towards the tree line at the edge of the clearing they’d situated themselves in, he thought to himself that it was almost as far from a cave as one could get.
And yet he'd still…

Finally, when the silence became entirely too stifling, he just bit the kunai and asked, "Don't you have something to say to me?"

Lee glanced up at him, the light dancing in her green eyes. They at once seemed to contain an entire spectrum, from the lightest shades of jade to the deep shade of green that you saw in the leaves of pine trees cast in shadow. "No."

Minato-sensei would have probably said something, he thought, probably something profound enough though Obito couldn't guess what that would be. Or, perhaps he wouldn't, perhaps he'd feel as speechless and dumb as Obito himself did right now.

"It will get easier," she finally said, lowering her hands and placing them gently between her crossed legs.

He scoffed, could hardly help it, feeling exhausted and twitchy. "Will it really, shishou?"

"You'll get used to it," she corrected, which, that was not nearly the same thing. Used to it… He probably would; he used to dream about the cave every time he closed his eyes, nearly gutted Kakashi one time when the idiot had been stupid enough to wander into Obito's room at the crack of dawn.

That had faded somewhat. He'd learned to expect waking up to the Hatake clan compound if not the cave or his grandmother's home. He supposed he hadn't learned to expect Eru Lee yet.

"Sometimes I still dream that I'm… tasked to Danzo, under his supervision in ANBU," Lee said, a small wry smile on her lips as Obito looked over towards her in alarm, "And it's always so strange, because even in the dream I know he's dead and buried, but it's as if it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that I'm older, that the war's over, that things have changed…"

"Point being," Lee concluded, "I have it on good authority that you will at the very least get used to it, accustomed to it, even if it never truly becomes easier."

For a moment he said nothing, just watched as she raised her hands again, turning them away from the flames so that her palms were facing the heat. Then he said, "I never knew you worked under Danzo."

Obito didn't know much about that name, truly; most of what he knew came from either Kakashi or else, in recent months, Hatake Sakumo. The man had been a very powerful figure in the village, especially during the third war, and then one day…

One day he simply disappeared, and no one had asked why.

The horrors of Shimura Danzo were ones painted over time, said in pauses, in dark glances, and finally in short and to the point tales of children who would conveniently disappear from ANBU or orphanages and come back…

Well, come back and yet not truly come back at all.

Lee nodded. "I was already skirting the edges of ANBU when I was a chunin. According to Sakumo-shishou, Danzo had an eye on me even before I took the chunin exams. It was… almost inevitable, with the way the third war started, that I would find my way into his sphere of influence."
She stopped there, didn't compare it to his experience, didn't elaborate on what she had gone through, simply stared into the fire as well as her own memories.

He wondered if she'd told Minato-sensei, if Minato-sensei had guessed even if she hadn't told him, but something stopped him from asking. Much the same way, he thought, that she had never asked if he had talked to Rin about what had happened.

Which…

He'd said more to Kakashi than he'd said to Rin. Maybe it was just a product of Kakashi now having a view of him in his worst moments, courtesy of living in the same house as Obito, but Obito thought it was something more than that.

He was… so afraid, he thought, that Rin would…

Not see him differently, because she already did that, and she'd never seemed to truly see him in the first place, but that some desperately needed illusion would shatter. That if Rin knew, suddenly it wouldn't be alright and it would never be alright again. He would have to acknowledge more than he already did that something in him was broken beyond repair, that Uchiha Obito as the world knew him was dead and buried in those mountains. He didn't want her to look at him and see him, see everything…

Love, he thought, it was supposed to make things like this easier, and yet his heart felt like it was tearing in half from the very thought of her.

"Is it nice? Getting used to it, I mean?" Obito asked, and Lee considered this for a moment, head tilted to the side, light flickering on her red braid and painting it so very many shades.

"It's… not unpleasant," Lee finally settled on, "Eventually, in a way, you stop noticing altogether and you become almost normal."

"Almost normal," Obito echoed rather drily, unimpressed, but Lee was not to be deterred as she smiled back at him.

"Sometimes, Obito, when you're given an 'almost', you just have to settle for it."

"If I'm never mistaken for shishou again in my life, I swear it will only be too soon," Obito's voice came through rather tinny across the comm, miles and miles away from Senju Tobirama in his hotel room turned living quarters on the capital planet Coruscant.

It was just as well, Tobirama thought, because as it was, the connection was likely bad enough that Obito couldn't hear Tobirama tinkering with bought computer chips, or else scratching down his translations of Anakin's oral records from the jedi archives while listening to Obito report in at the same time.

Still, Obito probably wouldn't care. It seemed as if he'd been pushed past the point of all reason and was now reporting in merely to vent. "And honestly, I don't know how shishou stood it, it's only been a few days and I can barely think. Madara used sleep deprivation—"

At that, Tobirama couldn't help but glance up, his mind caught on that name as always, on the surprisingly casual way that Obito said it. Obito, for all his pretense of nonchalance, rarely spoke of Madara and his time spent inside of that cave. Hashirama had asked, only once, and something in the boy had seemed to fracture. Hashirama had never made the mistake of asking twice.
Lee herself had said little about the man, alarming and likely exaggerated details here and there, had given an official report, but she otherwise left it to Obito, who seemed content to keep his time held prisoner to himself.

All Tobirama knew for certain was that whatever had happened there, however he'd gotten out, Uchiha Obito had never truly returned to his former self.

Tobirama had once thought there was little lower that Madara could go than his betrayal of Konoha, his clan, and Hashirama. What he did to Uchiha Obito though, Tobirama imagined that there had been nothing truly left of him, only a desperate, evil mockery of what Uchiha Madara had once been.

Obito didn't seem to realize his own out of character levity as he continued, "Sleep deprivation, chakra deprivation, genjutsu… He really tried just about everything he could think of, and sometimes I think it nearly worked, would have worked if—"

Obito abruptly cut himself off before he could finish that rather damning and alarming thought. He coughed, sighed, then started again, "This one though, he doesn't want any of that, he doesn't even recognize what I am. It's been weeks and I'm still Lee, Eru Lee, Eru Lee wearing the face of Uchiha Obito…"

These updates with Lee and Obito were getting eerie, unnerving, each one more so than the last. Finally, Tobirama ran a hand through his hair and set down his supplies on the table, paying Obito his full attention through the comm.

"Obito," Tobirama finally said, "Is Lee with you?"

Her voice, today, was notably absent, a rather odd occurrence, as thus far Obito and Lee had made their transmissions together. Likely because those two were attached at the hip and becoming more dangerously codependent by the minute, but also because, as they told it, if they weren't calling him then Kenobi was desperately trying to reach the jedi.

Obito snorted, that wry bitter sound he often made. "Shishou is distracting the problem child by agreeing to frolic with him through the fields of Alderaan."

Sometimes, Tobirama thought with a sigh, Eru Lee seemed to have rubbed off entirely too much onto her apprentice. "What?"

"The force, Haruki, as Lee has now dubbed him, decided to have us make a pitstop on the rather scenic planet of Alderaan."

Haruki, it was somehow just like Lee to give something like the anthropomorphism of all the natural chakra in the universe a name.

Tobirama quickly reached over to the keyboard on the table and began typing the limited Basic he knew to hopefully spell out Alderaan in the search bar. Several holos displayed in the center of the table of a rather Earth-like planet, featuring mountainous regions with green foothills, white-capped peaks, and rolling rivers. It looked, altogether, not unlike some of the foothills of Lightning Country, or else the Alps of Lee's home world.

"It's quite beautiful," Tobirama said. He swiped through pictures one at a time, taking in the views, the cheerfully smiling people in the traditional clothing of the region, each photo marking it clearly as a tourist's planet to get away from the silver and neon grime of Coruscant.

"That's the idea," Obito said, before expanding wryly, "I think, no I know, he's trying to convince
Lee to stay in the galaxy, to bring Konoha with her if she has to, by making a grand tour of all the
galaxy's wonders. Starting, of course, in the core planets with the scenic Alderaan. His idea of
Konoha's home away from home."

"What?" Tobirama couldn't help but smile despite himself at the very idea of it, of Konoha simply
packing up and inserting themselves in this… Well, this postcard planet.

"Oh, he means it," Obito said, oddly serious, that constant dry undertone to his voice disappearing
entirely and replaced with something quite grave, "I think he's desperately aware that Lee can leave
any time she wants and just never come back. Like some kind of odd dream he once had that he can
only half remember…"

Obito trailed off, letting those words hang in the air, a tense uncomfortable silence that permeated
all the thousands of miles between them. Finally, it was lighter again, exhaustion forced out of his
voice as Obito said, "Well, creepy force dreams aside, I can't say anything too important has
happened..."

Obito paused. There was a muffled exchange of what sounded like a very upset young man, and
then Obito said, "Strike that, Kenobi has joined the ranks of the sane and enlightened and
recognizes that Palpatine hungers for his children. He also wants to talk to you."

"Talk to me?" Tobirama asked, eyebrows rising upwards at not only Obito's first sentence (again
said in such a tactlessly Lee manner) as well as that last.

Kenobi Obi-Wan he'd had little to no contact with. The young man had left early on with Lee and
Obito on what was supposed to be only a week-long voyage about the core planets. These days,
grinding through Basic, Tobirama mostly spoke with the jedi academy instructors, or else the
young Skywalker Anakin.

He couldn't think why Kenobi would want to speak with him directly.

"He does remember that I'm only a month or so into learning Basic, doesn't he?" Tobirama asked,
which, while he was good and certainly working on it, he'd acknowledge that he wasn't that good.

"Well, he's tried the council, the council won't patch him through to Jinn due to conflict of interest
with his trials ongoing, and I suppose that just leaves you on Coruscant," Obito said, and Tobirama
could imagine him haplessly shrugging as he sat in the copilot's chair, "The thorn in the side of the
people whose side I am a thorn in are my friends, or something to that effect."

"I'm not sure that's how that phrase works," Tobirama chided, a smile curving his lips up as Obito
huffed.

"I'm working on three days with no sleep, I can make phrases do whatever I want them to."

There was a shuffling of movement on the other end, a sigh, and then Kenobi Obi-Wan's voice was
there in his smooth and polished Basic, "Greetings, Master Senju."

"Greetings, Padawan Kenobi," Tobirama echoed, his own accent not quite up to snuff yet, but
getting closer with each day.

A sigh of relief, then rapid, more desperate Basic, and finally a translation from Obito: "I regret to
ask you this, Master Senju, as I am aware of your… tenuous position among the jedi. However, I
am afraid that matters have come to my attention that simply cannot wait for my return to the
temple. I need you to speak with Master Qui-Gon for me, the temple won't put me through and jedi
do not own personal comms for use outside of missions."
"Jinn," Tobirama considered. He had seen the man here and there in the temple and the archives, but had yet to have a chance to truly speak to him. In slow, stilted Basic, he responded, "I will have to bring Skywalker."

The boy, for better or worse, was the only reliable translator that Tobirama had, and whatever it was Kenobi wanted him to convey to his master, Tobirama suspected it was outside of his own Basic abilities.

"Fine, that is fine," Kenobi swiftly responded, not sounding as if it was fine at all, but that he would take whatever he was given. Kenobi then, after a moment's pause, spoke quite rapidly, that edge of nervousness overriding his naturally smooth and polite tone.

He was afraid, Tobirama thought in growing realization. If Tobirama had learned anything from these jedi in the courses Anakin translated, in their records, in simply interacting with them even through a translator, they abstained from fear more than anything else. Fear, they fully believed, was the path to their damnation.

Yet Kenobi, who had been trained in their ways for as long as he could likely remember, was afraid and doing nothing to banish that feeling or hide it from Tobirama.

Finally, after the jedi's words died down, Obito translated, "I know this is difficult, particularly coming from you, but you must convince Master Qui-Gon that the force truly is with us. Not simply in spirit but in the body of a shadow clone as well. If you can convince him of that... No, even if you can't, tell him... Tell him that Lee was right, that Palpatine is the sith master and that we have allowed his election as supreme chancellor. Tell him that at best we have thirteen years before the end of everything we know and believe in. The end of the republic, the end of the jedi, everything!"

Tobirama paused, eyes glancing towards the scrolls that recorded the history of the jedi in a language he could understand. Characters upon characters representing millennia of philosophy, the force, the light, the dark... He swallowed, felt a well of pity rise within him as he confessed, "Kenobi, I am not sure I can."

"Please," he said, and that word Tobirama did understand, simple and desperate as it was. "Please, Master Senju, you must try... You're our only hope."

Only hope...no, that had never been him. Hashirama, that had been his older brother, every second he was alive he had been the hope that Tobirama himself hadn't dared to believe in...

Tobirama was beholden to a village Kenobi Obi-Wan might never see, was a foreigner and a heathen by Kenobi Obi-Wan's own cherished doctrine, and could not even speak their language. Yet, all the same, closing his eyes he said, "I will try."

"Thank you." Another simple, yet so sincere phrase. And then, "May the force be with you, Tobirama Senju."

And just like that, the transmission was cut off, Obito apparently having nothing more to say and Kenobi having made his desperate plea. Tobirama slowly flicked off the switch that turned off his own microphone, leaving him to stare blankly at the dark metal box as his mind wandered.

Thirteen years. Such a specific yet odd number to give; Tobirama wasn't sure how long he personally would have said this republic had, a decade perhaps, but Kenobi had seemed so certain, where before he had brushed off each and every one of Lee's warnings. Thirteen years until the end of both the jedi and the republic, the end Lee had so easily prophesied for these people...
And yet still Kenobi Obi-Wan had ended his message with a hope for the goodwill of the force.

Tobirama leaned forward and flipped through his latest finished record from Anakin, a tale told in monotone by a desperately bored little boy, about a jedi turned sith master Revan, tortured and turned into a puppet by both sith and jedi in turn.

The one and only man who, in the jedi archival records Tobirama had seen thus far, had wavered so distinctly between the light and dark side of the force.

Not, however, the only jedi to have drifted into the influence of the sith and the dark side. Not even close to the only man to have become a despot, a madman, and a butcher with senchakra at his disposal. He was, however, the only man who had ever once shown a hint of coming back…

Tobirama supposed, after weeks and weeks of classes among children, histories upon histories, he was finally beginning to understand just why the jedi prioritized what they did. Why Lee and Obito especially alarmed them to such a degree.

Chakra here drove people mad. It drove them mad in the way the sharingan had driven so many Uchiha mad. Uchiha Izuna, Uchiha Madara… Only Uchiha Kagami had seemed so truly divorced from the curse of hatred eating his clan alive. To use chakra in this galaxy in a certain way, to even look at it from a certain angle, was to drive oneself into despair and madness while simultaneously gaining unnatural and powerful abilities.

Madara had once attempted to destroy the village through use of his sharingan, fallen jedi upon fallen jedi had attempted to wipe the jedi order from the face of the universe.

Only, these people did not have a doujutsu alone to blame, but instead that poison, that instability and hint of madness which coursed through their very blood, through every aspect of the universe itself. To have chakra at all, in this world, was to court insanity.

And, thinking of the Uchiha at their worst, Senju Tobirama could not blame them.

He had shunned the Uchiha for what they were and what they had always been, no matter how much they spat on his grave, because he had seen what they as a whole had become. Beyond the centuries of warfare with the Senju, beyond Madara's own personal betrayal, he had seen it time and again, and thought to himself more than once that the Uchiha were damned for their eyes.

He could not truly begrudge the jedi their fear of their own chakra.

And yet, everything that brought them closer to the dark side was what also gave them humanity. Passion, fear, attachment… Without these a human being was little more than a serene shell of himself, content perhaps, but lacking something truly fundamental.

Had Tobirama been a jedi… He did not know if he could have paid that price.

Something fundamentally, at the very core, was wrong with this world. The universe was… desperately unbalanced, had been so from the very beginning, and only now showing desperate signs of it.

And yet, in relaying Kenobi's fears to Jinn, he didn't know how he could convince the man to disregard everything he believed in on faith alone—that a shinobi who courted damnation could be trusted, and more than trusted, that a shinobi could be right.

Obito must have dozed off at some point.
He supposed it was understandable, given that he was now going through the hell that Lee had been going through for weeks, but all the same, waking abruptly to the sound of the ramp being lowered and footsteps on metal, he felt unnerved that he hadn't even realized when it happened.

He'd just closed his eyes at some point after signing off with Tobirama, and then here he was, still in the copilot's chair with a kink in his neck. More, glancing out the windshield, it was hours later, twilight now, when it had been early morning when Haruki had pulled Lee out of the ship and out into the foothills to go hike and admire the scenery.

He probably should have gone with them, but…

Good lord, he'd been so tired, and had thought that for once Lee could handle herself while he got just a few hours of sleep. The idea of hiking with Lee and cheerfully smiling Haruki had just filled with him with the kind of existential dread that was best left to Kenobi.

Even if he now could only imagine what they were talking about, with the bastard insisting on wearing Minato-sensei's face and Minato-sensei's lovesick smile.

Obito forced himself to stand with a long groan, cracked his neck in one direction then the other, then walked over towards the main hull of the ship to where Lee and Haruki were now entering. "Well, did you have any fun?"

The pair looked fine enough, a little windblown perhaps, but hardly worse for wear. As usual, Haruki was wearing Minato-sensei's idiotic grin as he beamed down at Lee-shishou, who was trying to smile fondly back. However, there was a hint of some impatience in there, a relief to see Obito, that Obito perhaps appreciated a little too much.

As Lee looked over Obito's shoulder towards the bridge for the missing member of their party, Obito filled her in, "Kenobi decided it was time to stop hogging the comms and instead resort to good old-fashioned praying."

After the early morning comm with the nidaime, Kenobi had seemed to deflate, retreated for tea, and then retreated into meditation and thought, asking quietly for Obito not to disturb him outside of an emergency.

Whether he was using this time to connect with the force (as had been his method of confronting these kinds of challenges before Haruki had made his grand appearance) or to retreat into his own thoughts was beyond Obito.

Likely he was thinking what Obito had been thinking about before he'd nodded off in the cockpit—the likelihood that a jedi, even a jedi like Jinn, would listen to Senju Tobirama. Obito had his doubts, and he was sure that Kenobi did too.

As he'd said to the nidaime, Senju Tobirama was his last and only hope.

Lee looked back to Obito, silently dismissing Kenobi from her mind. She smiled that patently Eru Lee smile of hers, and said, "You should have come; there were flowers, mountains, waterfalls, even a rainbow or two."

The force, in his own guise of Namikaze Minato, gave the pair of them a rather odd look, one painfully familiar. It was the kind of look that Minato-sensei did sometimes give Lee and Obito as a pair, as if he couldn't decide if he was amused or else just baffled. "Lee, you were there, you don't have to tell yourself."

Obito was going to kill him. No, wait, he couldn't kill him, but goddammit he could at least dispel
the clone and teach it some sort of lesson about something and…

"Haruki, we've talked about this, I'm damn sure Obito's talked about this," Lee said with a rather long-suffering sigh, interrupting Obito's internal exhausted rant, "It doesn't work like that."

Haruki just gave her one of Minato-sensei's patented dubious looks that he usually reserved for Bakashi when he was at his most Bakashi. "If you say so."

Obito was about to cut in, for the nth time, that they had said so and would continue to say so until the force got it through his thick head, when Kenobi made a surprise appearance.

Surprise because Kenobi made it a point to spend as little time with the humanoid force as possible. Between that and the emergency thinking and meditation session, Obito hadn't expected to see him until the next morning, when they'd informally planned to head off into the great unknown.

Kenobi paused in the entryway, blue eyes moving over each of them, settling on the force with a flash of what looked like determination and defiance. With a breath, he looked back towards Lee and said, "Lee, you can teleport great distances, can't you?"

"Yes," Lee said, blinking a little at the out of context nature or the fact that it'd come without any of the small pleasantries Kenobi usually preferred.

He nodded, as if she'd just reaffirmed what he'd already suspected, an oddly determined look entering his eyes, then asked, "How far? Could you get us from here to Coruscant?"

Lee laughed, shoved her hands into her pockets, and said with no small amount of confidence and pride, "Kenobi, please, that's child's play."

That was a bit of an exaggeration; that kind of distance was sure to make Obito uncomfortably nauseous if not Lee herself, but the point was that Lee had crossed entire universes and dimensions, and did so regularly. A hop over to Coruscant was nothing to her.

Kenobi took another breath, another small nod, then said with that same growing determination, "I think we should head back."

Haruki's head slowly turned from Lee to Kenobi, his interest sparked in the same way it had been when Kenobi had made this same demand before touching down on the planet, and for once he looked nothing like Namikaze Minato. However, Kenobi either did not care or deliberately disregarded that penetrating blue gaze as he continued, "I must speak to the council in person, and if they will not listen, certainly to Master Qui-Gon and perhaps even Master Dooku. They must be warned about Palpatine, about the sith, and take action now while there's still time."

"We did warn them," Lee pointed out, a little nonplussed as well as a touch amused, now pointing out to Kenobi what the force had pointed out to him not so long ago, "We warned you personally more times than I can count."

Kenobi had the decency, at least, to cringe in regret, as he had been cringing in regret and anxiety ever since his bitter realization at the force's callous hands. All the same, he did not stutter or back down as he said, "I know, and I am sorry, but I am afraid that neither you nor Obito is a reliable source for them, us. Even Tobirama Senju is… I'm not sure Master Qui-Gon will believe him either, even if he is the most willing to. You're too close to… You're not jedi, and they will never, can never, believe it from you."

He motioned to Haruki in all his Namikaze Minato desert-prince glory, still dressed in his white robes with a red scarf eerily reminiscent of Rin's now hanging around his neck. "I am a jedi, I have
been a jedi all my life. If they see it, him, and hear it from me even if there is no hint of him in the force... They might believe it."

Might believe it, Obito thought. That word, might, was weaker than Kenobi wished. That the jedi only ever might believe it, even from one of their own.

"So, we dock the ship here, head to Coruscant for a few days while you try to talk sense into your people?" Obito asked, but it was more than that. This put them nicely back in the chancellor’s grasp, the evil chancellor who suddenly Kenobi would be warning everyone about, while the man had ears and eyes everywhere.

If Kenobi started talking, if the chancellor saw him as a threat that could be silenced…

More, the point of this had been to stall. It had been to give Tobirama time to think and to prepare the rest for the meteor that was about to land. It was also to give time to Obito and Lee to figure out what exactly it was that the force, Haruki, wanted. And even after all this, the dreams and the conversations, Obito could only catch glimpses of what it wanted. Lee, certainly, Lee in an alarming capacity but…

Going to Coruscant now would be bringing the fight straight to them long before any of them were ready.

Obito shared a glance with Lee, reading his own concerns reflected in her eyes, and it was Lee who said slowly, "We suspect, Kenobi, that he has a spy somewhere in your order if not your council."

He paled, eyes growing distant, likely thinking over every council member and every interaction he’d had with them and wishing to god he could say no but not sure if he could. After all, everything else he'd believed in had turned on its head, why not the jedi order as well?

"Palpatine's hinted at it often enough, perhaps just to steer Lee and I away from your order, but I suspect he'd make it a point to have a spy or two planted deep in your village. They might not even know they're spies yet, perhaps simply jedi who vent a little too often and a little too much to the chancellor," Obito added, not quite for Kenobi’s peace of mind, but to let him know how good he suspected the chancellor truly was at this sort of game. That he could make genuinely good people, with genuinely good intent, unwittingly become his informants.

People like the young, proud Amidala Padme, who had absolutely no idea that the invasion of her planet was instrumented by the very man she'd pushed to be elected.

"More," Lee said, pausing for a moment as she looked across at Kenobi, older than Obito and yet somehow so much younger, "If they take you seriously, if they even look like they'll take you seriously, I suspect Palpatine will make it his life's work to erase all memory that Kenobi Obi-Wan existed or ever hinted at the truth. Kenobi, if you do this, you're signing your death warrant."

Kenobi swallowed, eyes fluttering closed for a moment, but before he could prepare to sacrifice himself for the good of his people or else rethink his decision, he was interrupted.

"We are not going to Coruscant." It was Minato-sensei’s voice, cool and clear and confident, as if it was a simple truth rather than an opinion which could be taken into consideration or disregarded.

Kenobi stiffened, purposefully not looking at the force, but the force kept speaking all the same, now stepping closer towards Lee and running a finger through her hair, twisting it out of the confines of its usual braid with an odd, soft smile on his lips as he ignored Lee's own look of annoyance. "There is no reason for Lee to meet with either sith or jedi."
"There is a need for you to meet with them, with us," Kenobi said quietly, an odd strain to his voice that could either be determination or a harder, colder fury, but Haruki did not listen. Instead he moved his hands back from Lee's now loose hair as she swatted his hand away.

"We will not go to Coruscant," he said, at first with a smile and then a graver look as he turned towards Lee, and his expression morphed into one almost of accusation. "If we go to Coruscant… You will simply take it as an opportunity to get your Tobirama, pack your things, and head back to Konohagakure."

Well, wasn't he clever? Still, it was almost time for rendezvous, and Obito personally was exhausted enough to warrant a few days back in the village rather than the single rushed night of last time.

That and the paperwork was going to be…

Well, it was going to be paperwork worthy of a mission with Lee.

However, clever Haruki didn't seem to realize that rendezvous would be happening whether Obito and Lee were on Coruscant or not.

"I don't have to be on Coruscant, Haruki," Lee noted, "I could leave from here, from the void of space even, just as easily."

"You'll still pick up Tobirama Senju," he said, with that truly dangerous tone that Minato-sensei would get that edged politeness but had something raw and dangerous just underneath his polished words.

A barely contained killing intent.

"Which I could do with or without Kenobi meeting with his people," Lee countered, "And the longer I stay, the longer my trip in Konoha has to be."

Haruki took a breath, an oddly human emotion even when wearing the guise of Namikaze Minato. He shuddered in place for a moment, squeezed shut his eyes as he imagined a world without Lee. Quietly, almost a whispering, he said, "They will not believe him."

"Why not?" Kenobi asked, stepping forward, hesitating for a moment and then grasping onto the force's shoulder. Haruki did not look at him though, did not even glance, but kept his eyes focused on Lee's.

"Why won't they believe me?"

Finally, at Kenobi squeezing his shoulder and shouting in his ear, Haruki pried the fingers from his clothing and said, "They are content in what they perceive of me, of the faces I have shown them for thousands upon thousands of years; they do not like the idea that I am not… as static as they had once hoped. When they look through my eyes they do not see me, they see you, Lee."

Kenobi didn't pale, but instead tilted his head forward so that shadows seemed to blossom beneath his tired eyes, and his voice was raw as he said, "You have to show them…"

Haruki turned his head abruptly, stared at Kenobi, and you could almost see the man wilt as Haruki's focus finally fully landed on him. And for a moment, as Haruki stepped towards the jedi, Obito could plainly see the god lingering behind Minato-sensei's delicate features. "I am not beholden to you, Obi-Wan Kenobi. I am not beholden to my sentients, I am not beholden to your republic or the separatists, I am not beholden to the jedi or the sith, I am not beholden to Alderaan"
or Mustafar, I am not even beholden to the seeds I plant in the barren deserts. I do not owe you pleasant visions of truth or fiction!"

Haruki’s shadow retreated back into its normal place, the guise of Minato-sensei tilted back to fit more securely against the foreign chakra, and Kenobi, shaking and blinking, attempted to recover himself.

Lee, however, looked past the force and instead to the jedi. "Do you still want to try?"

Lee held her hand out to him, not a word of the likelihood of Kenobi’s death, of some sort of consequence, or even a reiteration of her promise of sanctuary in Konoha. Slowly, wordlessly, he nodded and took her hand in his.

She squeezed it back, waiting as Obito reached across to take her other hand, leaving Minato-sensei to bitterly stare at their interlaced fingers. "Seven days, Kenobi, we’ll spend in Konoha. You have seven days to convince your master, convince your council, and stay alive."

And just like that, they were wrenching through time and space to crash land in their good old hotel room in Coruscant, the nidaime hunched over scrolls upon scrolls right where they left him, with Jinn Qui-Gon and Skywalker Anakin beside him.
"You've changed, Obito."

Obito was fourteen-years-old, that strange age when he was no longer Minato-sensei’s genin student, but not yet fully immersed into being Eru Lee’s apprentice. He was the Uchiha Obito caught between worlds and lives, and for a moment, that night, he was sitting quietly alone with Rin.

Kakashi had left, racing home to greet his father, and for once, Rin stayed behind along with Obito.

However, Obito had nothing to say.

So many times he'd imagined this moment, the two of them alone, an opportunity to finally act and have it mean something, and here he had nothing to say.

"I guess I have," Obito finally said in turn, because he couldn't deny it, but Rin just looked so sad at that statement.

As if she wouldn't have changed Uchiha Obito for the world.

"I feel like we're growing apart, in a way," Rin said. "So much happened when you were gone, but even now that you're back…"

"It's fine," Obito said quickly. "I'm fine, nothing's really changed, we're just not on the same team anymore, and—"

"That wasn't what I was talking about, Obito."

No, of course it wasn't, but he didn't know what she wanted him to say. That it was fine? It wasn't fine. That it would be fine someday? Obito didn't know that either, and he certainly couldn't hand her a date of when it'd all be better now.

That he still loved her and always would?

Rin had never wanted that.

More, Obito had not realized then that even this wasn't true.

"Sometimes, Rin"—and the words scraped at his throat, it hurt so much to say them—"there's not really much you can do."

"It's not your problem," Obito added. "It's mine, or it's... It's not something I think you can help me with."

Even if she reciprocated every feeling he'd ever had right then and there, even if she took his hand in hers and led him into the future, he knew it couldn't wipe away everything. He couldn't go back
to what he was. The scars, the eye, it was proof.

"Just, if there's something I should be doing—"

"Stay," Obito said, cutting her off. "Just stay the way you are, stay here, and I'll... I'll catch up to
you."

He never would.

Anakin wasn't exactly sure why, but he was feeling very uncomfortable and very out of place. No, strike that; he knew exactly why he felt this way, he just wasn't really sure how he'd managed to be pulled into this situation.

Anakin had just been exiting lightsaber training, the only training he really liked so far at the temple, and the next thing he knew, Mr. Tobirama Senju was pulling him down the hallway, collecting Master Qui-Gon, and taking them both back to his apartment.

Which…

Well, to be honest, the apartment was sort of like a dram to Anakin. The place was littered with tech, sorted and disassembled into neat sections, and next to these were scrolls upon scrolls of flimsy practically humming with the Force. It wasn't an apartment, Anakin thought, so much as it was a workshop, the kind he'd always wanted to have in Mos Espa but could never really dream of possessing.

Anakin wished that he could have come some other time, that maybe the second would invite him just to show him, but... That wasn't really the world Anakin lived in anymore, was it? Initiates didn't leave the temple, not without a good reason, and Tobirama was breaking the rules even to do this much.

This was probably the only chance that Anakin would ever get.

And he was spending it translating things he didn't really understand to a man who really didn't want to listen.

"Lee is many things," Anakin mumbled his translation to the floor, "But she isn't stupid."

This wasn't how Tobirama had said it; he had met Qui-Gon's gaze straight on without even a sign of flinching. He had this iron resolve and confidence, a belief in his own abilities and intellect, that kind of made Anakin feel worse about himself. As if by merely questioning the man you were already halfway to being just plain wrong.

"I'm sorry, Anakin, could you repeat that?" Qui-Gon asked, looking, as he had throughout this whole conversation, more than a little anxious and unnerved. He'd come and sat through the whole thing, but Anakin half-expected him to go to the jedi council after this.

There he'd tell them all that Tobirama Senju and the shinobi were crazy, and Anakin would never see any of them again, and that Anakin was too stupid to be a jedi and he'd be sent back to Tatooine
or else to Telos to farm for the rest of his life.

Anakin could feel the force of the second hokage's glare on the back of his neck.

Anakin sighed, lifted his head, and forced himself to say, "Lee is many things, but she's not stupid!"

"I never said she was," Qui-Gon said slowly. "Simply foreign."

Anakin dutifully translated this in turn to the nidaime, who frowned and seemed at something of a loss for words. They had, after all, been going back and forth on this more than once. The tea Tobirama had initially poured for each of them had long since gotten cold.

Tobirama had started with a plain, simple introduction of why he'd brought them all together. That Obi-Wan Kenobi had insisted Tobirama speak with Master Qui-Gon to convince him that Chancellor Palpatine was actually the missing Sith master.

Something that, apparently, Lee and Obito had been adamant about since they'd first landed on Coruscant.

Anakin… Anakin knew he hadn't spent the whole time with them, had really spent no time with them, but it somehow had struck him like a blow that he'd missed all of that. That Obito and Lee were convinced the Republic had elected a Sith as chancellor and that they'd never even told Anakin.

Anakin had met with him, the man had smiled and thanked him for saving Naboo, and they hadn't said a word!

There was just that one strange time where they'd almost attacked him on the landing platform and they'd left Anakin thinking they were crazy.

And the nidaime expected Anakin to just be able to sit there and neutrally translate all of this as if it had a right to be passed over!

Of course, Master Qui-Gon hadn't believed it and said as much. Asking why Tobirama was saying this instead of Obi-Wan, and what proof had managed to convince his padawan.

Tobirama then said that Obi-Wan knew because of the Force, and that he was just the messenger, since he knew that Obi-Wan couldn't get through directly to Qui-Gon during his trials. More, that he'd tried to contact the council, and they kept dismissing him.

Qui-Gon then noted there was a reason that masters didn't hear from their padawans during the trials, and that Qui-Gon had been in touch with the Force plenty and he hadn't seen a hint of Palpatine being the Sith. Especially since Palpatine really had no reason to be a Sith—if he was, it would have meant he'd orchestrated the invasion of his own planet.

Tobirama then said that this made for a great vote of sympathy to get him the chancellorship.

Qui-Gon called that paranoid.

And then Tobirama was going off about how Lee was usually right, especially when you didn't want her to be, and that she wasn't stupid.

It could be worse, Anakin supposed. He'd thought for a moment when they'd first stepped in that Tobirama would be breaking the news about the sentient, corporeal Force to Qui-Gon and Anakin
had broken out into a cold sweat.

Not that claiming the chancellor was evil was much better, though.

Tobirama sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and said slowly, "I realize that it is difficult to believe me, especially with no concrete evidence given. If I were in your position, undoubtedly I would have the same reaction you're having, if not worse. I won't blame you if you walk away. However... I would infinitely prefer, Jinn, if in the future I were to deal with your people rather than his. I have seen his kind before, and nothing good will ever come of him."

Qui-Gon had nothing to say to that for too long a moment, simply staring at the worn-down second who had... He'd given up, Anakin suddenly realized. This was the second hokage giving up on the Republic and the jedi.

"Well, were I in your position," Qui-Gon said with a weak smile, "I would undoubtedly do the same as well, even knowing that no one would ever believe me."

Tobirama simply nodded, then looked to Anakin. "Skywalker, sorry for having wasted your time. Express my thanks to Jinn for sitting through this."

"Oh, it's fine, really—" Anakin started, not sure how he wanted to put it except that even though it kind of was a waste of his time and he could have been doing other things, he didn't really mind.

Except, before he could finish, everything changed.

Whenever Lee and Obito teleported, it was as if there was an explosion of color and light. More, a faint hint of ozone in the air, as if lightning had just struck at a frequency so high that no one could see it.

This time, though, there was more than that, an afterthought riding on Lee's coattails like the smallest of breaths. Nothing to notice, nothing to stand out in her overwhelming presence, but something Anakin instinctively knew even when no other jedi would recognize it.

Without even having to turn around and look, Anakin knew he was here, it was here.

"Oh good." Lee's voice was calm, casual as always, even while Anakin's heart pounded in his head. "The gang's all here."

She walked up to the table, collapsing into a seat while offering a polite and respectful nod towards Qui-Gon. "Jinn, a pleasure as always."

Qui-Gon started, opened his mouth, and seemed to default to the first thing that popped into his head: "Lee, I can't say I expected to see you here anytime soon, given Obi-Wan's reports."

"Well, time and space are a little more flexible with me," Lee said, her green eyes dancing with some wry mirth, this of course being the understatement of the century. "And Kenobi here thought it best to drop in, not to mention we have business in Konoha."

Obito, without sparing a glance for Anakin, collapsed into the seat next to her, looking like he'd pass out at any moment. Anakin could feel Obi-Wan Kenobi hovering uncertainly and uncomfortably behind his shoulder, out of sight, but attention forced and locked on Qui-Gon in desperation.

Please believe me, Anakin could almost hear him thinking.
And then, the Force stepped forward into Anakin's line of sight, to hover over Lee's shoulders and look down at her fondly. He looked like a man—not any man, a very specific man, but he looked terribly human in a way that he simply shouldn't. Even the way he felt in the Force, there was hardly anything there, no greater hint of what he really was aside from the fact that he felt like nothing more than a shell.

At the sight of that blonde hair, those pale eyes Anakin had only ever seen in dreams, he felt his hair stand on end.

The man, the Force, hadn't even glanced at Anakin, and yet Anakin found himself hoping dearly that the man never would. The last time he'd looked at Anakin, really looked, was when he'd almost devoured him for a pair of hands.

"Business in Konoha?" Qui-Gon asked, eyes now straying to the Force, narrowing as he sensed that the Force certainly wasn't human but wasn't anything important either. Qui-Gon could only see that it was an idea of a person, he couldn't see where the idea came from.

"Paperwork, medical examinations, shipping off discoveries to R and D, that sort of thing," Lee said with a nod, before motioning to Obi-Wan. "And Kenobi said he had his own more pressing business."

At that, she glanced towards Tobirama, her face abruptly more serious. "Tobirama, we're taking a week of leave to Konoha; specifically, we're giving Kenobi the chance to get his Republic out of dodge. He'll do better without us muddying the waters."

Tobirama opened his mouth to say something, but Anakin couldn't hear it over the sound of his own heart. No, not just his heart—it was as if a sandstorm was raging in his ears and all he could hear was the winds tearing the desert apart.

Even when Obito opened his mouth, Obito who still hadn't even looked at Anakin, Anakin couldn't hear it. He felt his vision going dark around the edges until all he could look at was the man who wasn't a man at all.

The man, this shell called Minato Namikaze, who was now looking straight at Anakin with eyes that…

How had Anakin ever thought they looked human?

There were galaxies in those eyes, and when they looked back at Anakin, Anakin realized he was only the smallest speck of dirt inside of them.

"And who is that supposed to be, Lee?" Qui-Gon asked, pointing straight at the Force. "Another one of these shadow clones from Tatooine?"

Whatever forced levity Lee had brought to the room cracked, a stiff and unwelcoming silence took its place, as everyone focused on the man that was the Force. Anakin's mouth was dry, the words caught on his tongue, the desperate truth that this was what Anakin had been trying to tell Qui-Gon.

This wasn't Lee or Obito playing around, this was the real thing! That thing everyone had told Anakin couldn't possibly exist was right here in front of them!

Only, he couldn't make a sound.

The Force, however, hardly seemed to notice, as if Anakin, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan simply weren't
worthy of his attention.

Instead, he looked down at Lee, a frown on his face, and asked in what must have been Minato Namikaze's voice, "They will be seven days by the Republic's calendar, Lee, not Earth's."

That was not, Anakin understood, a request.

"Provide me a way to translate that," Lee responded drily, "Or you're just going to have to handle waiting on Konoha's timeline."

He frowned. "I still don't see why you have to leave, why you simply cannot bring Konohagakure here."

"Because that's a rather extreme solution," Lee explained patiently, seemingly unbothered by the way the universe focused in on her. "Let's not go pushing Konoha to move it somewhere else. Besides, there's something you could be doing while we're away."

"Oh?"

"Go to the council with them," Lee said, motioning to Obi-Wan now standing behind Qui-Gon, a front of solidarity where there was none yet. "Take the concerns of your people into consideration. Let them recognize who and what you are, Haruki."

Obi-Wan's expression broke into one of awe, staring at Lee as if he had never truly seen her before now, and wondered how he had ever passed her by.

Lee took the Force's hands in hers, squeezing them tightly as she looked up at him imploringly. "Be the proof they need to win this fight."

For a moment, as he looked down at her, Anakin could feel him considering it. The future flickered in and out of Anakin's sight, this brave new world in which he approached the jedi as an open god. Then it was gone, shuttered closed, with only an answer on his lips: "No."

The Force, after all, owed them nothing.

"Well then, you have seven days, Haruki," Lee said, standing and holding her hands out for Obito and Tobirama. As they put their hands in hers, Tobirama with muttered irritation of having no forewarning, she offered one last nod to Obi-Wan. "Kenobi, godspeed."

And just like that, they were gone, ripping through the fabric of time, space, and the Force back to wherever Konoha really was. For a moment, the Force stood like the rest of them, perfectly still as he looked at the spot where they'd vanished.

Then the shadow clone dissolved back into air and smoke, as if it too had never been there with them.

"… And then Obito and I, on our small excursion around the core planets with Kenobi as a guide, were greeted by the shadow clone avatar of all the chakra in the universe, wearing none other than your face, who offered to take us on an epic quest to gather lightsaber crystals."
Obito hadn't thought anything would top his last mission report to the yondaime hokage. Apparently, Obito just hadn't been thinking big enough.

As if to emphasize this thought, Lee grinned at Minato-sensei's gaping mouth and added, "I call him Haruki."

Minato-sensei's eyes slowly, in some disbelief, looked first to Obito and then to Tobirama, searching for some denial that this had happened. Neither Obito nor the nidaime hokage could offer this to them.

Finally, the yondaime hokage managed to croak out, "How?"

Well, wouldn't they all like to know the answer to that? No, not quite, because Obito was pretty sure he knew the 'how'; it was the 'why' that still left him confounded and unnerved. Why now? Why had the Force had to wait until Lee?

"The important thing, Minato, is that this isn't my fault," Lee said, which caused Obito and Tobirama to look at her in the same moment. Lee quickly amended her statement, "It is not directly my fault."

At least this time, the update was so bizarre that there wasn't a chance in hell of Minato-sensei picking up on Lee and Obito's new relationship status. If he hadn't last time, then today was not going to be the day, even if Tobirama was there to tell it to his face.

Minato raked a hand through his hair, looked down at his desk in despair, and asked, "How is this even possible?"

"I—" Tobirama started, stopped, glanced at Lee, and finally gave up with a shrug that didn't suit him at all. "It's not necessarily impossible."

Minato-sensei's expression clearly stated that the nidaime was not helping things.

Lee waved this off as if the how and why of it was ultimately unimportant in the face of reality. "At any rate, we've left Kenobi to the mercy of his council and the chancellor. God willing, he'll stay alive long enough for us to get back in a week."

"You mean the Force willing," Obito couldn't help but crack.

Lee unfortunately took his joke rather seriously, levelling Obito with a sober look as she responded, "That's the trouble; I don't think Haruki gives a damn."

Obito knew, he was well aware of that, and that was why part of him did not expect Kenobi Obi-Wan to be there when they returned. It had been a hopelessly stupid, yet hopelessly brave, thing he was attempting to do.

For all that Obito didn't envy him, he'd been struck in those last moments of their departure that he wished he had known Kenobi was capable of this sooner. Obito had wasted so much time that he could have known the man.

"You're not going back."

Obito blinked, looked up at Minato-sensei again, but that soft familiarity was gone and something imposing and foreign had taken its place. It was the look Obito had come to recognize as the face of the yondaime hokage; however, more recently he had seen it worn by the Force.
And it was terrible, that seeing that expression here, and looking at a man he'd respected for the past seven years, he couldn't help but see the Force in his place.

"Minato—" Lee started, but she didn't get a chance to finish.

"You're not going back," Minato repeated. "There's too many unknowns, too much risk."

"We knew there would be risk," Lee said slowly, her voice hardening in turn as she leaned forward towards him. "I knew there would be risk."

"Risk, Lee, is risk of death, it is risk of battles and war, it is risk of diplomatic failure," Minato spat back. "Risk is not conversing with the avatars of gods!"

"I am an avatar of a god, Namikaze Minato!" Lee's voice rose in turn, louder and angrier than Obito had ever heard it, "Or are we just going to ignore that per our own convenience, like we always do!"

"And I am hokage!"

Lee fell silent, Minato's words hanging in the silence as the rest of them breathed, standing stunned in the aftermath of those words.

"I am hokage," Minato said, forcing his voice calmer and quieter, but it still shook as he looked across at her, "And if I say that you are not going back, Lee, then I will shut your department down and you will never set foot outside of this village again."

Lee said nothing for a moment, just laced her fingers together and rested her forehead on them, staring at the floor in the suddenly overbearing silence. Obito felt like an intruder in this moment, as if this was something that was not meant to be seen, more, a moment that never should have happened.

Obito had known that things weren't... No, he hadn't known at all just how long this had been waiting underneath the surface of their friendship.

Finally, still looking at the floor, Lee asked, "And what place is there for me here, Minato?"

She looked up, green eyes meeting his, and they were so empty and tired. More exhausted, Obito thought, than she'd ever allowed herself to appear in that tin can in space. "What am I to do here, Minato? What great task awaits me that I should leave an entire civilization to burn at the hands of their cruel and fickle god? Teaching? England? What purpose can I possibly serve in a village without war?"

She stood quietly, looking down at Minato who was in turn looking down at his desk and the paperwork strewn on its surface.

"Let me have my sandboxes, Minato, my summits of imagination and pits of fear," Lee said, and then she walked towards the door without waiting for dismissal. Her hand on the handle, she turned one last time towards them, no expression on her face. "They're all I have left."

And then she was gone, the door quietly shut behind her.
Qui-Gon had not been allowed to meet the council with Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan himself had almost been refused access to the council, for that matter. There was talk of whether or not he had abandoned his task. Eventually, though, they seemed to have decided in his favor, or perhaps realized that Obi-Wan's task was a farce.

He could not control Lee and Obito's movements any more than they could. Any belief that he did, that somehow this would make him a jedi knight, was foolishness.

So, it was Obi-Wan standing by himself in the center of the council's circle. Though he had often stood in this circle, he thought, it had been so long since he'd been by himself for it. Long before he was Qui-Gon's padawan, when he was that troubled child who showed enough potential to be dangerous and enough of a temper to be more than that.

Since then, Qui-Gon had always accompanied him and always taken the brunt of the council's displeasure. His master, Obi-Wan had often despaired, seemed to live for their ire.

There was no buffer now, though, only Obi-Wan Kenobi alone, and he never realized how much the very idea of Qui-Gon's presence in this place had brought him solace. Qui-Gon was with him in spirit now, but there was doubt and concern, because the shadow clone wasn't enough for him as it had not been enough for Obi-Wan until he'd had no choice but accept it.

Master Qui-Gon would rather Obi-Wan spout heresy and paranoia than believe him.

And Obi-Wan could not blame him, any of them, because it was a realization that Obi-Wan wished every day he could plunge out of his mind. Every day, he now drew closer to the dark side and despair, if only because he knew there was no such thing as serenity in the Force.

Only perfect, callous indifference.

The Force, Obi-Wan thought wryly, was not with him in this chamber. The Force, though undoubtedly watching, had simply refused to come.

"Padawan Kenobi," Master Windu said, leaning forward, his dark eyes boring into Obi-Wan as if he could see to the very heart of him, "After weeks of travelling with them, what is your impression of the woman, Master Lee Eru?"

Lee, always Lee. He wanted to smile, because of course they were stuck on Lee Eru, and they couldn't even see why. They cared about her, suddenly and absurdly, because the Force cared about her suddenly and absurdly. The Force, in its own words, cared more about that one woman than it cared about the entire Republic and Jedi Order.

"That she doesn't play the fool," Obi-Wan said simply. "That, oftentimes, sages appear to be great heretical fools. And that I think she's quite used to this treatment."

Certainly, in retrospect, Obi-Wan wondered how she had so easily taken his dismissal in the face of the consequences. In her place Obi-Wan would have been screaming to anyone and everyone; in fact, in her place at this moment Obi-Wan was directly confronting the council no matter what it might mean for him.

All on that slim hope that they would listen to a jedi even if they would not listen to shinobi.

"Expand, can you?" Master Yoda asked, scrutinizing Obi-Wan and likely searching for what Lee
could possibly be in the Force. If, in fact, she was not the true chosen one in Anakin Skywalker's place.

Perhaps; Obi-Wan wouldn't know if she caused the Force to be balanced, but at least she caught his interest.

"Angered, you are, by this question?" Yoda asked, "Experienced as you are, know that anger is dangerous you do."

Yes, he knew, he had spent his entire life knowing the consequences of passion. There was no serenity in passion, yet lately Obi-Wan could find no serenity in serenity itself. How could he, when everything he believed in turned out to be a lie? A lie that the jedi had told themselves for thousands of years.

"No," Obi-Wan said finally, "I'm afraid I did not come here to talk about Master Eru, her apprentice, or their diplomat. I know you have questions, but the shinobi can and will wait."

Strange as it sounded, Obi-Wan now trusted them far more than he did the Force itself. It was Lee, after all, who had told the Force to go with Obi-Wan.

"The Republic, the Jedi Order itself, is under direct threat," Obi-Wan said, clearly and succinctly, forcing himself into the calm state he needed for them to listen and understand. "I have it directly from the Force itself that we have, without action, thirteen years at best before our annihilation and the rise of a Sith empire. Sheev Palpatine, as the shinobi have claimed, is the Sith master."

They did not mutter, no, but there was a muttering in the Force. Confused, concerned, wary voices raised by thought alone as the masters communicated with one another.

"They will not believe you," the Force had said.

"Seen no hint of this, we have," Yoda said, "Certain, you are, padawan?"

"It's not something you see," Obi-Wan said as calmly as he possibly could. "The Force has been muddied, we know this. Palpatine is using the Force against us. If we leave him and his power unchecked, he will destroy us all."

"You are bitter, boy, and angry," Master Mundi noted. "You have not properly been releasing your emotions into the Force."

Oh, but he had, even though the very idea brought pain to him, Obi-Wan had done it as he had been trained to do. It simply wasn't enough anymore.

"My apologies, masters, but the point still stands—"

"Your point is baseless," another council member said. "There has been no sign of your claims within the Force."

"Was the invasion of Naboo not a sign?" Obi-Wan asked in turn.

"There is darkness in this galaxy, the reemergence of Sith, but that does not place them on Coruscant, Padawan Kenobi."

Obi-Wan could hardly keep track of who was speaking as the dismissal surrounded him on all sides, not one in his favor, and he felt as if the room were closing in on him slowly but surely.
"Then where does it place them? Where would a Sith lord be if not right under our noses? Here he can hide better than anywhere in the galaxy and he knows it!"

And then the words that could very well have not been spoken at all, but instead hurled from Obi-Wan's so very recent past into his face, because he had said and thought these same things at one point or another.

"You have been infected by the shinobi."

"Just because they are not Jedi does not mean that they are wrong!"

"Know this, how, young padawan?" Yoda asked, leaning forward on his gnarled cane. "If not through the Force and not through evidence, then why so certain?"

And at that, the words flew out of his mouth like a hurricane: "The Force cannot be trusted!"

He did not slap a hand over his mouth, though his fingers twitched to do so. Instead, in the sudden quiet, he said, "The Force cannot be trusted. It, he, has an agenda that does not align with the Jedi Order's. The Force shows us nothing, because he does not care if we live or we die."

This time there was no muttering in the Force or outside of it. No, it was instead deathly quiet, a weighted heavy silence that loomed like a shadow. And whatever was hidden there, whatever Obi-Wan could not see in the darkness, was his fate.

"I have told you this already," Obi-Wan said, stepping forward towards Yoda, whose wrinkled face showed no hint of understanding or thought. "I told you how he's taken the shape of a human man to accompany us on our journey. How he has made himself copilot as if he's been piloting all his life. You must believe that I am not lying, and I heard the truth from his own lips."

They must have faith, not in the Force, but in something beyond him. Obi-Wan didn't know what that was, but they must find it even as Obi-Wan himself searched for it.

"Taken off your trials, we believe is best, padawan Kenobi," Master Yoda finally said, but the way he said it Obi-Wan knew that this was not the first time this had been discussed. All too likely, after his first transmission, the council had asked themselves this very question.

Weighing the benefit of spying on Lee Eru against Obi-Wan Kenobi's fragile hold on reality.

"Appointments with a mind healer have been set up for you," Master Windu continued, breathing out as it was confirmed that all useful information had already been grilled out of Obi-Wan. "Your first appointment will be tomorrow morning."

The Force, after all, had convinced them that the only thing they needed to care about was Lee Eru. And they would return while Obi-Wan was sent for counselling until he either forgot himself or learned to hide and parrot back exactly what they expected him to say. They would travel on without him, the Force alone at the helm and Palpatine left behind unchecked on Coruscant.

"No," Obi-Wan breathed.

The word was soft, but it seemed to startle every master in the room.

"What did you say?" Master Mundi asked.

This time the word came easier, confidence flooding into him without source, a sudden conviction
that this was the only path left for him, "No, I cannot abandon my trials now. I must continue, wherever it leads."

And for the first time in what seemed like years but had only been weeks, Obi-Wan allowed the Force to speak through him, "This journey is the most important thing that has ever happened, or will ever happen, in the universe."

"You are not well, Padawan Kenobi," another member said, leaning forward and looking at him with fearful eyes. "Surely, you must recognize that yourself."

"It doesn't matter if I'm well or not, I have to be there." They, after all, would certainly not wait for him.

"You are wavering dangerously close to the dark side, padawan," Master Windu spat. "If you do not seek help, then surely you will fall."

Strange, that Obi-Wan suddenly realized a powerful truth. "I have not fallen yet."

If he had not fallen in the face of this, in the face of a Force that was nothing like the Force, then surely the dark side did not await him. Obi-Wan might buckle, he might bend, but he would not break.

"Hubris, you are filled with," Master Yoda warned. "Jedi have thought similarly before, too many have fallen from such arrogance."

"I will not be one of them," Obi-Wan said. "I promise."

"You cannot make that promise, Padawan Kenobi," a Master Koon noted. "None of us can."

"Then I will try!" Obi-Wan retorted, feeling as if he were reaching the edge of a cliff, being backed into it, and one more step backwards and he'd fall.

"If you leave now, Padawan Kenobi," Master Windu stated, his voice strong and unquestionable, "Then you leave the Jedi Order."

Obi-Wan stopped, his mouth falling open, and he felt himself stop breathing. It was as if the world suddenly stood still, and this moment wasn't happening. Not simply that it was a dream, but that it hadn't happened, couldn't happen.

There were no more steps backwards to take, he was right on the edge of the cliff.

Outside, Qui-Gon waited for him. Qui-Gon, his reluctant master who had become more than a father to Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon, who had always had his own bickering squabbles with the council, who had never found a seat among them for his own unorthodoxy. Years from now, he and Obi-Wan might look back and laugh at the very idea that it was Obi-Wan, and not Qui-Gon, who had been threatened with expulsion from the Order.

Things could still go back to normal; Obi-Wan could go to mind healing, put the rest of it out of his mind and let the world keep turning. He would remain a jedi, become a jedi knight then jedi master, and perhaps in time he would have a seat on the council as well.

Perhaps he would look down on some heretical fool and give him this same decision.

Repentance or dismissal.
Obi-Wan Kenobi was seeing his life flash before his eyes.

He saw Anakin Skywalker as his padawan, not Qui-Gon's, and all the tense and fond years stretching between them. He saw Anakin taking on his own, problematic padawan in turn and feeling oddly like a grandfather to the pair even as the world collapsed around them.

Obi-Wan lifted a hand absently to his face, feeling tears coursing down his cheeks. All he had ever known was the Jedi Order.

Yet, just the same, all he had ever known was the Force.

He knew what decision he had to make.

"Then I am no longer a jedi."

He closed his eyes, took a shuddering breath and deposited his lightsaber on the floor for the masters to take from him, however much he might need it. He ignored the cries of concern and fear behind him that they had pushed him into the choice he never should have been capable of making. Obi-Wan, in turn, stumbled out of the chamber and into the hallway, recognizing the truth that the impossible had now occurred.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was no longer a jedi, and Anakin Skywalker was now and forever the padawan of Qui-Gon Jinn.

He made his way to the lift, collapsing and shuddering against the glass walls, breathing in and out and attempting to compose himself and the shifting world around him. This, he suddenly realized, was all too likely the last time he'd set foot inside the temple.

Those who were dismissed from the Order, who left the Order, rarely came back to it.

At the first floor he stumbled out, still in a state of shock, and searched in the Force for Master Qui-Gon. Master Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan suddenly thought as he halted in his tracks. Master Qui-Gon had already suffered the loss of one padawan, Xanatos; he did not deserve to face another.

Obi-Wan would see him again, on the other side of the Force, or perhaps sooner than that if the Force was willing.

If Qui-Gon heard it from Obi-Wan now, like this, then it was all too likely he'd leave the Order as well, as he'd been tempted to do so very many times.

And then where would Anakin Skywalker be?

So, Obi-Wan turned and instead headed quietly towards the exit, trusting the Force to keep him inconspicuous.

"Obi-Wan!" Obi-Wan stopped in his tracks at the high-pitched voice of a young boy, turned, and caught Anakin sprinting towards him. "Obi-Wan, what happened?!"

Anakin Skywalker. He was so… young.

Obi-Wan couldn't say why, but for a moment he looked at the boy and hoped that he was older. This Anakin, at this young age, Obi-Wan hadn't gotten a chance to know him yet.

He didn't deserve to have the world crashing on his shoulders. Still, he was the only one left, the only jedi in the entire galaxy who understood.
Obi-Wan slowly kneeled, placed his hands on Anakin's shoulders, and stared into the boy's eyes. "Anakin, I have to go now, but I need you to make me a promise."

Anakin's eyes, so blue and so bright, widened. "Obi-Wan, where are you going?! Tell me what's happened!"

"I need you to promise me that you will trust no one," Obi-Wan said. "Master Qui-Gon, he's the only one, and you can't let him falter."

Anakin didn't want to listen, was squirming and trying to distract Obi-Wan, but Obi-Wan wouldn't let him move and forced him to stay in place. "But where are you going?"

"This is no longer my battlefield," Obi-Wan said simply, "And so I have to leave it to you."

Anakin opened his mouth, closed it, and then there were tears at the corners of his eyes as well. He desperately tried and failed to blink them back, and instead croaked out, "You would have been a great jedi master."

Obi-Wan pulled him into a hug in the middle of the jedi temple, this boy he barely knew and now never would, and refused to let go.

"Shishou?"

Obito stepped into Lee's apartment, the door having been left eerily unlocked. The place was barren as ever, but the lights were all turned off. Stepping inside from the bright daylight, Obito couldn't make her out yet, could only sense her presence somewhere in the room.

"Shishou?" he asked again, shutting the door softly behind him.

He hadn't waited through the rest of the meeting. He'd stood after she had, staring after her, and it'd taken him only a second to decide to walk out the door after her. The meeting, whatever was left of that meeting, he'd leave to the nidaime hokage.

And instead of meeting with Kakashi or finding Rin, he practically sprinted to the door of her apartment and invited himself inside.

He'd never seen it like this.

With a handseal and muttered syllables, a small flame burst into life at the end of his index finger. He held it up, looking into the dark, and there sitting on the couch was Eru Lee.

He stepped towards her, circling the couch until he was standing in front of her and looking down, but she didn't look up.

"Lee," he said softly, cutting off the chakra from his fingers and allowing the flame to sputter and die. With a breath he took her hands in his, calloused and warm, and he opened his mouth searching for something to say but nothing came out.

"Lee," he repeated, forcing her name, that familiarity he so rarely allowed himself, off of his
tongue, "He didn't mean it."

She finally looked up at him, that wry, self-deprecating smile on her lips. "That's the trouble, Obito. He did."

"He's worried," Obito said, squeezing her hands and forcing her to look at him and recognize what he was saying. "He should be worried, I'm worried. Haruki is not polite company and I don't like it any more than sensei does."

"That doesn't mean he didn't mean it," Lee responded softly, with that dull resignation he'd seen too often on her face when it came to Namikaze Minato.

"What do you think he meant, shishou?"

"I unnerve him," Lee said succinctly. "He likes to pretend I'm human, or at least think that I'm something of a kissing cousin, but then he remembers that I have more power than he can ever comprehend. More, that I've used it, and that I've used it without his consent."

She continued then, her smile growing larger and her words easier even as they felt like daggers in Obito's heart, "I unnerve everyone, really, I always have. It's why I've carved out this strange little place for myself, jonin master, captain of an ANBU department that should have never existed in the first place. Always taking two steps beyond where man was ever meant to go. Except, even then I apparently went two steps too far."

"It's not you, Lee," Obito said, "I promise it's not—"

"Are Haruki and I really so different, Obito?" Lee asked. "He's younger, he didn't have Namikaze Minato, but I think that I could have been him easily enough. Strange, when we don't call it Eru Lee, suddenly all those repressed feelings come out in the open."

She was looking pointedly at him as well, as if to ask what Obito's excuse was for hating one and loving the other. If, perhaps, Obito was not quite as understanding as she'd once believed, that he would not have done everything and anything for Nohara Rin and now for Eru Lee herself.

He cupped her face in his hands, leaning forward until their foreheads were touching. "Shishou, Lee, I don't care about him. Maybe that's terrible of me, I don't care, I just know that I care about you. And whatever awful thing you did for Minato-sensei—whatever you've done for Minato-sensei—you know if it was in my power, I'd do the same for you. If you want to go back there, if you want to desert Konoha to go back into that cesspool of jedi and foreign chakra, I will personally escort you!"

He pulled her close, off the couch and into a suffocating hug. "I will go into Minato-sensei's office every day, convincing him it's the best damned idea he's ever heard of to go play house with chakra that likes to wear his face, even though I hate that thing with a passion and have this constant feeling of dread that it will blow up in our face."

Obito wanted to stay—god, now that they were here in Konoha he wanted to stay so badly it hurt. It would be so easy to just never go back, or else simply send Tobirama to deal with it while he and Lee stayed inside this apartment and never left.

But Obito was very familiar with not getting what he wanted.

He tucked a curling strand of hair away from her face and behind her ear, leaning against her. "Lee, I would destroy worlds for you, but don't ask me to do it."
She didn't. Instead, with the most fragile of smiles, she leaned forward and brushed her lips against his. They tumbled backwards onto the floor, Lee on top of him while his hands moved upwards to the small of her back to press her closer.

"Only until the crystals," Lee said into his ear as his hands snuck under her shirt. "We return, we stay, only until we get the crystals."

Obi-Wan found himself wandering Coruscant, a few days to spare before Lee, Obito, and Tobirama Senju were due to return. He had thrown himself out of the Order too early, and now he had nowhere left to go.

The city was so strange, Obi-Wan thought, it was as if he had never truly seen it before. He had visited its underbelly as well as its highest heights with his master before, but somehow it was different now; before, it had always been a visit. Now, though, he lingered and remained long after the sun had set and the neon sights were set ablaze.

He no longer belonged to the world of jedi and yet he did not belong outside of it either.

That was how he found himself in a bar, idly biding time, and wondering just how he'd ended up in this kind of a world. Dex's had felt too familiar, too close—more, Qui-Gon would have found him there in no time at all, and Obi-Wan was not ready for that.

Besides, something about the grunge, the seediness and ill-repute, served to remind Obi-Wan that his world had changed. If he went to Dex's, he'd likely walk back to the temple on autopilot, unthinkingly returning to his former life. Here there was no such familiar path home.

He raised a hand for another glass, watching as credits disappeared from the wallet stockpiled by Lee as well as the Force, the only credits Obi-Wan had any access to. A small shot of colorless alcohol was set in front of him with a grunt. Obi-Wan looked at it in some bemusement.

As a jedi, he had not typically indulged in alcohol, only when it was required by custom or by cover. He couldn't say he was indulging now, as he was not quite drunk yet, but there was a pleasant blurred buzz that he wasn't sure he had felt before.

He raised the glass, a silent toast, but before he could throw it back, he was met with a hand stopping the liquid. Looking over, he started, as there was the Force in his blonde familiar form, smiling across at Obi-Wan as if he had been sitting there all along.

"I would not drink that, Obi-Wan Kenobi," the Force said, his smile never slipping. "The chancellor is working very hard to see you dead."

Obi-Wan paled and slowly, ever so slowly, set the glass down on the bar counter. "Why are you here?"

Since when was the likes of Obi-Wan Kenobi worthy of his attention?

"I have plans for you, Obi-Wan Kenobi," the Force said slowly, smoothly, utterly unconcerned by whoever might be watching. "You are, after all, still my copilot."
"You don't need a copilot," Obi-Wan answered. The man could find a ship without one, or else perform the work of two pilots with ease, and they both knew it.

"You are familiar to her," the Force answered in turn, this being the heart of the matter, then. "Any other copilot I acquire would likely not be nearly as suitable."

Obi-Wan wasn't certain how he felt about that, something insulted certainly, but it was more of a straight answer than he'd ever received from the Force. The only straight answer, in fact, that he had ever received from the Force.

More, Obi-Wan was here, was alive now, because the Force had a vested interest in keeping him alive. So long as Obi-Wan was necessary, so long as the Force was with him, he would not die, not even if Sheev Palpatine struck against him.

"And you forgot something in the temple, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan looked up from his reminiscing. "Forgot something? I didn't—"

He stopped. There, handed to him here in a world so far away from the temple, was his polished lightsaber that he'd left to the Order only a few days before. Obi-Wan's hands shook as he reached out for it, gripped it tightly as if to determine if it was real and truly here.

He looked up, mouth open, not sure whether to reject this gift or else to thank the Force for bringing it back to him. As if to say, Obi-Wan Kenobi, you are still a jedi.

"You may have need of it yet, Obi-Wan."

And no matter what Obi-Wan thought of him, of it, he couldn't help but bow his head, tears prickling at the corner of his eyes, and say, "Thank you."
Chapter 20

“Granger,” Lee said with a bright grin and a small laugh, “What a pleasant surprise.”

Only, Obito couldn’t help but notice, that Lee’s expression while pleasant enough to fool your average civilian had a tense and unhappy quality to it when you looked at the right angle.

Granger Hermione, twenty-six-year-old English witch and ministry bureaucrat, stopped in her tracks and looked over at the pair of them. Unlike Lee, Granger Hermione either had no practice or little interest in disguising her feelings. Her scowl, slowly, painfully, transformed into a sort of half-grimace and from there into a rather thin smile.

Which left Lee and this English woman both just smiling at each other without smiling at all, with Uchiha Obito standing there next to Lee and feeling very out of place, right in the middle of Diagon Alley as if there wasn’t anywhere in the world they would rather be.

Well, Obito couldn’t speak for Granger, but he and Lee had been off to pester the wandmaker Ollivander again to take on a shinobi apprentice. This was something he and Lee did every few months or so and that Lee herself had been doing regularly for years. The man was stubborn though and understandably secretive about his craft even when pestered by not only the girl-who-lived but the woman who had personally bartered for his freedom from the English nin about eight years back.

Apparently though, the sight of Granger Hermione was enough to throw all that out the window.

Obito, by that point, had heard of the woman now and then. Lee didn’t talk too much about her brief stay at Hogwarts and the disastrous Triwizard Tournament, but Granger’s name along with Weasley Ron, Longbottom Neville, and some strange figure who was only referred to as Weasel Tequila came up every now and then.

And as he became more familiar with English law and the Wizengamot her name came up a bit more often than the others. Obito was hardpressed to forget about the woman singlehandedly responsible for S.P.E.W. after all.

This, however, was his first time actually running into her.
“Ellie Potter,” Granger said through her teeth, as if every pleasant syllable was like driving a nail through her foot, “You’re back in London for the Wizengamot session, I take it?”

“And auror business,” Lee said, this time her smile a little more genuine, if a little more amused at Granger’s clear dislike and discomfort.

“Right, they’re still contracting you people,” Granger bristled, emphasis on ‘you people’ as if she’d very dearly like to say something else, “You know, I have talked to Kingsly, Minister Shacklebolt that is, about that. It really isn’t a good idea to have foreigners so closely involved in domestic police business.”

“I agree,” Lee said, “However, neither you nor I oversee the auror corps, so I suppose we’ll just have to accept the decisions as they are. Besides, I think we can both agree that things have progressed to the point where you may very well need Konohagakure’s help.”

Granger finally seemed to have reached her internal limit and all pretense of pleasantness disappeared from her features, “Was there something you actually wanted, Potter?”

“Lunch,” Lee said pleasantly, as if the charade of friendship hadn’t dropped at all, “And information I suppose.”

Granger crossed her arms over her chest and snorted, “No bloody chance in hell.”

“Oh, come on. Are you really going to tell the Order that you passed up a free chance at information just because of your pride?” Lee asked, giving Granger a rather pointed look, at which she once again bristled, innate chakra causing her bushy hair to practically stand on end.

“Some people, Potter, aren’t spies!”

“No, that’s your trouble” Lee said as she gave Granger Hermione, the civilian pseudo soldier who was one of that small population left truly keeping the English nin at bay, “You only think you’re not a spy.”

Then, Lee offered a sly sort of grin, the kind that said she knew she had already won and there was nothing Granger Hermione could do about it, “I’ll pay.”
Whether it was the promise of free information or else the offer to pay for lunch a few minutes later saw Lee and Obito sitting across from a rather huffy Granger at a small magical café in the heart of Diagon Alley.

After ordering a small lunch Granger wasted no time and cut straight to the point, “What do you want?”

“You’re as impatient as ever,” Lee noted wryly, a very ironic thing to say as Lee wasn’t exactly known for her own patience, “I told you earlier, I want the same thing you want, information.”

“I don’t want information,” Granger huffed, impatiently tapping her foot against the cobblestone sidewalk to show just how unhappy she was about the situation.

“Really,” Lee said, “Then why are we sitting here?”

“Oh, I don’t—” Granger forcibly cut herself off and instead her dark eyes turned to Obito with a laser focus, “Who is he supposed to be anyway?”

Obito blinked, not sure how he felt suddenly being the focus of Granger’s attention. Up until this point he wasn’t even sure she’d noticed him. Which, in itself, was a little odd as with his face looking the way it did most people couldn’t help but do a double-take when they looked at him.

“He doesn’t even look old enough to have graduated Hogwarts,” Granger noted with contempt, as if this was something that should be held against Lee, likely because by her people’s standards Obito had no business being anywhere near a foreign country on official police business.

“Haven’t you heard?” Lee asked with raised eyebrows before motioning casually to Obito, “This is my apprentice, Obito Uchiha.”

“Oh, I’ve heard that,” Granger said, “I just wasn’t sure whether I wanted to believe that your government would really put someone like you in charge of a child’s well-being.”

“Child?!” Obito couldn’t help but blurt, flushing in mortification, and wondering when the rank of chunin would ever be enough for the Englishmen. He knew how they looked at him, like a
schoolboy who’d wandered his way into something far over his head, but he appreciated it when they didn’t say it.

“He’s the same rank I was when your people shoved me into a thinly disguised assassination attempt. Hell, Obito’s even older than I was,” Lee said with a shrug, but according to Granger’s face this was not a statement to make lightly.

“For the last time, Potter, the government wasn’t behind that! And before you can even think it neither was Dumbledore!”

“Yes,” Lee said, but with no real force or thought behind it, “Do you know if you’re doing any of those again anytime soon? It’d be great for morale. And if you do, do you think you can get Konohagakure an official slot this time.”

“Oh, you’re not nearly as clever as you think, you only want it back for the money!” Granger said, slamming her hands down on the table and causing the silverware to rattle.

“I do like money;” Lee said, without any shame whatsoever, indeed with a small nostalgic smile on her face.

Granger paused, took a deep calming breath, and backed off giving Obito another critical look, “So, if he really is your apprentice and I’m supposed to start believing the Prophet, then is he also your…”

Granger grimaced, flushed, and looked pointedly away from Obito leaving it to him and shishou to easily connect the dots. It was, to date, one of the most embarrassing and awkward lunches Obito had ever had. That was including the plethora of lunches he’d had with Bakashi as well.

“For shame, Granger,” Lee said, looking shocked and appalled in the most Casablanca sense of the phrase, “You know Skeeter insists that Malfoy Draco alone is my scorned paramore. Could I cheat on such a ferret of a man even with my adorable apprentice?”

“Shishou,” Obito said, intending to interrupt this, but Lee held up a dismissive hand to stop him apparently having far too much fun to respect Obito’s pride.

“And what about you, still married to Weasley?” Lee asked, “You have kids, right, they must
almost be ready for this English academy of yours.”

“Well,” Granger said, only to pause, a darker look crossing her face, “To be honest I suppose that is why I came to lunch with you.”

Now Lee looked genuinely surprised, her eyes widening and leaning forward, likely not having expected anything out of this lunch other than vague entertainment at Granger’s expense.

“It’s a few years off yet,” Granger said quietly, “Our oldest is only seven but…”

“Weasley wants her to attend Hogwarts, doesn’t he?” Lee asked, suddenly quite somber and serious as she looked across at Granger.

“Of course he does,” Granger said, resignation bleeding into her voice, “And I don’t blame him. We must stay and fight for our place in this world, because if we run who will be left? Even in this day and age there must be lions in England. Except…”

“Except you’re sending your untrained eleven-year-old daughter into a castle crawling with spies and enemy ninja,” Lee completed for Granger.

“Hogwarts has… It has typically stayed neutral,” Granger started, but it was a weak argument, made only to give herself some reassurance rather than to convince Lee.

“It has been infiltrated a dozen times over by enemies who show no hesitation in using children as a means to their ends,” Lee said, “And your children, in particular, would make a powerful statement.”

Granger sighed then, a long deep sigh from inside her heart, “I know, Potter, Lee, that we don’t get on. I wish our world views were more compatible, and… Well, I was young when we met and I’m willing to acknowledge that. As this war keeps going on and on, sometimes I can’t help but see your side of things, sometimes I even wish my daughter and son were prepared the way you were when you came to Hogwarts.”

“You don’t mean that,” Lee said without hesitation.
“No, I don’t mean that,” Granger said, “And I don’t mean to avoid Hogwarts either. I just…”

“It’s strange,” Granger said with a small smile, “The way your world changes when children enter it. Before you’re willing to die, to sacrifice everything, your own parents even, for a shining ideal of a world that never wanted you. Then, they come into your life, and suddenly you’re almost willing to find the money to have them personally trained by foreign child soldiers.”

“Almost?” Lee prompted and Granger gave her a sad, desperate, look.

“When Rose and Hugo are a little older, maybe next summer,” Granger said quietly, looking down at the table even as the waitress arrived with their lunch, “I’ll give you a call.”

The air in the hokage’s office was stifling, chakra and tension laced through everything, so thick it was almost choking. The silence, interrupted only by the ticking of a clock on the wall, was deafening.

Namikaze Minato, the yondaime hokage, Obito’s jonin sensei, and the closest thing he’d had to a father had yet to look directly at them but instead stared down at his paperwork. With the hokage hat on and the angle of his face it was impossible to tell what, if any, expression he was wearing.

It had been seven days since they had stood here, since Lee had quietly walked away from this office with Obito on her heels, and Lee’s self-imposed deadline was now upon them.

Finally, Minato set down his pen and lifted his head to stare at Lee and her apprentice, “So, you really do still intend to go.”

His face looked like a mask, his mouth a thin grim line, and his brow unfurrowed. Like a mask though, his true eyes were peeking through, and he couldn’t quite manage to make that pale glittering blue entirely expressionless.

“All until we find these crystals,” Lee responded just as coolly, “The rest I leave to the nidaime.”
“And you didn’t bring him to this meeting?” Minato asked but Lee just gave him an exhausted and flat look.

“He said he’d wait outside.”

He’d thought that Lee and Minato could use a chance to chat without his intervention. He’d been near ready to drag Obito out of it too, but for better or worse Obito was now intimidating enough that by a look alone he could get the nidaime hokage to back off and let him sit in a meeting he had no business being included in.

Well, that wasn’t quite fair, Obito was more and more convinced that he had every right to be here. Even if Minato-sensei didn’t know it yet. After all, in the seven days since their fall out, Obito was almost certain that Minato hadn’t reached out to Lee and Lee hadn’t reached out to him in turn.

“I—” Minato started, then cut himself off, slowly taking of his hat and running a hand through blonde hair, “I still think you shouldn’t go. From everything you’ve told me, that Senju Tobirama has told me… This is a catastrophe waiting to happen, Lee, and you and I both know it.”

“And that’s why I’m only there a few more months at best,” Lee responded, leaving hanging again in the air that unheard argument of the risks she had been willing to take and the people who now needed her help even if they didn’t know it.

“You don’t have to go,” Minato said, and suddenly his attempt at stoicism was gone and some of his human desperation was shining through, “There are missions, Lee, students even. Granger contacted us, dropped a line about teaching her children and a few others self-defense, and of course they’re only willing to settle for you as an instructor.”

Lee just offered him a small, sad, smile that said exactly what she’d said last time she’d been in this office. There were no missions anymore, not for the likes of her, and there was no true place for Eru Lee in this brave new Konoha the yondaime aimed to create.

“I’ll be fine, Minato” Lee said, forcing a brighter smile on her face, “Really, have I ever failed before?”

Minato-sensei, weakly, tried to smile back, “You’ve had more than your fair share of close calls.”
They grinned at each other then, and for a moment it seemed real, not necessarily mended or that they were back to where they were but that whatever their relationship was it was not as damaged as Obito expected. This was a friendship that had seen storms, weathered them, and still come out with rays of sunshine peeking through the dark clouds.

It was…

Part of Obito was glad to see it, that he hadn’t been entirely wrong about them for all those years, but another part of him felt as if his heart was sinking into his chest with a painful resignation. Because, for these past seven days, Obito had thought that he was more important to her life than perhaps Minato-sensei ever had been.

But he was wrong and maybe it was good that he was reminded of that.

“Obito,” Minato-sensei said, startling Obito from his morose thoughts.

“Yes, sensei?” Obito asked, feeling a jolt as he wondered if this was going to be the moment Minato-sensei finally got his head out of his ass and put it all together.

Apparently, it wasn’t though, as Minato just pleasantly smiled and motioned to Lee in turn, “I’m trusting you to keep her out of trouble.”

Obito grinned back, the kind of smile that had come so naturally before the Kannabi bridge, “Of course, sensei, you can count on me.”

Obito, after all, had been on the creeped out by Haruki bandwagon before it was popular. Still, he thought as Minato-sensei smiled and pushed them out the door with the promise that if they missed their meeting they’d have hell to pay, it might have been terrible of him but he couldn’t help a small hint of relief that for a few more months yet he’d be out of Minato-sensei’s shadow.

Even in the presence of the Force and all it’s terrifying implications a small part of Obito was more than willing to go anywhere just to tear Lee away from the slightest thought of Namikaze Minato.
“They’re here!”

One moment Obi-Wan had been sitting alone, attempting meditation inside the squalid out of the way motel room that the Force had provided for him, and the next he was started out of his trance by the sight of the Force’s borrowed form grinning ear to ear and tugging on Obi-Wan’s hand to pull him towards the automatic door.

“They’re here?” Obi-Wan asked, confused and out of sorts, and then realized what the Force must mean, what the Force had been singularly focused on ever since he had revealed himself as being more than simply the lifeblood of the galaxy.

“Lee is finally back,” the man said with a smile towards Obi-Wan, so unnervingly and perfectly human for a moment.

Whoever this Namikaze Minato really was, the man whose form the Force had been borrowing, Obi-Wan imagined he was quite charismatic. All of the human mannerisms, his expressions, everything the Force appeared to have borrowed were somehow innately likeable in a way Obi-Wan couldn’t quite describe.

He looked like the kind of man who could be just about anyone’s friend.

“She’s late though,” the Force said though to himself, now visibly irritated even as he pulled Obi-Wan out the door and into the midday sunlight, “I knew she’d be late, I warned her, but she didn’t listen…”

Down they went over the steel grated balcony, rusted staircases that looked seconds away from crumbling, and all the way to the sun deprived gutter that was the street level where, true to the Force’s word, Lee Eru and her apprentice stood staring up at Obi-Wan’s temporary residence with confused wonder.

“Where’s your diplomat?” Obi-Wan asked as he approached them.

“We dropped Tobirama off at the temple, he wanted to announce his return and dig into the archives personally,” Lee said, still distracted by the sight of Coruscant’s seedy underbelly, “We thought we’d pick you up in there.”
Ah, of course they did, and it was strange how much that assumption hurt.

“Jesus, Kenobi,” Obito said as he squinted up at the delapidated high rise with dark raised eyebrows and a grimace, “Where the hell are we?”

Wasn’t it strange, Obi-Wan thought, that these people who only a short while ago had been the bane of his existence caused a relieved smile to appear on his face? Still, as he reached them, he felt something in himself loosen. This at least was as it should be.

“My temporary home for the last few days,” Obi-Wan said, able to say it with a surprising ease. He wouldn’t say that he’d grown used to his position in their absence, often he found himself straying towards the temple or else thinking of what he’d do when he returned there, but as time had passed it had become easier to process.

Obi-Wan Kenobi was no longer a jedi and never would be a jedi again.

Perhaps, though, it was so easy to accept because there was still a lightsaber strapped to his waist and the Force was still with him (too close to him honestly). Obi-Wan might no longer be a jedi in name, no longer have the backing of the council or the benefit of a master to watch over him, but he believed he was still more than a jedi in spirit.

After all, the Force himself had asked Obi-Wan to do this.

No matter what the Force really was, no matter what he wanted, Obi-Wan would cling to that for as long as he could.

“What? This place? But I thought all jedi lived in the temple.” Obito asked, apparently not quite getting it, but by her expression Lee seemed to have caught on before he had to say it.

“So, they really did it,” Lee said, slowly reaching out towards him with a pale hand, “Kenobi, I am…”

“No, it’s alright, it’s…” Obi-Wan paused, searched for the words he needed, “The council gave me an ultimatum and I made the only choice I could. As it happened, I could not choose the jedi
“What?” Obito said, head whipping from his master to Obi-Wan and back again, realizing that he’d missed something devastatingly important.

“I am no longer a jedi,” Obi-Wan said, and it was funny, because this was the first time he’d said it out loud. He hadn’t said it at the temple, and after he’d left, he’d hardly talked to anyone. The only true conversation he’d had was with the human guise of the Force who hadn’t needed to be told for obvious reasons.

The words sounded so innocuous.

Lee and Obito, however, seemed to take his words with the gravity they deserved.

“Are you telling me that they expelled you from the hidden village,” Obito said slowly, expression draining from his face, “Simply because they didn’t like to hear what you wanted to say.”

“Technically,” Obi-Wan said with a smile that statement didn’t deserve, except he was somehow finding it funny, “It was because I refused the required mind healing brought upon me by speaking heresy and utter lunacy.”

Still, even now he wasn’t entirely sure they had meant it to go that far. Any other padawan would have taken their offer, Obi-Wan himself likely would have in any other situation, and he didn’t blame them for it either. The dark side was something to be so cautious against, was so subtle and insidious, that the council no longer believed it could afford to take chances.

Except, they lived in an age where if the jedi order was to survive, the republic itself, they must learn to take chances.

Obito looked as if he wasn’t sure what to say. Obi-Wan wondered if he was debating blurting out yet another reproach of the order, that this was why the jedi were terrible and he never understood them. However, instead he offered Obi-Wan a said sort of smile, patted him on the arm, and said, “Unfortunately, I understand.”

Unfortunately, he understood…
What in the world could that mean?

“Lee,” the Force said, forcing their attention back towards him, “I haven’t seen you in seven days and the best you can do is chatter away with Kenobi?”

For a moment, when the Force had handed Obi-Wan back his lightsaber, had acknowledged him on a personal level, Obi-Wan had thought they’d had a moment. He was now dutifully reminded that he was still an ant in the eyes of the Force, just a slightly more useful and memorable ant than the rest of them.

“Oh, look at you, Haruki,” Lee said with raised eyebrows and a rather amused expression, “You managed to remember his name. I think I might be impressed.”

“And you didn’t even manage to remember to come back on time,” Haruki accused, pointing a finger into Lee’s dark vest, “You said seven days, by Konohagakure’s clock, and I’ve been counting.”

“A wizard is never late nor is he early,” Lee said rotely back, and judging by the look on Obito’s face this was something she said at every given opportunity, “Instead he arrives precisely when he means to.”

“Besides,” Lee said, giving the Force a rather pointed look that Obi-Wan himself could not dare to, “Kenobi being thrown out of the order is more important than a few lost hours here and there.”

“Did they believe you about Palpatine?” Obito asked, cutting straight to the heart of the matter before the Force could interrupt.

“No,” Obi-Wan said with a sigh, “No they didn’t believe me, and I doubt Master Qui-Gon did either. There’s only Anakin Skywalker and he’s only just become a padawan.”

Not to mention that Palpatine had…

Obi-Wan liked to think that he was moving too soon, that to get rid of Obi-Wan now after only a few days would at the very least attract Qui-Gon’s notice, but he wasn’t sure. Palpatine had made it
this far, after all, and he was becoming more and more convinced that if Palpatine was making those sorts of moves he was more than confident that he could make the jedi overlook Obi-Wan’s death or disappearance.

Sheev Palpatine already had that much power and influence inside the order.

He could only hope that Anakin and Master Qui-Gon would move carefully.

“I told you the jedi would not believe you,” the Force said with a sigh, looking as put upon as Obi-Wan imagined he himself had with Master Qui-Gon throughout their many missions.

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said, “You did.”

“If you had wanted a path beyond my domain, a miracle of that nature,” the Force lectured, looking directly at Obi-Wan as he so rarely did, “Then Lee would have needed to accompany you.”

Lee tilted her head back and laughed, it was a bright cheerful thing that was so very at odds with their conversation, and as she laughed for a single moment Obi-Wan could see what both Obito and the Force seemed to see in her, “Oh, Haruki, you give me entirely too much credit.”

“Lee hasn’t even managed to convince her own people, the English, out of their extravagant decade long societal suicide,” Obito explain with a wry grin, “There’s a reason we weren’t anyone’s first choice of a diplomat.”

“Why were you made first contact then?” Obi-Wan couldn’t help but ask, because now that the question had occurred to him, he couldn’t force it away. If he was their order, their village council and leader, he would never let Obito and Lee be the first beings on any kind of planet.

Force, he wasn’t even sure he’d give Lee a padawan.

“Well, I didn’t give Minato much of a choice,” Lee said with a small, pleased, smile and no hint of a greater explanation behind that alarming statement, “Now, that said, I believe we left our lemon of a ship on Alderaan.”
And just like that, in the blink of an eye, Obi-Wan was hurtled through time and space in a way that matter was not meant to move and standing on the green hilltops of Alderaan where their ship was right where they’d left it.

As if, Obi-Wan thought for a moment, nothing at all had changed and he had never returned to Coruscant. A week ago, Obi-Wan had been on this very hilltop, a jedi, desperately making a choice he had known would have no favorable results.

And now he was back, having reaped the consequences of his actions, and no longer a jedi though still somehow bearing his own lightsaber.

It was strange to think how both nothing and everything had changed.

Except, glancing over at the so very human Force, who looked as if he wanted nothing more than this moment to last forever, Obi-Wan couldn’t help but wonder just how long this could possibly last.

“So, Lee, since you went back to Konohagakure for so long that means you’re not going anywhere for a while. Right?”

Obito had forgot, in his momentary eagerness to get away from Namikaze Minato’s face, that he’d be going right back to seeing Minato-sensei’s face in the worst of ways. There he was, dressed today in pale garments and gilded sandals one might find in higher quality markets on Tatooine, looking entirely too comfortable with Minato-sensei’s face.

The Force, at least, seemed to be in a good mood. He was wearing the kide of dopey smile that Minato-sensei wore when he was so lovesick and joyful that he forgot how to have even the slightest bit of dignity.

Minato-sensei looked like that a lot around the time Naruto was born, and sometimes, in the early days, he’d looked at Lee with that same expression.

Obito really did not like being reminded of it.
“Yeah, sure,” Lee responded, looking a bit distracted as she unpacked all their supplies while Obito loitered against the wall watching her. Finally, as she stuffed clothing into cramped drawers, she looked back at the thing wearing Minato’s face with an almost sheepish smile, “Probably not for a few months at least.”

Haruki didn’t take the hint though, just leaned over the doorway, past Obito and asked, “And did you bring up moving Konoha here? Since you seem so fond of discussing things with your sentients.”

Ah yes, Obito had missed those backhanded and yet somehow oblivious insults as well.

“I mentioned it,” Lee said, apparently not willing to go into the gory details of what had been in their mission report, “They weren’t thrilled.”

That had to be the understatement of the millennium.

“Oh, but there’s plenty of room here, Lee,” Haruki said, not deterred in the slightest by Lee’s lame answer, “Better, there’s none of those enemy villages or shinobi you’re always going on about.”

Obito wasn’t sure the current state of the elemental nations had ever been brought up in detail to Anakin or anyone else. They’d offhandedly mentioned the third war as well as the second, certainly made no secret of their combat abilities and wariness of other villages, but had they noted that the villages were at peace? Obito wasn’t sure they ever had, it somehow hadn’t seemed worth mentioning, and it certainly didn’t feel right bringing it up now.

Besides, that was all beside the point.

“Except the jedi,” Obito interjected, “And the sith.”

Haruki glanced at him, more aware of Obito as always than he ever was of that poor bastard Kenobi. Though, he supposed it could be worse, while expelled from the order as Obito had been expelled from his clan Kenobi was still alive and in good health which was more than Obito had predicted for him. Who knew, perhaps when this was said and done, he’d agree to come back to Konoha with them. It really, as far as Obito felt anyway, was the best course for Kenobi. So even though Anakin passed them over they still might have a jedi-shinobi hybrid yet in Kenobi Obi-Wan.
For now, Obito was simply glad the man, one of the few allies and friends they had among the jedi and one of two true believers, was still with them.

Haruki, as usual, didn’t seem inclined to pay his jedi friends even half a thought, “Oh, they don’t count.”

“Don’t they?” Obito asked, utterly unconvinced. Not that any of this was surprising since Haruki still appeared to have trouble grasping that those inconsequential sentients were worth a lot more attention by the likes of Lee.

That Lee seemed to care what Obito, Tobirama, and everyone else seemed to think at all was probably to him the rough equivalent of Haruki asking opinions from his collection of china dolls during pretend tea time.

Although Obito supposed it was better than being her sex toy.

“Well, maybe to your Obito and his ilk,” Haruki conceded, as if the concerns of the likes of Uchiha Obito were entirely irrelevant, “But if it bothers you that much, I can see that they leave you to your own devices.”

How generous of him.

Obito wondered, for a moment, how much Haruki really had seen of Konoha. He’d implied that he could get more than a few glimpses through Obito and Tobirama, somehow filtering through their memories, but he wasn't acting as if he’d been privy to their first meeting with Minato-sensei.

Or, if he had seen it, then he didn’t realize how much weight that threat from Minato held and that Lee really didn’t intend to stay here even if she’d come back.

Perhaps it was for the best that Haruki didn’t concern himself with the concerns of the likes of Uchiha Obito.

“We’ll just have to see,” Lee said with a smile, unwilling to give him the flat answer that there was no chance in hell that would ever happen.
She then looked towards Haruki pointedly, motioning towards the open door, “Shouldn’t you be helping Kenobi fly this thing?”

“You know, Lee,” Haruki said drily, looking uncomfortably like Minato-sensei, “I can be in two places at once.”

“We need a break,” Obito groused, cutting straight to the point, but rather than being put out or offended Haruki just beamed back at them.

“I know, I know,” Haruki said, sauntering away from them and towards the bridge with a smile on his face and a spring in his step, “You like your space, Lee. I’ve personally had far too much space, since the very beginning, nothing but space and quiet. Still, I can give you your illusions of privacy, I’ll let you know when we’re nearing our next stop.”

And just like that he rounded the corner towards the cockpit where he undoubtedly was about to make Kenobi’s life ten times more miserable than it already was. Obito probably should feel bad about that, but somehow, he just couldn’t bring himself to.

Instead he sighed, raked a hand through his hair, and spared Lee a look as he dared himself to be honest even when the Force could very well be listening in on every word, “You’re going to need to tell him eventually.”

“Tell him?” Lee asked, even though she knew perfectly well what Obito was getting at.

Still, even as Obito collapsed on the bed and stared up at the metallic ceiling, he clarified, “That we’re not staying.”

Lee sat on the bed with him, the mattress giving slightly under her weight, and looked forward with a serious and pensive expression, “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Obito agreed, there was the thought that he didn’t know what Haruki would do when he found out. Given past actions though, and given his prowess, it was something that would be desperate, powerful, and highly unpleasant.
The trouble was, Obito couldn’t help but think and voice aloud, “He’ll figure it out.”

“Perhaps,” Lee responded, but they both knew that perhaps was optimistic at best. For all that Haruki was alien, was certainly not human, that did not make him stupid or entirely unobservant. Especially when he cared whether Lee stayed or left far more than he seemed to care about anything else.

He was aware and desperately afraid of the possibility already, Obito thought, and the fact that he’d acted so pleasant after their return...

It made Obito nervous.

“I suppose we’ll just cross that bridge when we come to it,” Lee finally said with resignation, “Who knows, maybe Tobirama will come across something useful in the jedi archives or else finally get through to one of them. Sometimes there’s nothing you can do but wait and see how it all pans out.”

Yes, Obito thought somberly, that was the trouble. Because even if they waited, he had the feeling that it would not pan out in any of their favor.
Chapter 21

Obito had made it a point not to linger by the memorial stone.

Before the Kannabi bridge, it had been out of ignorance as well as a general discomfort, the idea that his name, Rin’s, Kakashi’s, anyone he knew could be etched on that stone. When he returned it was with the certainty that his name, for some short time at least, had been engraved there.

Kakashi, Rin had quietly told him, had been different.

During Obito’s absence he’d spent hours at a time there. Every time he was late to a mission or a meeting, instead of simply disappearing into thin air, you would almost inevitably find him staring dead eyed at the stone. Even when Obito returned from the dead, every now and then when Hatake Kakashi disappeared, Obito wondered if he wasn’t lingering there.

Mourning the ghosts of those who weren’t quite dead.

As for Obito, he could not or else would not bring himself to openly grieve for the Uchiha Obito that could have been. The boy whose name was, perhaps, still engraved there.

Lee, however, must have felt differently.

It was only a few days before they were due to depart for worlds unknown. Obito’s packing was almost done but, as usual, he thought Lee’s last-minute double checking wasn’t unwarranted. That, or perhaps he simply wanted to see her. Even more than Kakashi, sometimes more than Rin, he found himself gravitating towards her and making excuses as well as time to go and find her. Somehow, in all the places he could have found her, it was seated crosslegged in front of the memorial stone.

At first, he thought she didn’t see him. She stared straight at the memorial, not even blinking, attention not wavering from it in the slightest. However, she addressed him before he could even think to, “Did you know that there are only two names I’ve managed to take back from that rock?”

Obito blinked, looked down at her, throat suddenly dry. She didn’t look at him though, just kept staring ahead, casually speaking as her eyes moved over the names of the dead, “Yours is still there, Uchiha Obito, it hadn’t seemed right to try and carve it off. The other, Hatake Sakumo’s, the
“Village forgot to carve on in the first place.”

“Hatake Saku—” Lee didn’t explain though, didn’t allow him to even ask.

“And yet there are so many others, too many familiar to me, and every once in a while I ask myself if it was worth it. I could take them back, you know, each and every one of them. I could annihilate that stone and all others like it. There are some in this village who know it, Minato, who holds supreme power, knows it dearly. But I’ve never done it, just two names, and that’s all.”

“Shishou,” Obito said quietly.

Finally, Lee looked up at him, “I really am tired, Obito. I know that I don’t look it, but I’m—”

“The war’s over, shishou,” Obito reminded her gently, something that he often had to remind himself, even after more than two years.

“Yes,” Lee agreed quietly.

Just that small, simple, yes. Not a question of how long, or if it really was over, or even if it was over would it ever be over for them or the dead they’d left behind. Just that one word, yes.

He could leave, he supposed, leave it at that. Maybe moments like these deserved to be buried and forgotten.

He didn’t though, instead he stood and asked, “Do you think it was worth it?”

Lee laughed, a quiet and bitter thing, “Well, isn’t that the question, my young apprentice?”

“I always imagine, that if more knew, they’d say no. I, after all, more than anyone before me have the power to change the world as we know it. I could change the very fundamentals of reality to my own favor. There would be no war, no death, only Lee’s benevolent shinobi society… But I never wanted that.”
A breeze swept through, winding its way through stalks of drying grass, and lifting Lee’s red hair away from her headband for a moment, “Perhaps I’m short-sighted, or cruelly indifferent, but I always have believed that would be doing a disservice to mankind. Peace, that is to be earned by mortal men like Namikaze Minato or else his firstborn son, not for me to force upon us. Only then will we remember its worth and the price we’ve paid for it.”

Obito sat next to her, crossing his legs, and staring ahead at the stone with her, “What about me?”

“You weren’t dead,” Lee said with another small laugh, “That helped significantly.”

“I might as well have been,” Obito noted, “Anyone sane probably told you I was buried beneath a mountain and rotting away in the dark.”

Which, he had been, but not in the sense they’d meant it.

“I honestly don’t know,” Lee said, and it was so casual, and yet the sound of that admittance forced the wind out of Obito’s lungs. “I didn’t really know you, then, I never was close to Minato’s other students aside from Kashi. I knew Kakashi liked you, more than he’d admit, and you were Minato’s student, but others had died before you and arguments like that weren’t enough for me before.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be back that long,” Lee noted, looking somewhere far past the Obito of the present, “I only just got back from the front, was all too soon going to be sent out again to mirror Minato’s performance against Iwagakure. The war was nearly over, and we could all taste it, and my taking care of whatever aftermath remained from Kiri or Kumo would tie things up with a neat little bow.”

If he closed his eyes, he could see it, Lee three years younger walking through the gates covered in blood, dirt, and exhaustion beyond measure. Only just having the chance to reach her apartment and close her eyes when they came for her with a mission scroll.

“But then in comes Kakashi, finding me before anyone else, even Minato, more polite and formal than I’ve seen him in years. And he asks me to do what no one else has the time, energy, or stupidity to do. He asks me to travel alone into enemy territory and bring back Uchiha Obito’s body from beneath a landslide.”

Lee glanced then at Obito, and her eyes, once again Obito could read nothing in them for all that
they seemed to glow with emotion and power, “Maybe it was because Kakashi wasn’t asking me for death, like so many seemed to, and that he wasn’t asking me purely for life either. Just a body, Minato’s student who had been left behind with so many others. Something, that somehow, had been too much to ask anyone else.”

“It likely cost me the hat, you know,” Lee said with a grim smile, “I know I was in the running, considered with Minato. I don’t think they ever forgot though, that for all I destroyed Madara’s threat before they even realized it existed, I willfully disregarded orders for a thirteen-year-old chunin I didn’t even have the decency of knowing. I was, at the end of things, my master’s apprentice.”

“Did you want to be hokage?” Obito asked, clearing his throat as his voice scratched at it.

“No,” Lee said, breaking out of her somber reminiscence with that single word and a smile to follow it, “That I’ve always felt was best left to Minato anyway. I never would have been able to handle the paperwork or logistics. I’m just here to look intimidating.”

She stood, pulled him up with her, and moved them away from the stone and back towards the village, “Come on, let’s leave the dead buried for now. For you and I, there are other worlds than these.”

“Tell me, Lee, about your worlds again.”

Obito didn’t know how much time had passed, not in terms of home, only in the standard republic days. Even that, however, had little meaning in the void between the stars. Life became a series of pitstops on planets of the Force’s choosing. The best and brightest of all his worlds.

Alderaan, Endor, Hoth, everything the Force had promised and more… All these strange, diverse, worlds that each looked as if it had spent billions of years forming. And Obito had to say, that Endor’s trees towered over Hashirama’s, that these were Konoha’s forests in thousands of years. More, that the aurora borealis over Hoth, dancing through the frozen landscape, was one of the most ethereally beautiful things he’d ever seen.

In between, a cramped space ship that grew more cramped with every passing hour, hurtling onward into the black pit between stars in search of something none of them could see. Only the
Force himself seemed calm and certain the rest of them left guessing, doubting, and wondering if the Force knew how to lie.

Because what would that thing do to keep Lee here if he could?

Obito didn’t think he’d figured that out yet, even with time and close proximity, the force hadn’t realized that the dangling thread of hope that Lee might stay wasn’t as present as he thought. He, after all, was still trying to figure out what Lee was.

So, they waited, in a floating metal box, communication back to Tobirama on Coruscant getting slower and slower as space and time stretched between them. Obito, just as he had on Tatooine months ago, felt as if he was constantly waiting for that other shoe to drop.

“Lee,” Minato-sense’s voice prompted.

Minato-sense’s voice, Obito thought with a smile, that wasn’t quite right anymore. With time and proximity, it was starting to sound like Haruki’s voice somehow. Perhaps, when Obito and Lee did finally return to Konoha, Obito would have to spend months thinking that Minato-sensei looked exactly like Haruki rather than vice versa.

He looked up, there, in the realm of Obito’s dreamscape, was Haruki staring out at him kindly behind Namikaze Minato’s features.

He was getting better, Obito thought, not only did he look like Minato but the shape of this shared dream almost resembled Konoha. Obito didn’t know the name of this planet, if it even was a planet, but they were seated in a grove of blooming sakura trees. Next to the lazy river, with the pink petals drifting downwards, it was almost as if it was a spring day inside the village.

Of course, as always, it wasn’t.

Obito opened his mouth, to remakr once again that he wasn’t Lee, but then closed it with a sigh. He’d been singing that song for too long now, months by Coruscant’s calendar, and even Obito was starting to get tired of it. Some days, it was just easier to nod his head and pretend he really was some cynical, scarred, masculine half of Eru Lee.

“Haven’t you heard enough about Konohagakure?” Obito asked, knowing of course the answer
was no, Haruki would never hear enough.

“No,” Haruki answered, leaning forward and giving Obito a very frank look, “Because I still don’t understand.”

Of course, he didn’t, Obito couldn’t help but think. And god, it had to be something about the confinement of space, but he almost felt fond exasperation for a moment there. Maybe it was just the fact that Haruki wore Namikaze Minato’s face, or maybe it was worse than that. Given that Obito’s feelings towards Minato-sensei seemed to be growing more complicated by the minute, maybe it was just that some part of Obito was starting to like Haruki.

He was a creepy overpowered bastard, but in his own way, he truly was like Lee. Sometimes Obito could see it in his smile, or in the brightness of his eyes when he looked at something, he thought was new and strange. Worse, his persistence, while it remained unnerving some part of it was starting to remind Obito of himself.

In Haruki’s place he could see a twelve-year-old Uchiha Obito screaming to all the world that he would be hokage someday and he would marry Rin no matter what the rest of them thought about it.

Yes, as much as Obito hated to say it, there was a little bit of Uchiha Obito in Haruki’s soul.

Not that he’d ever admit as much or let it do anything to change his mind. The closer they got to this planet of his the closer Obito and Lee got to leaving, and there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in Hell Haruki was going to take that well.

That other shoe, the one where the Force figured out their plans, hadn’t dropped yet after all.

“Alright,” Obito said, forcing his mind back to the current conversation, “What don’t you understand?”

“Why is it so important that Konoha be there?” Haruki asked, “Outside of my reach.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how Lee’s thinking about it,” Obito said, rubbing the back of his head with a sigh, “She just wants to leave Konoha where she found it.”
Lee owed him for this. Well, no, that was a lie, he was doing this for her. Creepy Force dream patrol was best split between them, or in Obito’s opinion kept as far away from Lee as possible. Obito could handle, mostly, Haruki the creepy invasive bastard but for all the guy was unwillingly growing on Obito (like a fungus) that didn’t mean he liked the idea of him hanging around Lee.

He had, after all, chosen Minato’s face.

For all the Force seemed out of touch, Obito would always remember that he had been clever enough to choose that face of all faces.

“Where she found it?” Haruki balked, and Obito blinked, looking up and finding himself staring at Minato-sensei’s completely flabbergasted expression. Sage, had Obito ever seen his sensei caught that off-guard? Maybe with Kakashi in the beginning, years before Obito had graduated, but Obito had never had the chance to personally witness it.

“Sure,” Obito said slowly, feeling something turning in his stomach, the idea that he’d said something he should have kept quiet, “Lee’s from England, remember?”

They had told Anakin that, hadn’t they? Yes, Obito was sure they had, that Lee had immigrated to Konoha from nowhere when she was only four. Granted, Anakin might not have listened, but at this point Obito thought anything that passed through Anakin’s head had gone straight into the Force whether he was listening or not.

“Yes, but—” the Force stopped, a slow, dawning realization beginning to draw on Minato-sensei’s features. This look, now this look Obito had seen. Once, in a world that had never happened, as Namikaze Minato the yondaime hokage had realized he’d have no choice but to sacrifice his own soul to seal away the tailed beast.

“It’s not important,” Obito quickly said, brushing off his comment, “As shishou constantly says, England is anything but exciting.”

Haruki said nothing, just sat perfectly still, watching Obito through those eyes that glowed far too brightly. Even the blue sky overhead, Obito thought, paled in comparison somehow.

Finally, he said, “You truly are not Lee.”
Obito started, then couldn’t help it, but broke out into wild laughter, “You just figured that out?!”

“Lee isn’t from Konoha, there…” Haruki said, though this appeared to be more to himself than Obito, who was still caught in his own hysterical laughter, “Whatever’s in Konoha, if there’s anyone in Konoha, must not be like me or her. You, Senju Tobirama, you’re not a part of Lee.”

Obito kept laughing, unable to stop himself, and in between fits of giggles managed to get out, “I’ve been telling you for months. And just now, after just that, you finally put it together.”

God, it shouldn’t be funny, but how was Haruki dumber than Lee? It was such a Lee moment, in its own way, and yet he could never see even a younger Lee saying something that stupid with that much of a straight face. And he’d seen Lee-shishou say the dumbest stuff with a straight face.

Not limited to such cliché motivational wonders as: “Dreamwork makes the team work”.

Haruki didn’t seem to mind Obito’s laughter at his expense though, barely seemed to note it, as instead concluded, “You’re truly just a sentient.”

“Hey now,” Obito said, wiping the tears of mirth away, “I’ll have you know I take offense at that, Haruki, we sentients are more capable than you realize.”

Obito, stifling one last chuckle, looked across at the man and noted, “Of course, you do know you have to call me Obito now, don’t you?”

For a moment he didn’t seem capable of responding, capable of even seeing Obito. Instead those blue eyes were dazed and distant, only focusing on Obito after far too long of a pause, “I suppose, at the end of things, you truly are only Uchiha Obito.”

Ah, there was the insult, and it did smart but it wasn’t unfair. Why be Obito, after all, when you could be Lee? Obito supposed he understood, but all the same, he repeated the words he’d once said to the Force when they’d first become acquainted with one another, “The trouble is, that I’ve worked so long and hard to be Uchiha Obito, that at this point I wouldn’t choose to be anyone else.”
Haruki didn’t seem to be in the mood though. He stood, in that alien and graceful motion that was smoother than even what Minato-sensei could manage, and walked down to the river. For a moment Obito just stared at him, noted how still he was as he stared down at the water, and then with a groan stood and walked after him.

“I don’t understand,” Haruki said quietly, a simple, summarizing statement with no feeling behind it. As if after too many hours wasted this was the only thing he could conclude.

“You know,” Obito remarked, “That’s common for sentients, I hear. Being in a constant state of confusion.”

“No,” Haruki said, “I don’t understand how… I just don’t understand.”

He spared Obito one last look, and this one, this one reminded Obito exactly who he was talking to. This was not his friend, not even a puppet of his sensei, but something utterly alien who did not look on him or anyone else kindly. However much he smiled or contented himself to questions about Ichiraku’s ramen stand…

Without a word, he stepped out of the dream, and as he did so with his white cloak billowing behind him, he looked exactly like Minato-sensei, the yondaime hokage, had looked as he’d walked confidently to his death on an October 10th that had never happened.

“Obito, ask again,” Obi-Wan prompted, earning a groan from his shinobi companion. It was not, by Coruscant’s standard time, early in the morning, but Obito had just woken up from sleep which always made him more irritable and unresponsive than usual.

Once, Obi-Wan would have found it obnoxious, these days he’d grown so used to it he barely even noticed anymore.

Obito hissed, even as he threw together his usual morning kettle of ungodly strong tea, “Kenobi, he’s not going to give a different—”

“Ask again,” Obi-Wan repeated with a patience that he didn’t feel.
“Haruki?” Obito asked with a sigh, not even looking at the avatar of the Force who, upon being summoned by Lee’s pet human name for him, appeared in the doorway to the main hold and pitiful kitchen with a smile on his face.

“Yes, Obito?” the Force asked, smiling slightly at the way Obito twitched when it said his name. That was a new and somewhat unnerving development, one morning Obi-Wan had woken up to suddenly find Obito (who before had always been addressed as Lee when he was addressed at all) was now Obito Uchiha.

Obi-Wan didn’t know what he’d done to earn his name but he must have done something and now the Force’s attention lingered on him almost as much as it did Lee. It wasn’t quite the same intensity, the same awe, but instead a nagging curiosity to figure out what it was that made Obito Uchiha so different even from the likes of Tobirama Senju.

For now, what it meant to Obi-Wan, was that the Force more than ever paid attention to every word that left Obito’s mouth. Obi-Wan planned to take advantage of that.

“What’s happening on Coruscant?”

The Force kept smiling as he walked inside, leaning against the cabinets to stare directly at Obito, who as always bristled under the eye-contact, “Do you always have to do that you creepy fu—”

“Why are you always so concerned about Coruscant?” The Force asked.

“Kenobi’s concerned about Coruscant,” Obito responded but The Force hardly seemed dissuaded, “The concerns of my sentients are not yours, Obito Uchiha, as you so often point out.”

“Yes, well, call me nosy,” Obito groused back, “What’s happening on Coruscant?”

Before the Force could answer, or more likely disregard answering in favor of asking some other question, Lee walked in. As usual, somehow in what substituted for the mornings in deep space, she looked worse than Obito did. Red hair flew in all directions, uncontained by ponytail or braid, and she walked about in only thick woolen socks, a loose sort of undershirt, and skin-tight shorts stopping partway down her thighs.
In short, she was walking around in what would have been a jedi’s under clothing without a care in the world.

Without a word Obito tossed her a clay tea cup which she caught with a grunt.

Immediately, as always, the Force was distracted by her presence and broke into his extraordinarily childish grin (one that reminded him too often of young Anakin Skywalker), “Lee, you're awake!”

“Unfortunately,” Lee said, before with a shudder proclaiming the same words she said every time she woke up after eight hours of sleep, “God, I hate mornings.”

“You always say that,” Obito responded blandly, just in time for the kettle to start whistling.

“If I always say it,” Lee bit back as Obito poured himself, then her, a cup, “Then it’s always true.”

Taking a long drink of the piping hot liquid, not even flinching as it all too likely burned her tongue, she leveled a stare at Kenobi, “Are you still passing on the tea?”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said with no regrets whatsoever.

“How do you survive?” Lee asked.

“Some of us, Lee, are morning people,” Obi-Wan merely responded with a smile, although that wasn’t quite it, it was more that Lee and Obito were the least morning people he’d ever met in his life.

“Right, what were we talking about?” Lee asked as she settled into her own position leaning against what little counterspace they had.

“Coruscant,” Obito answered easily even as the Force shot him an amused look.

He was getting better at that every day, Obi-Wan thought. He looked so human now, acted so human, that you barely even noticed. More than that, he had caught on to some of their dynamics,
and Obi-Wan didn’t know if either of them had realized it yet but where they were once a duo they were slowly morphing into a trio.

The Force, slowly but surely, was making a place for himself among them.

“We were not discussing Coruscant,” the Force started but Obito cut him off without shame, forgetting, for a moment, what the man he called Haruki truly was.

“Yes, we were, specifically what’s been happening,” Obito stated confidently before taking a sip of his own, cooling, tea, “Especially now that Tobirama’s god knows how many hours behind us and virtually unreachable by comms.”

The Force gave Lee a truly pitiful look, one that was almost pleading, but Lee just smiled and said, “Tell us about Coruscant, Haruki.”

“Anakin Skywalker is still attending his courses, a padawan in name but needing the preliminary training before he is handed off to Master Qui-Gon Jinn. Qui-Gon Jinn is in mourning over his second lost padawan, discusses it often with his former master Dooku, and they debate the merit of leaving the order themselves.”

Obi-Wan started, moved forward, but as always (even though he had been asked to come, had been made copilot and more on this strange journey) the Force hardly seemed to see him, “He has been kept in the dark regarding his padawan’s exile, told an un-truth by the council that it was Obi-Wan Kenobi’s own decision, and he is grappling with the decision of whether or not to believe it. He consults the Living Force often, however, it provides him no answers, only glimpses of Lee Eru.”

Lee frowned at this but said nothing, merely continued drinking tea as the Force continued to report, “Sheev Palpatine moves slowly and carefully, the hard part is done but there is much to go, and he is now with his power slowly watering the seeds of separatism in the border worlds of the republic. In a few years, they will be ripe for rebellion, and the civil war which will tear apart the republic will begin.”

And there was nothing Obi-Wan Kenobi could do about it.

He had tried and failed. The only thing left for him was to follow more closely behind the Force than he ever had before and see where it dared to lead him.
Obi-Wan sighed, then asked, “Is he watching the comms?”

At the lack of response, he turned to Obito who, as always, sighed himself and repeated the question, “Is Palpatine watching the comms?”

“Yes,” the Force said simply, “The jedi’s at least, Tobirama Senju’s he has not hacked yet, though he eagerly waits for the opportunity. It hardly matters, though, the jedi will never listen to Tobirama Senju.”

Still, Obi-Wan supposed that being able to talk to someone, for now, was a relief. Even if that man was Tobirama Senju, who only a few months ago Obi-Wan would have balked at relaying anything of import to.

Before Obi-Wan could press any further though, the Force seemed to decide he’d had enough, “I am done talking about Coruscant.”

Obi-Wan could feel it in the air, that edge of impatience, a growing fear and unease within the Force. Something about this situation, about the concern towards Coruscant, about Obito Uchiha, about all of it was setting the Force on edge the way it had been before it knew what to make of Lee Eru.

“Did you have something else you wanted to say?” Lee asked, a small amused smile on her lips, one far too light for the atmosphere.

“We’ll be reaching them soon,” the Force finally said, looking away from the three of them, “The crystals I promised you.”

“Really?!” Obito asked, nearly spilling tea over himself in his astonished excitement.

“A month, by the standard calendar…” the Force confirmed. He laced his hands together, a very solemn and human gesture, one Obi-Wan believed was stolen from the jedi rather than from Konoha.

He then looked back at Lee, straight at her and not even lingering on Obito, “You know I love you, don’t you?”
Lee gagged on her tea, spluttered, and could only ask, “What?”

It was so comical, and yet, so heartbreaking because the Force couldn’t see her reaction for what it was. He couldn’t see that she took him, took it, anything but seriously no matter what face he happened to be wearing.

“Well, you can’t expect me to see it, can you? I’m a machine, a clone made of smoke and air, and anything I feel or am is made of the same.”

“Haruki—”

“No,” he said, cutting her off forcefully, “I know, and you’re right, I have known even before you came to find me. I have… Always been wanting.”

He looked down at his borrowed hands, flexing them and watching the muscles move in fascination.

Then he said words that Obi-Wan didn’t understand, but all the same felt like a turning point of some kind, a decision which could not be unmade and would change everything Obi-Wan had ever known once again, “This is not tenable, for any of us.”

Anakin, to his alarm and horror, still dreamed the Force’s dreams.

He’d find himself talking to Obito or else Lee, not always at night, but sometimes drifting towards them in the middle of meditation. It seemed that even though he’d been set aside by the Force, replaced by a shadow clone’s body, Anakin still couldn’t escape its shadow.

Was it bad that Anakin was still always grateful, even when waking up covered in sweat, that he’d been passed over?
Even if it meant Obi-Wan Kenobi was gone, no longer a jedi, even if it meant Lee and Obito in space with it, he was still grateful. And that made him…

So ashamed sometimes.

To the point where, whenever he felt one of those golden soul sucking dreams crashing over him, he’d always shudder and shrivel before he was assimilated into the Force. Thinking, in that moment, that maybe this small glimpse of the lifeblood of the world was something he deserved.

If not for this moment then for Mustafar, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Padmé.

This dream though, somehow even in the beginning, immediately felt different.

There was no sliding into the greater persona of the Force, suddenly Anakin was there and everything, for the first time, felt so clear. This was nothing he had seen, nothing he had planned, and yet he knew what he must do.

All other paths had failed because it simply could not be done in the worlds he had made. He could not create himself, no matter how he had tried or how close he had been to succeeding.

But Lee, as he had noted over and over, was capable of that which could not be done, of miracles.

Even though he had said it to his sentients, to what he’d thought were her sentients, he had almost forgotten that it applied to his greater self as well. Lee could do what he could not, she played by rules he had no knowledge of, and if he wished to do the impossible then he must play her game instead of his own.

He was wearing the guise of Namikaze Minato once again, only this time there was no hint of Tatooine in there, no assimilation into his own worlds and origins. Instead it was Namikaze Minato as he’d once been, eighteen-years-old, dressed in the standard wear of a jonin.

He faced Lee, herself painted younger, seventeen, inside of what had once been their small and cluttered apartment before Namikaze Minato had left to move in with Uzumaki Kushina. Uchiha Obito would see this apartment many times later, remark to himself how bare it looked, but he
would not realize that was because most of its heart had left with Namikzae Minato.

By the time Obito would see it, years later, only a shell of the place remained.

Lee looked about at their surroundings slowly, no sign of an expression on her face, and then back towards him, “Why are we here?”

He didn’t answer, because that was not the true question, that was not the heart of this room and she knew it as well as he did. She knew why they were here, even if she would never say it.

“You once told Obito,” he started in Namikaze Minato’s younger voice, “That you had never considered sex with Minato.”

She didn’t answer, she didn’t need to, for all that she was opaque he caught enough glimpses, at time, to stitch it together.

“You weren’t lying,” he continued, “However, there was that one moment, where you might have. Do you remember?”

The dream shifted, blurred into a memory, with Lee trapped somewhere in the hazy gauze. She was suddenly in the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her body, moving over towards the dresser and rifiling through for civilian clothing.

“You were seventeen, he was eighteen, you were still living together even though he was now seriously dating Uzumaki Kushina. It was raining outside; you’d taken a shower and forgotten your clothes.”

As she drew out a worn looking sweater, the memory of Namikaze Minato, whose body the Force was wearing, opened the door. He was soaked, rain dripping down blonde hair and into his eyes, but even so he stood halfway in the door and halfway out of it.

“It was this moment,” he said with his door on the handle, watching with wide eyes as Lee held the sweater upwards, “This single, solitary, moment that became a might have been. Do you remember what happened?”
Lee, still holding the sweater, trapped in the memory, quietly said, “He left.”

Minato, no longer a memory but a might have been, closed the door softly behind him, “He flushed, stammered, and left. He moved out the next morning, tried to brush it off and say it was time, but you both knew differently.”

“If he stayed,” Lee said slowly, with a forced detached calm, “He could never have stayed with Kushina.”

Minato stepped forward, raking soaked hair away from his face, looking at her intently, “But he might have stayed. He could have stayed, Lee.”

Then, reaching her, and gently taking the sweater from her even as she stared up at him with impossibly young and wide eyes, “I will stay, Lee, if you will.”

And Anakin, for a moment, remembered himself, remembered that he was not the Force, but felt himself trapped all the same. Minato’s hands removed a towel that both was and was not a memory.

Somewhere in his head his heart was pounding a drumbeat growing more and more erratic as the shadows lengthened and the toppled towards the bed. Anakin didn’t want to look, couldn’t see anyway as they somehow weren’t at the right angle, but didn’t need to look to have some sinking feeling in his stomach.

The apartment drifted into the barren sands of Tatooine, where once a woman named Shmi had lived in slavery and had been miraculously gifted a son from nothing. Seeds, the Force had said, planted in a barren desert.

“This never happened,” Lee said, words slurred and out of focus, but her eyes were returning as she looked up at the Minato that wasn’t Minato at all.

“No,” the Force agreed, brushing her hair back from her face gently as he breathed the words into her ear, “But does that matter.”

She sat up, pushed him back, forcing herself to stand stumble backwards on the dunes, “Yes, because I didn’t choose this!”
“You would have chosen this—”

“But I didn’t!” Lee hissed, breathing deeply and walking backwards, out of the dream even as he scrambled after her. “And I don’t regret the paths I’ve chosen, no matter how painful and disappointing they might seem.”

She laughed then, standing on top of the dune, and even though she wore no clothing, had had her clothing torn from her, there was no vulnerability as she looked down at Namikaze Minato.

With a growing, cruel smile, she pointed down to him and concluded, “You chose the wrong face.”

“Obito!”

Obito groaned, then stiffened and sat upright as a sharp elbow jammed into his side. Twisting around he found Lee looming over him, hair in disarray and eyes wild.

“Shishou?”

Where were they? Yes, their tiny bedroom in the ship, always a little too reminiscent of the cave. What had happened? Nothing had happened, they were sleeping, it was Lee’s shift with Haruki tonight in dreamland. But something had happened, by the look of it something terrible had happened.

She moved forward, breathed a sigh of relief, and rested her forehead against his. Before he could push her back and ask her what happened her hands moved forward, under his shirt.

He stiffened, “Shishou, what are you—”

“Trust me,” she said, but it wasn’t a request or a plea, it was an order, one he didn’t dare ignore.
He lightly grabbed her wrists, made to push them back, but she didn’t move, simply repeated the same words, “Trust me, Obito.”

She didn’t move forward, waited for him to make some decision, even as his mind raced in twenty different directions. Somehow, he understood he could push her off, he didn’t have to do this, whatever this was. However, there was a reason why they were doing this, one she apparently couldn’t explain, and if he didn’t do it then something would happen.

Trust, yes, it came down to trust.

Whatever was happening…

Did he trust her?

Was that even a question?

He let go of her wrists, watched as she shuddered in relief once again, and then proceeded to take off his shirt. He didn’t ask, even when it became very clear where this was headed, even when they shouldn’t be heading this way as it had been stupid the first time and would be stupid the second time.

He didn’t ask, he couldn’t seem to make out the words the same way she couldn’t seem to make out the explanation.

Afterwards he just, laid there, not sleeping and staring up at the metallic ceiling, idly tracing circles in her bare skin. Even then, even as she fell into exhausted sleep against him, he somehow couldn’t ask.

He couldn’t even begin to find the words to form the question.
He must have still been fourteen when he first asked Lee for advice on Rin. Fourteen, because he was young enough to still have hope, still feel that burn of frustration, and wasn’t anywhere close to being in love with Eru Lee instead.

He had never asked Minato-sensei about Rin and Minato-sensei, in turn, had never said anything one way or another about it. Given that they were on the same genin team, it probably made things a little too complicated for Minato-sensei’s liking. Crushes, combined with puberty, the natural bonds that formed in genin teams, didn’t necessarily lead to productive places as Minato-sensei himself had pointed out.

He’d probably hoped that Obito would either let his unrequited love fade or save it for when Obito and Rin weren’t his problem.

Namikaze Minato was a great man, had retained his kidness and morality even in the face of the third war and all the atrocities he had accomplished inside it, but he had a habit of turning away from things that were distressing and left them to sort themselves out.

Years earlier, though Obito didn’t realize it then, Namikaze Minato had turned away from Eru Lee. Given time, distance, and the hokage’s hat and all that came with it, things had the appearance of working out. For all that, just underneath the underneath, they hadn’t.

Similarly, with time, distance, a destroyed bridge, a cave, and Uchiha Madara, an uncrossable divide had come between Obito and Rin. For fourteen-year-old Obito, it just hadn’t quite sunk in yet.

And just like with Lee, to Minato-sensei, to anyone who didn’t want to look close enough it seemed like it all worked out.

This Obito was younger than that though, not necessarily more naïve, but he had yet to settle into his cynicism or his scars. So, he fidgeted at Lee’s kitchen table, too early in the morning, only daring to think or say what he was going to because Bakashi that bastard was nowhere in sight.

Not that Kakashi had ever given him too much flack for his hopeless crush on Rin, but all the same, Obito was not going to give him ammunition.
“Spit it out,” Lee finally said, not even bothering to look at him as she just sat there, sipping tea with all the serenity of a monk.

He must have been insane, crazy. Why would Eru Lee, Bakashi 1.0 as Obito was slowly but surely figuring out, have anything worthwhile to say about any of this? She hardly even knew Rin! As far as Obito knew, despite Rin’s hero worship, he and Rin had maybe glimpsed Lee only once or twice during their whole genin careers. The only reason she probably even knew their names was just because they were Minato-sensei’s students.

His fingers just kept tapping against the table as he fought the increasing urge to chicken out.

He had better things to do today. Well, no, that was a lie. These were the early days when missions to anywhere, but England were scarce, and Obito wasn’t proficient in it enough to be sent to the Wizengamot yet. That, and in that first year, especially the first few months, Lee had been easing him back into shinobi life. For all her fondness of learning on the job and pushing him past his limits, he’d realize in retrospect that she could have pushed him much further and faster than she chose to.

The only thing Obito knew, at the time, was that he was practically broke, having to resort to the odd D-ranks here and there because the missions just weren’t coming, and the only real work he did was train.

Which was why he’d shown up bright and early at her doorstep, maybe a half-hour late or so, because it was yet another day slated to kicking the shit out of Obito until he became a jonin.

Point being, he really didn’t have anything better to do, and they both knew it.

He sighed again, rubbed a hand through his hair.

“Am I supposed to read your mind?” Lee asked with her own sigh, setting down her tea and giving him a rather pointed look.

Maybe that was why, Obito thought, he’d had the idea to blurt it out today. That no-nonsense look, that didn’t offer sympathy or pity. Whatever answer he got from Lee would be honest, no matter what he felt or thought. More, even back then, maybe he saw something of himself in her. She was what he could become, the future he’d always feared, where long after he was a jonin and an adult Rin still slipped through his fingers as Minato had slipped through hers.
Lee, above all others, was in a position to understand him.

“Nothing,” Obito pouted down at the table, then, glancing up amended, “It’s just… You know Nohara Rin, right?”

“I know of her,” Lee said slowly, musingly, as if Rin really wasn’t her problem, “Minato’s other student, right.”

Obito tried, and failed, not to wince at that.

“I…” Obito breathed out, it was hard to just sit there and say it, for all that he’d never been ashamed to admit it…

Had he ever admitted it? It’d been written all over his face for so long he didn’t remember ever having to say it. Everyone had already known by the time they’d spent even five minutes with Obito. Rin certainly knew, she had to, for all that she’d done her best to politely dissuade him. Lee herself probably already knew, but had made no comment on it, probably saw no reason to.

Lee sipped at her tea, waiting with quiet anticipation and raised eyebrows.

Finally, thinking of Rin’s polite smiles, Obito lost all patience and just blurted it out, “I’ve been in love with Rin forever and she doesn’t even look at me!”

That wasn’t quite true, she looked, but he was at best a younger brother or dear friend, a close comrade from a genin team. Rin, even before the cave and the scars, had never looked at him once the way he looked at her.

There was a small, yet somehow substantial, pause.

“Well, alright then,” Lee said, taking another sip of her tea with her eyebrows still raised.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!?” Obito blurted, cheeks flushing and regretting he’d ever come
here and said it.

Except, there was nobody left to talk to. He sure as hell wasn’t talking to Bakashi, Minato-senesi was already out, talking to Sakumo had the dangerous chance of getting Bakashi involved, which pretty much left Lee-shishou.

It was Eru Lee or bust.

“It means, what are you expecting me to do about it?” Lee asked, calm as you please, like they were talking about the goddamn weather.

“I don’t know,” Obito bristled, “Aren’t you jonin sensei types supposed to be filled with life advice?”

Lee threw her head back and laughed, laughed so hard that her cup rattled and drops of tea fell onto her hand unnoticed, “Oh, you are too funny, Obito.”

“What is it?” Obito glared, feeling almost too mortified to function, but Lee hardly seemed to notice as she calmed down from her laughter.

“The idea, that I could offer you love advice,” Lee said with a fond smile, “Well, it’s very flattering.”

“Why not?”

Lee nodded towards her empty apartment, then gave a pointed look back at Obito with a smile, “Do you see the overwhelming evidence of my lovers, apprentice?”

He looked, and saw what he always saw, Lee’s minimalist apartment that barely supported any signs of life let alone a significant other.

Right.
“I’m not sure what to tell you,” Lee continued with a fond smile, “It will either work out or it won’t.”

Obito opened his mouth, closed it, then opened again, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you shouldn’t change yourself to suit what you think she wants,” Lee said, “That’s the tried and true tactic of an Uchiha fangirl and it never works out in the long run. Similarly, you can’t change what she wants or even thinks she wants, not truly. Either it will work out, or it won’t, all you can do is play your cards and wait to see what she makes of them.”

At the time, it felt like the most useless advice in the world.

She wasn’t wrong though.

He didn’t appreciate it then, put it out of his head for ages, but it lingered there and marinated. The idea that he couldn’t change for Rin, and more, couldn’t change what Rin herself wanted. Sometimes, you gave all you had, you watched, you waited, and it still wouldn’t be enough.

That was the trouble with love, when so many others talked about it, they conveniently left that heartwrenching bit out.

“Jesus, shishou…” Obito trailed off, wincing, and ignoring Lee’s baleful glare as she slumped over the kitchen sink, drenched in sweat, forcibly calming her heavy breathing, and looking anywhere but at the vomit splattered at the bottom of the silver basin.

Wordlessly, still without looking, she turned on the faucet. Not quite a waste of water, it all got filtered through the ship, but still a needless use of power that Lee probably wouldn’t have bothered with a few weeks ago.

It was just the pair of them, Obi-Wan, as always, taking refuge in the cockpit and staring out at the expanse of stars as if they might tell him his destiny. It was a poor replacement for his previous hobby, hogging the comms and desperately trying to convince the jedi that the end was nigh, but Obito supposed that he had to take what he was given.
If Obito was in his situation, well, he wasn’t sure what he’d do.

Well, in some other world, Obito had been in a similar situation. Konoha had not disavowed him, necessarily, but Uchiha Madara could have convinced Obito that it had. In that world that might have been, always dangerously close to his psyche, Obito did far worse than stare forlornly at stars.

Haruki, or at least his Namikaze Minato puppet, had taken a brief leave of absence, a compromise to “give them some space”. It wouldn’t last long, it never did, and he probably was still watching avidly out of sight, omnipresent bastard that he was but Obito did at least appreciate the gesture.

In the past few weeks, as their destination grew closer and closer, Haruki had been making quite a few gestures. Perhaps, he was beginning to realize that there was more than just a threat of Lee leaving and never coming back.

As for Lee, well, he didn’t know quite what was going on with Lee. Things had been… tense, recently. There was something unspoken, a dark miasma of suspicion and bitterness, laced in the air. Something between Lee and Haruki that Obito just couldn’t see or even begin to guess. The Force had brushed off in the world of dreams with a polite, thin smile and glittering blue eyes. Lee had said nothing, for her own part, just was a little quieter and clingier to Obito than she’d been in… ever. Whatever happened, if anything had happened, neither Lee nor Haruki were talking.

And then, in the past few days, this had started happening.

Lee silently shuddered, straightened her back, and stepped away from the sink and turned around to face him. She looked miserable. She was paler than usual, more than that under the ship’s fluorescent lighting she looked almost green, dark almost purple circles stretched beneath her eyes, and her red hair was matted with sweat.

Slowly, still doing those goddamned breathing exercises, Lee made her way over to the table and slumped into a seat. Obito, hesitantly, took the seat across from her.

“Lee,” Obito said slowly, “I think you might be really sick.”

“I’m fine,” Lee said dully.
That, in itself, showed that she very much wasn’t. Any other day, even when tired beyond all comprehension, Lee would have resorted to some kind of quip. Something about how it wasn’t as bad as it looked, or how she’d had worse, or even just that Eru Lee didn’t get sick because illness was the tragedy of mortality.

‘I’m fine’, did not inspire confidence.

“I’d agree with you, maybe, if that was the first time,” Obito said, reaching out and taking her hands, “You’ve been… Kind of vomiting all over the place.”

“It’s just nausea,” Lee said, attempting to shrug even with her hands trapped in Obito’s, “It’s fine, I just have to sit here a little bit and it’ll go away.”

Obito frowned, that wasn’t quite… a lie, she did seem to have moments where, after looking green for a little while, she’d stand right back up and be fine enough. Except, just when she least expected it, she’d be right back again with her head in a sink vomiting her brains out.

He… didn’t think it was poison. Granted, Obito was pants at medical jutsus, the cost of always having Rin on hand as a genin meant he hadn’t bothered to even try, but he knew the basic signs of poison. She was doing a little too well for poison, though god only knew what space poison could do to you, but it didn’t seem like she had the flu either.

She just… kept throwing up.

“If you keep getting just nauseaus then we have to turn back around and see the nidaime,” Obito would have demanded it days ago, except that as Lee was the only one that could teleport them that far back it kind of put a damper on that plan when she was the one who was out of commission.

“Oh, that will work out wonderfully,” Lee said with a laugh, “There’s nothing like teleportation to cure your sudden sense of vertigo.”

“I’m serious,” Obito said.

“And I’m fine,” Lee retorted, “I don’t get sick.”
Oh, he knew she was going to say that, and before he could even say as much she cut him off, “And even if I am sick, even if I’m being poisoned by the Force or Kenobi for God knows what reason, you forget that I’m immortal. If this is fatal, then it will pass.”

That was a terrible way of looking at things.

“Besides, we’re so close I can taste it,” Lee said, nodding her head towards the cockpit, where not twenty minutes ago they’d started being pulled in by their destination’s gravity. The world beyond all bounds of the republic, Haruki’s untouched treasure of kyber crystals.

“Are you sure that’s not just the vomit?” Obito couldn’t help but ask, still, at her words he relaxed.

They were close enough to taste it, close enough to feel it. All those months, all that distance, all those bizarre little field trips and heavy-handed manipulations from gods and they were almost there. All they had to do was harvest crystals, hand them and the location of this place back to Tobirama, and they were done.

No more failing republics, indifferent gods, contemptuous jedi, leering sith lords, desert planets, cramped spaceships, or anything else from this place.

After far too long, they were going home.

“You know, Minato-sensei’s going to kill you for getting the space flue,” Obito said with a smile, squeezing her hand.

“Oh, Minato’s going to kill us over a lot of things, not just the space flu,” Lee said, catching his eye meaningfully.

There was a pause then, as they stared at one another, this silent acknowledgement that whatever was going on between them wasn’t going away when they got home. He wondered, for a moment, if this was the first time Lee had ever acknowledged the solidity of what they were. This wasn’t going to be a hidden thing on the sly, as it had been every time they’d gone back to Konoha thus far, and it wasn’t going to disappear either.

Whatever waited for them, Lee was stating that Namikaze Minato would know about it.
He tried to smile, failed at first, and then it stretched all the way into a relieved grin. He bent forward, resting his forehead against hers, not caring for the moment about the sweat, “Thank you.”

“No, Obito,” Lee said, a grin forming on her own lips, “Thank you.”

She then drew back abruptly, expression blank, and sprinted with inhuman speed and grace back over to the sink. Obito winced, looked away, and cursed, “Goddammit, shishou, why are both of us so incompetent at medical jutsus?!”

Lee didn’t even look at him, just waved a hand towards his face, and always insisted, “It’s fine!”

That was starting to get really old.

The caverns where kyber crystals grew were one of the jedi’s few guarded secrets. For millennia they had been kept out of the hands of the sith, protected by the jedi order, and ventured into sparingly and with reverence.

Obi-Wan remembered the first, and only, time he had ever been inside one.

Like all padawans, he had traveled to the crystal caves on Ilum, to mine the caves for the crystal that would power his lightsaber. He remembered walking in, alone, Master Qui-Gon waiting for him outside for when he was done and closing his eyes to the glittering cavern as he tried to listen to the music of his crystals. Meditating, it had taken hours until he had found it, a small crystal that would fit easily in the saber’s handle he’d spent so long crafting. In his hand, it had turned a bright, pale, blue.

It seemed wrong, that he should enter an untouched and unguarded cavern when a lightsaber was already in his possession. Wringer, still, that he was travelling not by himself but with two others and the spirit of the Force in the pale body of a human man.
They landed just outside the cavern, on a nameless glittering ice world that was not so harsh as the wastelands of Hoth had been. Although there was a chill in the air, the sun was shining, reflecting off crystals in a glittering rainbow, and in the air, there was an excited hum within the force.

The ancient song of the kyber crystals, amplified into a symphony with the Force’s focus, and Lee Eru’s alien presence.

“You know, it’s a good thing Tobirama didn’t come,” Obito said, rubbing at his temples, “This kind of natural chakra flying everywhere would give him seizures if it’s giving me a headache.”

Obi-Wan couldn’t help but smile, wondering if the shinobi would notice. Lee didn’t say anything, merely shifted, bundling herself further in coats and looking miserable. She hadn’t been doing well the past few days, unaccountably space sick as they’d drifted into the planet’s gravitational well.

He’d hoped, that with solid ground, she might feel better.

“Alright, Haruki, the stage’s yours,” Lee said, looking over at the fourth member of their party, the one that Obi-Wan still preferred ignoring when he had the chance. For him, it was easy enough, as the Force still spent most of his time only acknowledging Obi-Wan Kenobi when it was required of him.

A necessary copilot, a sentient jedi friend for Lee, and that about summed Obi-Wan’s current worth.

Still, that much seemed to have kept him alive, even given the warning he had spread.

The man smiled, grabbed Lee’s hand, and pulled her forward, “Come, Lee.”

They walked inside, as with the caves on Ilum, without the chill of the wind it was warmer in here. The crystals began to spark to life, heating the air, as they sensed the living force within the three of them. The distant hum of their voices in the Force became louder, harmonies forming, a wordless and ethreal song that only the kyber crystals could produce.

Haruki stopped Lee before she stepped forward towards the wall, softly commanding, “Close your eyes, Lee, listen. Not just any crystal will do, you have to hear it call your name.”
Lee eyed him warily, eyebrows lowering, “Are you seriously telling me, Haruki, that the wand chooses the wizard.”

The Force smiled, fond amusement written all over his face as he looked across at her, looking as always as if he’d never wish to look at anyone else in the world, “I suppose, in that, your people are not so different.”

It was terrifying, Obi-Wan couldn’t help but think, how much the Force looked at her like a man in love.

Lee glanced at the walls, at the many crystals at the surface, having been pushed up from under the earth over billions of years, and then back to the Force in mortal disguise, “Why don’t we have Obito go first.”

“Obito Uchiha?” the force asked, looking nearly as dumbfounded as Obito himself did.

“My wand choosing was… an experience,” Lee said, wincing momentarily, “I somehow suspect my crystal choosing will be no less bizarre. Best let the less overpowered take a crack at it first.”

Both Obito and the Force frowned, glanced at one another. It was… it was oddly as if they were sizing each other up, there was an unconscious shift in both of their postures, a straightening to grow taller and shifting of the feet into a more stable stance. For a wordless second, they appeared to be breaking the other apart to see just what they were made of and how far they could push it.

Then it was done, and the Force motioned to the crystals in offering, “Uchiha Obito.”

Obito sighed, closed his eyes, and breathed out. Even with his constant turmoil, the exhaustion of always hovering just on the edge of the dark side of the force, Obito seemed to find himself rather quickly. It wasn’t quite serenity, Obito would always have too much feeling for that, but for him it was likely as close as he could get.

The glow of the crystals softened his features, made him look younger, as young as he should look without the scars. As he stood there, Lee’s eyes drifted silently over his face, lingering on his closed eyes, as if memorizing every inch of him.
For a few minutes he stood there, drifting from the realities of the world as he listened, and then he slowly opened those strange mismatched eyes and stepped forward. With the same confidence Obi-Wan had felt when he was a child, Obito stepped deeper into the cave, moving out of sight as Haruki held out a hand to stop Lee from following.

When he returned, it was with a glowing, purple crystal and a child-like grin.

Was it strange, that for a moment, Obi-Wan had almost expected it to bleed red or black?

Lee grinned in turn, nodded towards the Force who released her shoulder, and closed her eyes. She was calmer in the Force, almost slipping into the wordless serenity and detachment that jedi had chased for thousands of years, and even standing there with her eyes closed she was a song in and of herself.

One that was amplified by the kyber crystals as each reached desperately towards her with a promise of the Force.

It took longer for her than it had her apprentice, as she’d expected. She stood perfectly still, eyes closed, for long enough that Obito and Obi-Wan both quietly seated themselves, leaning against the cavern walls as they waited for her to make some movement.

As she had watched Obito, he watched her, only there was far more concern in his eyes that constant seed of worry that had steadily bloomed out here beyond the republic’s borders. In him was an ill-disguised urgency to return home, a longing for his village and his people, and a concern he couldn’t even attempt to hide.

Finally, Lee held out a hand, and in the dark, there was a single fearsome cry as a crystal tore itself from the wall and flew into her hand. The clear crystal shone for a moment, then burned, unable to settle on any given color but rather rotate gently through them.

She opened her eyes, smiled over at Obito who smiled fondly back, “Looks like we’ve got it.”

Obito laughed, stood, and took Lee’s free hand in his own as she nodded towards Haruki, “Now let’s get the hell off this planet before I lose yet another lunch.”

“Now?” Haruki asked, frowning and looking at her, perplexed as well as concerned, “Lee, we only
just got here. Surely—"

“Haruki,” Lee interjected, “You must know I haven’t been… I’ve been sick. Obito and I aren’t medics, aren’t anywhere close to being medics, I have to get back to Coruscant.”

“Sick?” Haruki asked, eyebrows raising and looking if anything more confused and concerned than before, “You’re not sick.”

“I know, I don’t usually manage to get sick,” Lee said with a laugh, trying to brush it off, “But I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“You know, *shishou,*” Obito said, clearly irritated as his jaw twitched and dark eyebrows lowered, “You could try to sound a little less cavalier about it.”

“You’re not sick,” Haruki repeated, “These are all very common side effects of—”

“Of being sick,” Obito interjected, “Which means that shishou needs to see someone who knows what they’re talking about which sure as hell isn’t me, isn’t you, and no offense but it’s not you either, Kenobi.”

“None taken,” Obi-Wan said, maybe a few months ago he might have taken offense at them brushing him off, but Obi-Wan could see this for what it partly was. A need to see Tobirama Senju, yes, but more importantly a need to go home.

Even now, Obito burned with it.

“Lee,” the Force said slowly, his expression transforming into one of stark concern, “It might not... I do not know what your teleportation would do to you, in your state. It would not be wise.”

Lee said nothing for a moment, eyes darkening as she looked across at the man, as if trying to see what he truly meant by that, what he wasn’t saying, “I am not renowned for my wisdom.”

Without another word, still gripping her crystal tightly, she reached out to the rest of them in the Force, and pulled both them and their ship across miles and miles, all the way across the galaxy
and back in the heart of Coruscant.

They appeared without any warning whatsoever.

For once, Tobirama didn’t blame them. As they’d drifted further and further out into the galaxy communication had become harder by nature. These days by the time he’d received a message from them it was already out of date.

Still, all the same, it was somehow just like them to crash land on the top of their apartment building with a broken-down ship, a wayward expelled jedi, and the Force still wearing the yondaime hokage’s face.

“You’ve had better landings,” Tobirama said after having bounded up to the roof and seen the damage for himself.

Lee, hunching over and wiping bile from her chin, looked up at him miserably, “I’ve had better weeks.”

She opened her hand though, revealed a glowing crystal, and grinned across at him, “We found them, have the coordinates and everything.”

He breathed out a sigh of relief, it would have been nicer if they could have brought the crystals back, but having a location would do for now. With that, Lee could teleport directly there, could create portkeys, and the rest could be left to whoever Konoha decided to send next.

Of course, he thought bitterly, that meant Obito and Lee were leaving the rest of this garbage to him. Still, looking at the pair of them, thinner, paler, and far more exhausted than when they had set out, he couldn’t truly hold it against them.

It was past time they went home.
Just a few more weeks likely, a few more spotty missions in this place, and they’d be transitioned out for whoever the hokage deemed fit.

Lee sighed, straightened slowly, almost painfully, “That said, I might be ill.”

“She is ill,” Obito interjected, watching as Tobirama frowned, crossing his arms.

She looked… Well, she didn’t look well, and thinking back while he always suffered nausea from her methods of teleportation, he’d never seen her suffer from it in the least. Even over vast, disorienting, distances she was never the one who came out worse for wear.

She looked worse for wear now.

“She’s not ill,” Minato, the thing pretending to be Minato, insisted as he moved towards her, slinging a hand over her shoulder and looking at her with a deepfelt concern the true Minato could very well have given her, “Lee, you’re not ill or poisoned, I promise. These are simply—”

“She’s ill,” Obito stubbornly repeated, cutting off the shadow clone before he could start.

That was more than enough for him, he moved forward, placed a hand against Lee’s forehead which was clammer than he’d prefer. She was also an uncomfortably green color, rather than her usual stark white.

“Well, at least you conveniently timed it,” Tobirama muttered as he, ignoring the ship and the others, pulled her towards the stairs and down into the building towards their apartment.

Surprisingly, no residents had come to gawk at the ship and no building manager had demanded they move it. A glance behind him and Tobirama suspected the Force himself had something to do with, effortlessly driving away the interest of sentient beings to keep this moment private.

Lee, for her own part, didn’t complain as he manhandled her into the apartment and pushed her down into a chair. Immediately, Obito and the Force both began to hover over her shoulder, eyes wide and far too concerned.

“Do you mind?” Tobirama bit out, “I’m trying to work.”
One Uchiha Obito was bad enough, two was a disaster of proportions Tobirama simply couldn’t handle.

The pair glanced at each other, and like wary opponents in a duel, slowly walked to the kitchen table without ever taking their eyes off the other. Tobirama supposed he understood, he hadn’t been around that thing as much as they had and it unnerved him, but it was as hopelessly dramatic as only an Uchiha could ever be.

As Tobirama started, pushing chakra through her, he began asking the usual questions, “What are your symptoms?”

“Nausea,” Lee said, “It’s not really a fever, at least I don’t think it is, I just get… motion sick or something out of nowhere.”

He could see why she’d been ignoring it, it was harmless though obnoxious enough that it wasn’t debilitating, and Lee had never bothered to concern herself with slow acting poisons. Slow or fast, to her, it didn’t matter either way. Death had never been a concern for her.

That said, he couldn’t remember illness being a concern for her either.

“How long?”

“A few weeks?” Lee asked, as if it was a question, “I don’t know, it’s hard to count days in space.”

He hummed, frowned, then frowned again as he caught something. He pulsed chakra through again, waiting, and paused as he felt that tell-tale echo back. It was early, almost unnoticeable, but Tobirama was very good at what he did and this was considered something basic.

He leaned back from her so that he could look her in the eye, removing his hand from her bare skin, and asked, “And has anything, in the past six weeks, happened that I should know about?”

Lee blinked, blinked again in confusion, and then appeared to understand exactly what he was asking. No, not asking, exactly what he knew which she, in all her grand idiocy, apparently hadn’t realized.
“Oh, hell,” she cursed.

Tobirama smiled at her, a painful, enraged, polite smile, “Congratulations, Eru Lee.”

“Congratulations?” Obito spluttered, moving forward, apparently not nearly versed enough to understand what was painfully obvious.

“Tobirama,” Lee said shaking her head in denial, “That can’t be right.”

“Oh, but it can,” Tobirama said, standing and forcing himself to walk away from her and towards the kitchen, make tea to keep himself busy before he slapped her across the face.

“I’m on birth control—”

Ah, there was Obito’s sucked in breath, his look of panicked horror. Realizing, of course, the consequences of his own half in this clusterfuck of stupidity. He looked as if he was going to collapse right there and then, faint dead away on the plush carpet with only Kenobi Obi-Wan to catch him.

As for the others, their guests the former jedi Kenobi and the Force itself, they just silently watched this Konohagakure drama with wide eyes. Kenobi not understanding the words, but clearly understanding the tone and perhaps managing to put together the truth of the situation.

He slammed his hand down on the counter, already far past the limit of his own patience, “Birth control, even Senju Tsunade’s designed birth control, is not one hundred percent effective. It can fail, Lee! You know this!”

Lee looked as if she’d been slapped across the face, sitting pale in that chair, leaning forward as if the world was suddenly crashing down on her shoulders.

He forced himself to breathe out, this wasn’t helping anyone or anything. What was done was done, they were already on their way out the door anyway. She could go home, even come back here for a few more months before she was sucked back into the village. Life would simply move on.
He sighed, stopped in the middle of his tea preparations, and crossed back over, forcing himself to ignore the rest of them as if it really was just him and Lee in a private physician’s office.

Finally, kneeling in front of her, he asked, “What do you want to do?”

This, perhaps, was also a question for Obito, but above everything else Tobirama felt it was a question for Lee. She, above all others, should be presented a choice before she returned home and choosing became far more difficult.

Lee, with a bitter smile, seemed perfectly aware of this, “The council, Minato, wouldn’t approve of me getting rid of it. Would they?”

No, they would covet Lee’s children and bloodlimits like nothing else. Combined with the Uchiha bloodline, it was the council’s dream come true. Tobirama suspected, that had time kept marching by with Lee a celibate bachelor, in-village seduction missions may have been assigned.

He didn’t know whether it was better or worse that Lee had now taken that choice from them.

She rubbed a hand over her face, sighing with exhaustion.

Obito, hesitantly, quietly as if he didn’t dare to breathe, tried to move towards her. He looked as if he was caught in a scene he didn’t belong in, no matter his personal participation in the matter, and kept looking to both Lee and Tobirama for a cue of what to say or do.

God, he was so young to be a father.

Lee, undoubtedly, was thinking the same thing as well.

“Do you know gender yet?” Lee asked.

“No, it’s far too early,” Tobirama said, before pausing to note, “But it’s very likely twins.”

Lee laughed, a sharp thing, “Twins, of course it’s twins. Can’t have just one!”
“Lee,” surprisingly, it wasn’t Obito who said it. Instead it was the Force, wearing Minato’s conflicted face, and looking more like a man than he ever had before. He moved forward with all the hokage’s trained grace, placed his hand on Lee’s shoulder, “Lee, please, don’t be upset.”

“I’m not upset,” Lee said, “I’m…”

She didn’t finish, but Tobirama understood all the same. This was likely never a future she’d allowed herself. When Minato had broken it off for Kushina, any dreams of family or children had likely been stored away, slowly gathering dust in her mind. It was much the same for Tobirama, whatever idle thoughts he’d had of family had slowly slipped from him until they were all but impossible to resurrect.

The man gently cupped her face, tilted her jaw so she was staring up at him, and she seemed distracted enough to allow it. Perhaps, to forget for a moment, that this man wasn’t Namikaze Mintao for all that he looked it.

“Lee, I should have told you, but I thought you knew.”

Tobirama felt something cold plunge into his stomach. Slowly, his eyes moved from Lee, to the man who wasn’t a man at all. He felt Obito’s gaze shifting with him, drawing together conclusions faster than Tobirama dared.

For all that he’d said, his grand niece’s birth control methods were near one hundred percent effective. They were designed to be for this very situation.

“What did you know?” Lee asked, horror threaded through her voice.

He stroked her jaw, as a lover might, and leaned in close with a far too tender expression, “Your adopted people, Uchiha Obito, Senju Tobirama, and all the others I haven’t met are more than welcome in my kingdom. You don’t have to leave.”

“What did you do?” Lee asked, louder, eyes wide in terror.

“Nine years ago, I created a son from nothing, an egg with no seed in a desert wasteland,” the man
said, “His name was Skywalker Anakin.”

At the name Kenobi’s head lifted, eyes wide, desperately trying to understand the foreign words.

“He was intended to be like you, an avatar, something to give me… sentence,” the Force continued, never noticing the way Lee’s chakra began to crackle, the horror rising through the room with every word out of his lips, “It failed.”

He leaned close, ignoring how Lee leaned backwards into her seat, the rest of them caught as if spellbound, “I realized, later, that I could not do it on my own. To do so would be to thwart my own rules of creation. You, however, can.”

He was so close that their faces nearly touched, his nose sliding against hers and his lips almost brushing. “You are carrying not only my children, Lee, but my salvation. Through you, I will have mortal form and thought, be able to walk in the sun as you do, and you and I can be husband and wife.”

“For that,” he breathed, “I will do more than make this a world you can live in. It will be a world that you will thrive in.”

Lee pushed him away, hurling the shadow clone across the room, lunging desperately forward to grab Tobirama and lunge towards Obito. In a wordless, desperate, flash time and space ripped away as Lee pulled them into the void between worlds and back to Konoha and Earth.

It was like Naboo, again, when the world suddenly ripped away even in the waking world and Anakin wasn’t Anakin anymore. There was no dream, no weightless lull to convince him he was one with the grander whole. Instead, there was a black void stretching through everywhere and everything, and Lee pulling Tobirama Senju and Obito Uchiha along as she desperately tried to break through.

She clawed at their surroundings, fighting to find the fading path back to her own world beyond this universe, but the universe was twisting and rearranging itself beneath her fingertips. The void was moving to the will of the Force, particles of dust and light forcing it into shapes she couldn’t recognize, or grab hold of.
She tried anyway, caught in a place of no time and space, in territory that was not her own.

Her fingernails tore at the fabric of reality, a horrible tearing sound reverberating through the Force, and Anakin cried out, “Lee!”

She looked up, distracted, only for a moment but it seemed to be enough. She was hit back, the Force itself throwing her out of the space between worlds, dragging her back inside his greater domain.

She lost grip on Tobirama’s hand, crying out as he plummeted like a ragdoll through time and space, slipping through this reality and into another.

Perhaps, if he was lucky, all the way through to Konoha.

She pulled Obito in closer, gripping him tightly, and bracing herself as the pair ripped back into the galaxy as a fiery comet. They crashed on some wooded world, far beyond the core worlds and in the outer rim, an imitation of Konoha and when they came to a stop they were torn and bleeding.

And there, in that exact moment, the Force chose to rewrite the universe.
When Obito was twelve years old, he still had not been selected to become a padawan learner. With his thirteenth birthday fast approaching, endless days of farming in Telos began to loom over him in his nightmares, and it seemed his future was all but set.

Obito Uchiha, jedi initiate since birth, was not going to become a jedi.

Even when he'd spent all his goddamn childhood screaming at everyone who would listen that he wasn't just going to be a jedi knight someday, no, he was going to be the youngest jedi master to ever sit on the council.

Granted, always being a league and a half behind his peers, even he hadn't really meant it. The point was that he'd looked like he meant it.

"You feel too much," Kakashi had explained at one point, back before he'd become a padawan and they'd still been in the creche together, biting through some imported Naboo fruit handed off to him from Anakin Skywalker himself. "They don't like that."

For reasons Obito couldn't explain or even begin to guess, Skywalker had a soft spot for Hatake, and usually made sure to bring him back something or other from far-off worlds. Obito supposed that, being a little prodigy, Kakashi reminded him of himself somehow.

Obito remembered laughing, too bitter for a jedi his age, and asking, "And what am I supposed to do about that?"

"Meditate," Kakashi had said with all his usual bizarre seriousness that, along with his sheer talent, had gotten him a jedi master so very quickly.

Not that Obito was bitter or anything.

"Meditate," Obito huffed, hating when Kakashi went and decided to be a reasonable sentient. "I do meditate."

"You nap while sitting up and hope no one notices," Kakashi corrected between another bite,

"That practically is meditation!" Obito bit back, color rising to his cheeks. Then he stopped as Kakashi's eyebrows rose higher, because it'd happened, he'd just gone and proved Kakashi's very point.

"Once more," Kakashi said, patting Obito on his shoulder with that cheerful smile he so loved to give, "But with less feeling."

Once more, but with less feeling.

That seemed to have been the mantra of his life for as long as he could remember. Obito had
power, everyone agreed on that, and he certainly had potential, but he also was considered
dangerously hot-headed and dangerously prone to attachment.

At his last review, when he'd turned twelve and Master Yoda sat him down to discuss his future,
the troll had told him that even his bond of friendship with Kakashi Hatake was too much. If
Kakashi was grievously injured, if he died, Force forbid, then Obito would very likely fall to the
Dark Side of the Force.

Obito was born dangling from a very thin thread.

And so, by the time he was almost thirteen, Obito finally allowed himself to recognize the reality
of his situation.

He was never going to become a jedi.

Until, somehow, he did.

"Initiate Uchiha."

He'd been out in the gardens, off from classwork and working on meditation yet again, trying too
hard to find that effortless serenity that Kakashi had always just drifted into like it was nothing. As
usual, he was the last one out, the other, younger initiates all returning to their quarters and their
hobbies with only Obito Uchiha, dead last, desperately trying to reach that insubstantial thing
holding them all together.

If he could just reach it…

At the sound of the voice, he'd startled out of his meditation and fallen straight on his back. There,
blinking into the sunlight, he found himself looking up at a strange young human woman wearing
the robes and saber of a jedi master.

She was pale, as pale as he was if not paler. Her hair was a wild, curling red which in the sunlight
almost burned golden, held back in a loose horse's tail. Her eyes though, they were so very bright
and green, that even looking at them he lost all train of thought.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she said with a smile, but by the look on her face, she very well knew
she'd been interrupting something.

It was then, with a click, that he realized who she was. "You're Master Eru!"

Her smile dimmed as he scrambled to his feet and tried to reclaim some of his dignity.

She wasn't the oldest to have ever been made a padawan, but as far as Obito knew, she was the
oldest in a long time to have ever been brought into the Order and then successfully been selected
as a padawan. She'd even been older than Skywalker.

That said, on the other end of the spectrum, she was the youngest human he'd ever heard of
becoming a jedi knight, and in the shortest amount of time. She'd become a jedi master even more
alarmingly quickly, and while she didn't have a seat on the council and it didn't look like she would
for a long time, she'd still become a jedi master by the age of eighteen.

In other words, she was kind of Obito's unofficial hero.

"Settle," Eru commanded, before looking around with an awkward wariness for anyone passing by.
"Please, people might see us."
"I, just—" Obito forced himself to cut off. Fangirling would not help him become a jedi (whatever chance in the sith hells there was left of that), but more importantly, he didn't need to embarrass himself. "You're looking for me?"

That didn't sound right, but she'd said his name, oh Force, she knew his name. How the hell did a jedi master like her know his name? Was he that infamous?

She nodded out towards the rest of the gardens, one of the few green spaces left on Coruscant, protected as it was by the temple itself for thousands of years. "Walk with me."

Obito hesitantly walked alongside her in silence. She wasn't as young-looking as he'd expected, somehow. He thought she was twenty-two, if he remembered right, but something about her oozed the same confidence that all jedi masters had. Something that aged you considerably, bestowed upon you the wisdom of the Force that could not be won by youth alone.

It was more than that though; in the garden, she looked otherworldly. As if Obito was the one who had stepped out of time and place onto some ancient garden planet with a race of sentients who only appeared human but were in truth much older and wiser.

Beneath her jedi robes, beneath the browns, tans, and neutral colors, she glowed.

"I'm looking for a padawan," she said.

He stiffened in surprise, blinked, and said, "Oh, that's…"

Then her words caught up to him, why she would say them to him, and he laughed. "You can't mean me, right?"

She looked down at him, eyebrow rising (and goddammit, why did she look just like Bakashi when she did that?) "Why not?"

He laughed again, unable to help himself. "I'm dead last, you know that, right? Twelve going on thirteen, one foot halfway onto the ship to Telos already."

"You have great potential," she said, like he hadn't just admitted the sad truth of his life.

"Potential to go to the dark side," Obito bit back.

"As do the best of us," Lee countered.

He stared at her. He'd… No one had ever said that to him before, and she said it so easily, as if she hadn't just contradicted all his years of teaching. "What do you mean?"

She came to a stop, looked him in the eye. There was no room to move beneath her gaze, no ability to look or shift away. He felt trapped there, as if hers were the very eyes of the Force staring down at him and judging him for everything he was worth.

"I mean that I disagree with the council and your instructors," she said. "I believe that those of us who have to struggle for peace and serenity have the greatest understanding of what the light is worth. You have potential, more potential than you know, and I'm in need of a student."

She held out her hand to his, clearly meaning for him to take it in his own, grip it, and seal the deal.

"I'm not going to lie; I'm the last chance you'll get."

He knew that, he'd known that before she even showed up. Still eyeing her hand warily, he asked,
"Why me?"

And then… Then he didn't know if he remembered this right. It was such a defining moment in his life, but somehow, it felt like it slipped through his grasp. Or, like, instead it'd been a dream. As if he really had been meditating and the Force had sent him a vision.

They suddenly hadn't been in the gardens, instead a small and primitive kitchen. It was cramped with a wooden table and chairs, an ancient gas stove, a bulky refrigerator and freezer, and a row of cupboards.

They were sitting at the table, she'd made them tea, but he hadn't even blinked at the change in scenery.

Somehow, he'd known exactly where they were: Master Eru's apartment.

(Only, her quarters didn't look like that, he practically lived in her quarters and they didn't look like that at all.)

"The first is simple," she said as she poured the tea for the pair of them. "You have great potential."

Her eyes met his across the table, glowing in the half-light of the kitchen. "Second, you gave Kakashi your eye and didn't demand it back, even when you returned from the dead, even at the risk of your clan and family… If you hadn't done that, we most likely wouldn't be having this conversation."

"And third…" She paused, staring directly into his remaining eye (he had one eye, had somehow given the other to Kakashi to see for him, for reasons he couldn't remember). "You're like me. If you chose to, if you were compelled to, if Nohara Rin were to meet some tragic end or perhaps even Kakashi, then you would do everything in your power and more to rewrite reality so that such a fate would be inconceivable."

In the temple gardens on Coruscant, he'd taken her hand, and chosen to become the young Lee Eru's first padawan learner.

And that, he supposed, was the only truth that mattered.

"Well, it could be worse."

Master Eru, as always, chose the absolute worst times to be optimistic.

Obito couldn't even look at her, instead staring up at the clear blue sky obscured by an endless evergreen forest.

It was a beautiful world, he decided. It was just too bad they couldn't have landed here in different circumstances.

Something about it seemed… Familiar, he supposed, was a word for it, but what he really wanted to say was comforting. Obito, after all, had belonged to the Jedi Order for as long as he could remember. Familiar wasn't a word he could give to wooded, garden, backwoods planets on the
outer rim. That was reserved for the temple, for the constant noise and neon pollution that was Coruscant waiting just outside the temple entrance.

Still, whatever world he'd come from, he imagined it'd had forests.

That didn't help the fact that he was bruised likely to the bone, had a nasty gash in his torso, was wearing clothes that were half burned off, and still breathed heavily when he wasn't even moving.

So, he felt it was his right to ask, "Explain, Master, how it could possibly be worse."

With great effort, wincing at the sharp stab in his neck with the motion, he turned to watch his master's answer.

She looked as bad as he felt. Her hair was undone, curling all over the place thanks to the heat of the crash and the humidity of the planet they'd found themselves on. Her dark outer robe had burned away, there were great tears in her tunic and trousers, and she was featuring as many bruises and cuts as he felt.

"Well," she said slowly, seeming to taste the word, "We could be dead."

"We could be dead," he repeated dumbly.

"I enjoy being among the living," she said, as if this was something a normal person could say in this situation. "I mean, when it's my time I endeavor to go gracefully, as all jedi do, but it's nice to still be here."

And, just like always, he couldn't help but laugh. "Force damn it all, I guess it is nice to be here."

At his words she started laughing too, unable to hold back the absurdity of it all, the two of them just lying here on their backs in the middle of nowhere, staring up at the endless blue sky where, far out there past the atmosphere, dozens of worlds glittered in the dark like stars.

As their laughter died down into soft, exhausted chuckles, Obito asked the very pertinent question they both hadn't gotten to yet. "Master, where is here?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

They laughed again.

God, it hurt, too; his ribs were not taking that well. With a groan and a sigh, he eventually pulled himself into a sitting position. He instantly regretted it.

There was no sign of civilization, advanced or even primitive, and no sign of any sentient life either. Just trees, flora and fauna in every direction the eye could see.

Which, yes, it was very pretty, but it was not very helpful.

"Do we know where the ship landed?" he asked, sparing a glance towards Lee as she too forced herself to sit back up, wincing as she did so.

"Nope," she said, "For all I know, that little black box could still be floating in orbit."

They'd...

He blinked and rubbed at his head; Force, what had they been doing? They'd crashed, yes, they must have been shot down by enemy fighters. He'd managed to crash land them through
hyperspace on the nearest planet that wouldn't kill them the second they'd landed (and if that didn't say he was worthy of his trials, Obito didn't know what would).

They'd landed, hard, harder than he'd expected, and now the sad remains of their ship were nowhere in sight. Worse, there wasn't even a sign of them in sight.

"Do you have a transponder?"

"Also no," Lee said, sniffing and wiping at her nose, "And before you ask, I only have the clothes on my back and my saber."

They sat for a moment in dumb silence, both staring ahead at the trees and listening to the sound of twittering birds.

"I suppose we could try and build a ship," Obito said morosely, "Out of plants."

"Even I'm not that good."

He knew, he was well aware of that. With a shuddering, forlorn sigh, he tucked his head onto his knees. Maybe, if he closed his eyes and just took a nap, this would all go away and he'd be back on Coruscant in his room. Yes, that'd be nice.

Why were they even here?

No, that was a stupid question, he knew why they were here.

The Clone Wars, the wars that had eaten away at the last three years of his padawan apprenticeship and at the rate they were going would consume his jedi knighthood as well. He'd had a good three years with Master Eru before they'd started, missions that were…

Well, not normal—Master Kenobi fondly called Lee Qui-Gon Jinn's second coming for a reason—but they'd been what he had expected from the Jedi Order.

None of them had expected war. At fifteen, when it'd started, he hadn't even been able to imagine it.

Lee Eru, by her own insistence, was an exfiltration specialist. She didn't lead clone troops into battle in the outer rim, infamously refused to do so in fact, and had instead opted to be her own one-man army who could defeat entire battalions of droids with only a saber. She was the one the Order sent in when things went south, when the enemy surrounded the Republic troops on all sides, and they had to get out and get out fast.

Obito just happened to be along for the ride.

And sometimes the ride got you shot down on a planet you'd never even heard of.

"Can you reach Master Skywalker?" Obito asked.

Lee considered it for a moment before shaking her head. "I think… I think he's in battle, somewhere. It would not be wise to distract him."

"Then I'm sure the same goes for Master Kenobi," Obito said with a sigh.

Skywalker, Kenobi…

It was sad, but Obito thought that was where the list ended, at least for his master.
Once, there had been her own master, Tobirama Senju, but he was lost somewhere beyond all reach. Lee, much like Master Kenobi, had never truly gotten over the death of her master.

Similarly, he knew that she'd once been very close with Kenobi's master, the man who'd taken her and Anakin Skywalker from Tatooine, Master Qui-Gon Jinn. He too, however, was gone, lost on Naboo before he could take either her or Anakin as a padawan in Kenobi's place.

He supposed it was possible, to try to reach the council or any other jedi, but anything that strong and not sent through a bond was all too likely to be picked up by the sith. Obito didn't know where Dooku was; he could be halfway across the galaxy, but it would be just their luck that he was hovering right there in orbit ready to blow them away.

"Well, I guess we'd better get comfortable," Obito said with a sigh.

They'd need a fire, shelter, and—god, standing up made him even more miserable, and he'd kill for a bacta tank right about now. Unfortunately, for all of Lee and even Obito's prowess, both of them were absolutely miserable force healers.

Well, that was a lie; Lee could enter a healing trance well enough, probably would as soon as she got the chance.

Him though, he'd never even managed to get down regular meditation.

Before he could volunteer to take first watch, if only to give Lee a chance to recover, he turned at a violent retching sound. She was standing, but she was hunched over, bile dribbling from her lips as she vomited into a bush.

"Sithspit, master," he said, "You can't get ill on me now!"

She spared him a glare as she straightened up, wiping her mouth and stumbling forward. "I don't get sick."

"I'll believe that when you're not vomiting," Obito balked. Great, this was just…

Well, he supposed Lee was right, they could be dead.

"It's fine," Lee said, stumbling forward and leaning on him. "I'm just tired."

The words were slurred together, and up close, she looked unnaturally tired. Not just from the crash but as if… Yes, she'd been exerting a lot of energy; he'd been piloting the ship and she'd been trying to keep them off their tail using the Force.

The Force, in a dogfight through hyperspace and a crash landing, no wonder she looked half dead.

"You're right, it's fine," Obito said, trying not to let the panic seep into his voice. "I'll set up shelter."

He had to set up shelter. There was now no option of failure, no chance that Lee could step in and do it for him, he had to do this or not only he would die but she would as well. Lee couldn't be allowed to die.

She said nothing, just smiled and leaned into him further, slumping far enough down that he had to shift his weight and begin carrying her.

She felt crushing, and unthinkingly he slipped into the jedi mantra, "There is no emotion, there is
peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is—"

"I must not fear," Lee cut in, murmuring into his shoulder, the words flowing out of her, memorized years and years ago, "Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain."

"Master," he said, and an eye fluttered open, a fond smile on her lips.

"Frank Herbert said it better."

A non force-sensitive on a planet so backwater not even Tatooine had heard of it in the face of the Jedi code which had developed over thousands of years. Yes, it was just like Lee to insist that her version was better.

He supposed that was why she chose him as an apprentice, though, because Obito would never tell.

With that, she no longer felt so heavy, and he found the strength to pull both her and himself into a small cavern only a mile or so away. Ready to face this strange world and all it offered.

Anakin blinked.

He patted the space next to him, halting when he realized he was prodding Padmé sleeping next to him. It was too late, though; she shifted beneath the covers, the satin drifting away to expose the cream of her smooth skin, and she looked up at him with half-lidded dark eyes and a fond smile.

"Ani, what are you looking for?"

He shifted dark hair out of her eyes, speaking softly, "I thought I lost something."

"In bed?" Padmé asked, sitting upright and now giving him a chiding look, "You didn't bring your lightsaber in bed, did you?"

She said that like he'd ever risk accidentally igniting it and slicing her in half in the middle of love making. He had one sword already, he didn't need another in bed with him.

"No," he said with a laugh, "It's not important."

Except—he frowned; that wasn't right. It… It had felt very important, but he just couldn't remember what it was. It wasn't that he'd lost something, that wasn't the right word, but like everything had abruptly shifted.

He felt stretched, taller and larger than he should have been, awkward in his own body. Which, he'd certainly never felt that before. Anakin, by the grace of the Force, had never seemed to suffer many growing pains.

"Ani, what's wrong?"
"It's nothing," he said, trying and failing not to frown.

Maybe it was Obi-Wan.

The war had been hard on him, on them, and while they seemed closer than they'd been in ages, in years really, at the same time it put a strain on them. Plus, with Padmé, there were things Anakin simply couldn't confess to him or even to Lee. Anakin always had to hide around him, them, had to be on his guard in case they ever found out.

The war was distraction enough that Anakin doubted they ever would, but all the same…

Maybe it was Ahsoka.

His one, only, and so very unlikely padawan. Sometimes he'd forget she was gone, not just gone from him but gone from the Order too, and he'd turn around and expect her to be tagging along behind him with that chiding look in her eyes.

"Was it a vision?" Padmé asked, looking concerned. She reached up, stroked his face, more than used to the aftermath of Anakin's visions.

She'd been there, after all, for the bloody aftermath of the vision about his mother. She'd been there, and miracle of miracles, she had stayed. She had stayed and become his secret wife…

He looked at her, looking so deeply up at him. Perhaps that was it. Padmé, his wife, the forbidden love he'd taken despite everything the jedi stood for… It was hard on her. They met in hotel rooms, rushed rendezvous with him in disguise as he passionately kissed her with time pressing down on them both. Sometimes, he would find time between the war and the missions to come to Naboo, but always the eye of the council watched too closely.

And with the war entrenched in the outer rim, it felt like ages since he'd been able to see her at all.

War consumed them, and Padmé suffered for it.

She had endured all this and more for him, for them, and she asked so little of him.

It wasn't fair.

"Ani," she said softly, brushing his face, "It's alright, whatever you saw—"

"I didn't see anything," he said, trying to smile.

"Nothing, are you certain?" she asked, and… There was nervousness in here, fear, something trembling that tried to be hopeful and joyous but quaked all the same.

"What's happened?" he asked.

Her eyes didn't change. She licked her lips, her hands instinctively tightening on his bare shoulders. "Something wonderful has happened."

A breath, then another. "Ani, I'm pregnant."

Her eyes were locked on him, there was no buckling now, nowhere to run. He felt himself grow cold, sweat pouring off his skin, and suddenly the room was too small and he needed to get out. Force, he needed to get out. "That's—That's wonderful, Padmé, it's wonderful."

Shifted, something had shifted.
A smile, hesitant and trembling, grew on his lips.

"Ani, what are we going to do?"

He pulled her close, tucked her head beneath his, and stared out over her head into the silver towers of Coruscant glittering in the sunlight. "We're not going to worry about anything right now. This is a happy moment, the happiest moment of my life."

Shifted, yes, everything had shifted.

"Tobirama!" Lee jerked awake with a scream, eyes unseeing as she leaned forward, the Force beckoning her saber into her hand before Obito could scramble to restrain her.

"Master, Lee, Lee it's alright," he said, pulling her arms back and forcing her to drop the glowing blade. She shook uncontrollably, feeling feverish in his arms as he smoothed back her hair and murmured unhelpful nonsense, "It's alright, it's alright, it's alright…"

She relaxed, shuddering, and leaned back, then looked at him. "How long?"

"A few hours," Obito said, "As far as I can tell, we don't have company."

The good news was that meant they weren't about to be picked off by separatists. The bad news was that there was little to no chance of getting out of this place.

"The Force will provide," Lee said, "As they say, when he closes a door, he also tends to open a window."

"You say that," Obito corrected fondly, and Lee smiled in turn.

"Yes, well, if I always say it then—"

"It's always true," Obito completed for her, just daring her to try to talk over him.

Obito sighed, helped Lee return to her original position lying down on what remained of their robes, and noted, "You know, I'd prefer if he just went ahead and opened another door, or even the same door. Windows seem like a tight squeeze right about now."

She smiled but said nothing. Then, slowly, the smile drifted into a frown. She shot back up with a speed that she should not have been capable of, her eyes wild and bright. "That's it!"

"What's it?"

She looked at him as if he'd just said the most brilliant thing she'd ever heard. "We just ask him to open the door."

Soundlessly, he repeated her words, the meaning lost on him, but Lee didn't hesitate at all. Instead, closing her eyes and taking a breath, she said a single, clear word: "Haruki."

"Holy river of Force light!" Obito fell backwards, flailing for his lightsaber, as there, out of an
entire planet filled with nothing, was a human man.

He was blonde, just on the taller side of average, with bright blue eyes and tan skin. He was wearing jedi robes and... Haruki, Lee had called him Haruki, and slowly Obito remembered...

"Oh, Force," Obito breathed as he righted himself, "You're that guy, that guy Lee talks about, you're—"

The Force, Obito didn't get to finish.

"Obito Uchiha," the man interrupted, meeting Obito's eyes and watching with an almost fond smile as Obito shivered, "It is good to see you."

"It's—" Obito paused. Right, this wasn't his first meeting with him, Haruki, the Force's strange puppet avatar. Lee actually met him quite often, was seen with him even more than she'd been seen with Anakin, and if Obito thought about it, the guy was practically a fixture not only at the temple but near every mission they'd been on.

The unofficial and unacknowledged third member of their jedi team.

Another one of Lee's dirty little secrets that Obito had helped her hide under the bed for ages now.

He groaned. "Well, at least we don't have prying eyes this time."

Haruki grinned, looking inordinately pleased by Obito's exasperation. "The jedi see what they wish to see, Obito; you need not be concerned about them."

"You do realize I am a jedi, right?" Obito asked. Sure, he wasn't necessarily the greatest jedi who ever lived, but he'd made his way through padawan training and was almost ready for his trials. That, at least, had to count for something.

The man's smile...

In that moment, for a second, it was as if he knew something Obito didn't. As if he alone were in on some grand joke whose setup Obito had forgotten.

"Yes, and you are a better one than you realize," the man said. He then turned to Lee, frowning, and hesitantly reached out towards her. "Lee, that was a great fall."

"Yes, well, I suppose wars have consequences," Lee said with a painful shrug as he brushed strands of hair away from her face. It was... a very tender action, like a lover, and at the sight of it Obito felt something twist uncomfortably in his stomach.

It was like watching as Kakashi, as Rin, had been chosen as padawans without him but somehow ten times worse than that. His skin was crawling, hairs on the back of his neck standing upright, and he couldn't even say why.

"For you, Lee, they don't have to," he said, and then, with a slow deliberateness, moved forward and brushed his lips against hers. Brushed because... It took a second, watching, for Obito to realize what it was he was even seeing.

That churning in his stomach grew more forceful, serenity slipping from him, and inside his mind the code repeated on loop. A forced, calm mantra as the man who wasn't a man drew back from his master with a contented smile on his lips.
There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force.

The Force…

And in his mind, from years ago, he heard Lee's words. The ones she said only a few hours before:

I must not fear. Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain.

Not feeling itself, but fear, mindless fear was his enemy…

Obito breathed in and breathed out, embracing hard-earned peace he'd chased all his life, and asked, "Are we feeling handsy today, Haruki?"

The man faltered, looked closer at Obito, as if he had not looked close enough the first time. As if Obito had proved himself a little more interesting than your average sentient to a being that had only ever shown a human face to Lee Eru.

"Haruki," Lee said, inching closer, ever so slightly, to Obito as she sat up.

Haruki, by the narrowing of his blue eyes and the simmering of the Force in the cave, noticed.

"If you don't mind," Lee said with a smile, "Obito and I here are in a bit of a bind. We'd greatly appreciate a lift back to Coruscant."

"Of course," Haruki said, and the moment passed, that narrow-eyed rage and suspicion gone as if it'd never been there. "You only had to ask."

"Forgive me, Haruki, but most people don't have the option of asking," Lee said with a tight smile, motioning for Obito to help pull her up. "I forget that, for whatever reason, I can."

Haruki, as always, didn't answer why exactly Lee had the unique privileges that she did. Perhaps he had once, before Obito knew her, but since Obito had made his acquaintance, he hadn't even hinted at it. Just that, for whatever reason, it was something Lee above all others was born with.

Part of that same ineffable quality that had made her a jedi master so very young.

Lee's grip on Obito's arm tightened, a small, instinctive warning.

Lee had been friends with Haruki, with the Force, since before she was a jedi. Since she'd first arrived on Tatooine, she'd told him so herself. Her best friend, she'd said, a wind spirit from the great desert.

They'd been a packaged deal even when Obito had become her padawan.

So, why was she tensing and why were his own volatile emotions rising to the surface?

As usual, Haruki didn't answer; he just linked his arms in between theirs and with a burst of energy, folded them through time and space until they were standing on the steps of the temple as if they'd never left it in the first place.

In the corner of Obito's right eye, reality flickered.
Chapter 24

He was thirteen, a few months into being Lee Eru's apprentice, and they'd just returned from a mission on a swamp planet to act as mediators in a trade negotiation between two tribes. Obito, for the record, discovered that the one thing he might hate more than desert planets was goddamn swamp planets.

"I need a shower," Obito groaned as soon as they stepped inside the temple. "I need a thousand showers."

He felt dirty and gross, not just covered in sweat but also that glowing blue grime that was everywhere on that Force forsaken planet. Master Eru, however, as always didn't seem to mind.

Maybe that was her mastery over the Force speaking, that cool and effortless serenity, but Obito just kind of wanted to punch her in the face. She'd been just like this during the mission as well, cool and perfectly composed while the two tribes tried to verbally murder one another in their native tongues.

Just sitting there playing solitaire and just waiting for it to all be over, even when they started throwing chairs at one another.

Now, Obito wasn't sure exactly what the council had meant by "mediate negotiations", but he was pretty sure it wasn't what he and Lee had spent the past six weeks doing. That, or Master Eru was secretly some kind of genius, because it had worked out in the end anyway. A negotiation was reached, a treaty signed, and all the natives were happy while Obito was just covered in swamp.

"Patience, my hot-headed padawan," Lee chastised, no doubt hearing Obito's kvetching (as she liked to call it) through their bond. "Not all missions are filled with excitement, you know."

He spared her a look. "We didn't even do anything."

"I didn't say that," she said in return, a small smile growing on her face.

"Well, I'm saying it, Master," Obito retorted. "All we did was just sit there and look pretty."

When he'd finally been selected as a padawan, at nearly the last possible minute, to his own personal Jedi Master hero… Well, this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind.

"Yes, that was the point," Lee said. "We're neutral, Obito; we were just there to give peace of mind and some official representation for the Republic. The council would have my head if we actually did anything."

She had a point, and he knew all of that. Jedi were, at the heart of things, peacekeepers, but they were not any legislative or executive authority. They didn't make the Republic's laws, didn't enforce them, but instead helped guide the different sentients of the Republic to peaceful solutions whenever possible.
"It's just so…" Obito trailed off and then finally just spit it out, "Boring."

She laughed. He felt himself bristle, but she didn't stop—in fact, his annoyance only seemed to encourage her.

"What is it?" he asked, crossing his arms and huffing. She reached down and ruffled his hair.

"It's just that you'll change your mind," Lee said. "Force knows, I certainly did."

Her expression dimmed then, her hand slipping away from his hair and padawan braid. "That last mission, with Master Tobirama, it was the most exciting mission I had ever been on."

Obito felt something in his stomach plummet, the feeling that he'd unwittingly stuck his foot in his mouth, and now all he wanted to do was eat his own thoughtless words. Lee looked past him, though, their bond singing with a distant, muted pain and grief over the loss of her own master.

"Excitement is not what you're looking for, Obito. If the Force smiles on you, on us, then you will never have any true cause to draw that saber and will never be in a position where your life depends on all the years of training put into you."

She looked back down at him, her eyes intense once again. "However, you undoubtedly will be in that situation; it's what we're trained for. When it comes, Obito, learn to appreciate these small backwater missions on forgotten swamp worlds."

She patted him on the back, offered a quick smile, and then the feeling was gone. Released back into the Force or else buried in a box deep inside her heart for some other time. Obito, though… he just felt drained and speechless, wishing he could say something.

Wishing he had the nerve, even, to ask what had happened to Master Tobirama Senju.

But before he could, he stopped dead in his tracks, his head instinctively turning, because there she was. Rin was in the temple. She usually was; being trained as a medic meant she had less reason than he did to go out to the field on missions. Her hair was growing longer, curving down, now, below her chin, though her padawan's braid still was long enough to reach her shoulders.

And Obito was standing here, his hair sticking out all over the place, covered in blue mud.

He felt himself grow red, willing himself to sink back into the floor, anything just so she wouldn't look over and see him like—

"You certainly do like to live on the wild side, don't you?"

Obito started. Lee was standing over him, a hand falling on his shoulder as she looked towards Rin.

"Master?!!" he started, but she just grinned.

"She's cute," she said instead, ignoring Obito's hopeless spluttering as he put all of his will into the Force that Rin would just keep walking and never look in this direction. "Not my type, but I can see why you're interested."

Thankfully, either the Force was feeling kind or Obito really managed it, as Rin did indeed just keep walking. She probably had somewhere to be; she was carrying what looked like freshly done laundry. As she disappeared, Obito nearly collapsed under his own sigh of relief.

"It would behove you to be careful."
Obito looked up, blinking, but Lee was still staring after where Rin had gone, her expression somber.

"What are you talking about?" Obito asked, then flushed as he realized what Lee was getting at. "It's not like that, I promise! Rin would never—"

Lee looked down at him again, expression still somber. "But you would."

Then, grabbing his hand, she started pulling him swiftly through the temple without another word. They moved past the classrooms, meeting rooms, cafeterias, and all the way down into the living quarters and finally Lee Eru's own small rooms.

It wasn't much; none of them had much. There was a small futon in the corner, a bookshelf containing a small collection of souvenirs taken from missions off-world, a closet filled with your typical Jedi robes, and a bathroom off to the side with a fresher.

She pulled him inside and swiftly closed the door behind him, and then, when she did…

"Sith's shit!" Obito cursed as, out of nowhere, the room changed.

The room seemed to expand, space seeming to create itself out of nowhere so the place was bigger on the inside than it was on the out, and where before there was practically no furniture there was now an ornate kitchen table, a fireplace with bright red armchairs facing it, a king sized bed in the place of the futon, and books of flimsy everywhere.

"I know your badly guarded secret," Lee noted with a shrug. "I figure it's only fair that you see at least one of mine."

Obito found himself wandering to the books in an awed daze, cracking one open and then looking bug-eyed at the writing that was not basic but some foreign alphabet he hadn't seen before, even in foreign language class.

"What is—"

"Sit," Lee said, motioning to the armchair and—out of nowhere—the steaming cup of tea on the coffee table next to it. "We're about to have a long and painful conversation."

Slowly, Obito sat, and Lee sat with him, tea appearing out of nowhere in her hands as well.

His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. "Was that the Force—"

"No," Lee said, "None of this is. It's… how I've gotten away with it. I… I don't know what it is, only that it's something I must have brought with me when I came to Tatooine all those years ago."

He opened his mouth, wanting to ask what she meant, but she beat him. "Now, you and this girl, this—"

"Rin," he finished for her, "Rin Nohara, she was my creche-mate."

"But you want her to be much more than that," Lee said with a wince and he cringed, not wanting to agree but…

Well, it was wrong and he knew it, but Jedi didn't deny their feelings. They released them, yes, but they didn't deny them. The trouble was that Obito had just… He'd never let go, didn't want to let go.
"It doesn't matter," Obito said. "She doesn't feel the same way."

It was fine, if it was just him, and he could imagine in the safety of his own mind a world in which they could be together. Not even beyond the Jedi Order, on some forest world that Obito and Rin could make their home, but here in the Order among everyone else without an ounce of fear or shame.

In Obito's mind, there could be a place for them.

"That's what the Order is most afraid of," Lee said, sipping her tea, and with a snap of her fingers, igniting a fire in the fireplace.

"What do you mean?"

"Sex, nights of passion, these are frowned upon but not expressly forbidden," Lee said quietly as she stared into the fire. "True, the Order warns you against it, but for some sentient species more than others, sex means nothing. For some, procreation means nothing, and eggs are abandoned and left to fend for themselves. Human beings aren't like that."

"We constantly seek one another, seek to form meaningful bonds, and there is little in this universe stronger than the power of love. Sex, passion, fuels love, and love in turn can fuel grief, madness, and despair. Which, of course, leads straight to the heart of the dark side."

Finally, she looked back over at him, looking tired. "I know I'm not that old, that I'm not that... wise, but Obito if you really want her then you might destroy her. You'd be forcing her to choose you or the Order. If you approach her, be sure she's ready and willing to face that choice. Make sure she wants you first."

He set down his tea slowly, eyeing her warily, and finally asked, "You're not going to tell me to let them go? My feelings?"

She smiled, a quick, dry thing. "No."

"Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?"

"We have so little in this life, Obito," she said, motioning around them. "The Force, for better or worse, takes, and it takes, and it takes. I, controversially, believe that we should hold onto ourselves as tightly as we can. Even the parts of ourselves that hurt, the parts that might hurt others, because our lives are such precious things."

Obito swallowed nervously, then asked, "Does the council know you think this?"

Her smile became a grin. "What the council doesn't know won't hurt them."

It was the first hint he had that Lee's status as a Jedi Master was a single step in a great con she had pulled and was continuing to pull over the entire Order. More importantly, what he realized later was that Lee was making it undeniably clear very early that Obito could always come to her.

She gave him a dark secret of hers, she now had one of his, and there would never be any consequences from her. He didn't know it then, but it must have been engraved on his heart, that he could come to Lee about Rin and anything else.

That, more than anything else, had probably saved Obito Uchiha from the dark side of the Force.
As always, Lee was telling a very impressive tale to the council, ninety percent of it, of course, being utter garbage.

Obito didn't know when Lee had started pulling the wool over the council's eyes, but it must have been very early, because they didn't even seem to notice. It was a wonder, really, that she even became a Jedi, let alone rose so quickly to the rank of master.

"How'd you get back so quickly?" Master Windu asked, dark eyes narrowed on Lee, but she was unruffled.

"We got lucky," Lee said. "Our comms were functioning and we just barely managed to get in contact with a freighter in orbit. It was heading at hyperspeed to Coruscant."

"And you did not contact the Order or nearby generals?" Master Plo Koon asked, leaning forward in his seat.

"I said they were functioning, not that they were undamaged," Lee easily explained. "We didn't have the reach to the front, let alone back to Coruscant."

Obito, as always, remained silent. He didn't know if he had Lee's talent for bald-faced lying, he'd never bothered to try, and so it seemed best to stand behind her as the dutiful and grave padawan and let her do the work. When he became a knight, if he took on a padawan, well, then he'd learn how to weave such masterful bullshit.

Until then he could stand here and instead think of what Lee wasn't mentioning, her grave and strange secret, her personal connection to the Force itself.

They'd arrived too early, earlier than would be possible even with hyperspeed, and so after the Force, Haruki, had left them, Lee had snuck them into her quarters. There they'd waited and tended to the worst of the wounds and made use of the fresher hoping that the explanation of a freighter's fresher would do.

Sometimes Obito wondered if Lee should just suck it up and tell them. Except… It would change everything if she told them and they believed her. It would change everything if they didn't believe her; they'd think she was mad, or that the Sith were using her as a pawn and manipulating her memories. She'd be sent to the mind healers, and when they didn't find anything wrong, or when they dug deeper and realized that Lee wasn't just from beyond the Outer Rim…

Obito knew exactly why Lee hadn't told them, and he wasn't going to start telling them either.

He just wished they didn't have to go through this ridiculous song and dance too.

Especially since, unlike Lee, his ability to shield his mind from other Jedi was a hard-won thing that had been honed through years of grueling and painful training with Lee.

"And so failed, your mission did," Master Yoda opined gravely.

Obito looked across towards the council, meeting Obi-Wan Kenobi's eye, the one man he'd label as truly sympathetic to them. He was pointedly not looking at either of them, looking somewhere above their heads through the glass windows to the great city sprawled below.
Lee opened her mouth, closed it, and finally said, "No, just… delayed. Master Koth and his troops are still alive, the armada surrounding the planet has been broken and the Separatists will have to send for reinforcements. Our troops have the time to—"

"If you led your own soldiers, Master Eru," Mace Windu interrupted, "Then perhaps there would be no need to send our own reinforcements."

You could almost hear a pin drop.

Lee's mouth shut and for a tense moment she was perfectly silent, and then, "I thought I made my opinion on that perfectly clear."

"We are at war, Master Eru," Master Mundi said, his voice worn and grave, as if the civil war had ravaged it too. "We all must make distasteful sacrifices."

"We are relying on slaves, sending them out like sacks of meat to water fields of poppies, for a people who are too cowardly to defend themselves."

"The clones are not slaves, Master Eru," another council member opined weakly, "At the end of their term, at the end of this war, they will enter society—"

"If they survive it," Lee cut in bitterly. "We haven't guaranteed that for—what is the death rate now, seventy-five percent of them? I heard we've even increased production, that what used to take years is now taking months!"

"They are members of this Republic, more, we are as well and—"

"And we are a neutral entity," Lee cut in once again, practically burning in the Force. "We are Knights of the Republic, but we are not its military. The senate has no business asking us to be one, and giving into this madness will destroy us from the inside. Everything we have ever believed in will be gone! And the clones are just—"

"Lee," Obi-Wan said softly, instantly commanding Lee's attention.

Just like that, her rage, her passion, was gone, released back into the Force.

"Master Kenobi," Lee said, far more formal than she would be in any other circumstance, if they were standing anywhere but before the council, "We don't even know where they come from."

He opened his mouth, likely to explain they knew exactly where they came from, that Obi-Wan had been the one to follow Jango Fett and discover the production of the clones, just in the nick of time for the start of the wars.

She held up a hand, though. "No, Obi-Wan, we have no idea where they truly come from. We know the superficial details, the superficial process, but we didn't make them. They could come from anywhere and be designed for anything in the world. Which is why I will never, even if it kills me and my apprentice, lead clone troops into battle."

She then bowed, and with her motion Obito did the same. "If you need more relevant details, my paperwork will be in soon. Until then, I believe my padawan and I have an appointment with the medics."

Only when they were back out the doors, on the other side, did both of them breathe a sigh of relief. Obito looked over at Lee. Lee looked back.
"One of these days," Obito said, "They're going to catch onto your ass."

"That would be very impressive," Lee said blandly as she started to walk towards the elevator, "Considering they haven't managed to in thirteen years."

"At the very least, they'll find some way to shove clones onto both of us" Obito said, "No matter how many droids you slaughter or how much you stamp your feet."

"Yes, well," Lee said as they both stepped into the elevator, "I suppose it means that, yet again, I will not be elected to join the Jedi council."

"Otherwise," Obito said grinning across at her, "I think that went quite well."

She spared him an unimpressed look, then, as usual, having to get the last word in, bit out, "You're just saying that because you get to see Rin."

Somehow, his grin grew wider at the thought of precious Rin in the medical ward waiting for them both, because even with a hole in his stomach and having just walked out of a council meeting everything was coming up Obito Uchiha.

"You mean you were here this whole time?" Lee balked, stopping in the middle of eating a cheese fry and looking utterly appalled at Anakin like she'd never seen anything like him.

It was worse than the way she'd looked at him whenever he tried to stand up to Sebulba and she'd had to save him from becoming a pile of sandy goo. Most of his childhood, in retrospect, had been Lee saving him from doing something stupid.

And it was amazing that, even though he was only three years younger than her and a Jedi Master in his own renown, she could still make him feel like he was seven years old and he'd just accidentally blown up the prototype C3PO.

"Well, I mean—" Anakin started, gesturing wildly for some explanation that wasn't coming to him, "Yes?"

Then, spluttering, he added, "I can have leave too, you know!"

"The Jedi who knows no fear doesn't deserve leave when we're out in a single fighter for weeks trying to break enemy lines," Lee's little shit of a padawan, Obito Uchiha, said with raised dark eyebrows.

Anakin had thought he'd like the kid, when Lee picked him up, if only because Lee had gone out of her way to pick that one specifically. More, she'd picked about the worst possible padawan she could have, moving over his vastly more qualified peers for the one practically slated for Telos. Anakin, well, he'd respected that and the initiate for sticking it out the way the boy had.

And they had gotten along well at first. Obito had almost felt like a wayward little brother, but somewhere along the way Uchiha seemed to have decided that Anakin was an ass, and Anakin had decided that he could only deal with one upstart padawan at a time.
"I didn't call you because I thought you were in battle," Lee continued, her expression flat and, if possible, even more unimpressed than before.

"Well, that's not my fault, is it?" Anakin asked as he resumed eating cheese fries. It was nice, being at Dex's with Lee, even if Obi-Wan wasn't here and Lee had invited her padawan. It felt like old times, like nothing had changed, like Padmé wasn't—

"There was thrusting, Annie," Lee said bluntly, "And you were thinking an awful lot about 'your saber'."

Anakin choked on his fry, feeling himself grow purple, while Lee pulled her glass of soda closer and noisily sucked out its contents through a straw. Force, she was going to kill him, she was the worst, and it was in moments like this that he was absolutely certain that Lee somehow knew about him and Padmé when there was no damn way—

"Alright, alright," he wheezed, regaining his breath, "I owe you one, alright? Whatever you want, just, don't do that!"

He sighed. God, he hated when Lee went and got insightful. She'd always been like that, and he didn't know if it was just because she was the older sister, but he felt like he could never get away with anything around her. She always, every time, just knew. She hadn't even been surprised when he'd first shown up with Master Qui-Gon, Padmé, and Jar-Jar!

It'd been… So strange, relieving but also painful, when she hadn't said anything about his marriage to Padmé. When, somehow, she hadn't already known.

She would know now, though, or at least suspect. Obi-Wan would too, there'd be no denying it. Or at least, there would be no honorable way to deny it, not for Padmé. Pregnant, that word kept ringing in his head, Padmé was pregnant. It was wonderful, and yet it was terrifying, he was going to be a father.

Jedi weren't fathers.

This couldn't be a secret anymore, there'd be no more lover’s rendezvous, no hidden children raised by some stand-in patsy father taking Anakin's place. He'd have to leave the Order, the war, go to Naboo with Padmé no matter what anyone said or thought and leave everything he'd ever known behind.

Why was that so frightening?

He'd done it before, hadn't he? He'd left Mos Espa, he'd left his mother, he'd left—

He stopped, looked across the table in quiet horror at Lee, his older sister.

He hadn't left Lee, not ever.

She'd done the impossible, escaping Tatooine with him even when Qui-Gon hadn't won her in the pod race, somehow disabling the chip inside her through the Force with no training. She'd fought and bled her way not only to Coruscant but into the Order until they couldn't deny her even if they'd wanted to. Like the Force itself would allow nothing less than for her and him to be together forever.

If he left the Order, he'd be leaving her behind, and with the war going the way it was he might
never see her again.

Unless, somehow, she left the Order with him.

She'd never go, she'd never leave her padawan behind, but—

They could be a family. Him, Padmé, the baby, and Lee as an aunt. And god, if there was any hope at all, he could convince Obi-Wan to at least come and visit and be some kind of pseudo uncle. There was no chance in hell of his ever leaving, but, but Anakin could see it and he wanted it so badly it hurt.

To walk with Padmé in the sunlight.

"What's with you two?" Obito asked, and only then did Anakin notice that Lee seemed deep in thought as well, looking just as pensive and anxious as Anakin felt.

"Lee?" Anakin asked, a note of fear in his voice, quiet certainty that she knew. She'd known forever and just kept it to herself, because of course she would for his own protection, and oh Force—

"Nothing, it's nothing, just—"

"You've been looking grim since we went to the medic," Obito noted, then his eyes narrowed, "Master, what did they say?"

"Nothing," Lee said, too quickly, her face pale, "They said nothing, Obito."

For once, Obito and Anakin seemed to agree with each other: whatever the medics had said was most certainly not nothing. It was also something Lee didn't seem inclined to share. Anakin felt that vision in his head, Naboo, darken somewhat, a shadow passing overhead.

"You know I can talk to Rin, don't you?" Obito asked.

Lee just smiled. "Yes, I know, and don't worry. It's nothing, I just got banged up a bit."

"Is that what we're calling it?" Obito asked, but he hadn't let it go, Anakin could sense that much, and Lee undoubtedly could as well. As much as Anakin didn't like Obito, he would say this—the kid had his sister's best interests at heart.

Anakin could trust Obito to take care of Lee when she needed it. That, he supposed, was worth more than being the most likeable brat in the world.

"It is today," Lee said with a smile, and then she stood, smiling back at Anakin. "With that, I could use some sleep, and you probably want to return to your... sword practice."

Anakin choked again.

Unfortunately, by the time he recovered himself, they had long since walked out the door. Leaving the bill, of course, with Anakin.

God, he was going to kill her someday.
"What is it really?" Obito asked as they weaved their way through the crowded streets towards the temple, Anakin long behind them.

Lee opened her mouth, likely trying to brush him off again, but then closed it. Obito, after all, was the keeper of her secrets and she knew it. Even more than Anakin Skywalker, she wouldn't, couldn't keep whatever this was from him.

And he would talk to Rin about it if he had to.

"Not here," she finally said, meaning that they'd do this in her room, in her warded sanctuary where she confessed everything of any true importance.

"How was Rin?" she finally asked, and he couldn't help but smile.

"The same," he said, feeling a slight spring in his step at the mere thought of her and her smile, "Wonderful as always."

"And—"

"And she still has no idea that I've wanted to marry her since I was three," Obito finished for Lee with a sigh. "I… I don't think she feels that way about me. That, or she's even better than you at hiding her feelings."

"I don't hide my feelings," Lee said, "I just cleverly distract people from them."

Then she sighed, "But you're likely right, your feelings aren't that well-hidden, and if she felt anything—"

"She would have done something about it," Obito finished for her, then with his own sigh, said, "Rin is a good Jedi."

Rin would never succumb to feelings of romance, would quietly and politely relinquish its hold on her heart; she was nothing like Obito. Or, he thought as he glanced up at his master, like Lee.

Suddenly, the world seemed a little bleaker than it had before, even after having spent an hour in Rin's presence.

"Do you think they made a mistake," Obito asked, "When they made us Jedi?"

"No," Lee said, with that strange serene confidence that had served her so well. "We've done good in this world, even if we're unorthodox, and even after everything they've said and believed in, we haven't succumbed to the dark side yet."

"But you say they, Master, and not we," Obito pointed out gravely.

"It has always, my apprentice, been they," Lee said cryptically, and then grew silent.

The rest of the walk back was quiet, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Any other night, Obito might be searching for Kakashi, or likely Kakashi would come searching for him. He, Kakashi, and Rin, if she was free, would play sabbak just like in the old days, and he'd pretend he was still in the creche with them.

He didn't have leave often, not as often as Anakin Goddamn Skywalker seemed to get, and he tried not to waste it.
Lee would likely spend it with Anakin, Master Kenobi, or else Haruki—

Again, that shudder, that feeling of hair-raising anxiety and fear over what was secretly the Force itself and Lee's greatest friend. An instinctual dread he couldn't suppress, his vision going black at the edges, flickering—

Maybe there was something wrong with him.

Maybe he should have spent less time flirting with Rin and more time actually getting his checkup. His eye, it itched and ached. Sometimes it felt like it was even bleeding.

Finally, they stepped into Lee's quarters, which as usual transformed into their natural impressively messy and materialistic state. The Jedi would die if they knew how many books she'd written and hoarded for herself down here like a dragon guarding precious treasure.

"Well?" Obito asked, turning around to face her with crossed arms.

She was still at the door, hand on the metal panel, faced away from him.

"Master?"

She looked small, thin, like a stray wind might knock her over.

And she was so quiet.

"Lee?" he asked, his voice sounding choked.

That seemed to decide something for her, as her back straightened, and she turned towards him in a solid and confident movement. Staring him directly in the eye, she said, "I'm pregnant."

She stepped forward, walking towards her seat by the fireplace, talking while Obito just stared and gaped. "The healers don't know, or more accurately, they no longer remember. Rin wouldn't have been able to tell you."

"You're pregnant?!!" Obito asked.

She didn't answer, just stared into the fire startled to life by a snap of her fingers. He scrambled into his seat, gaping at her, but she didn't flinch. She looked resolute, like an ancient Jedi statue, staring into the inferno without a flicker of doubt.

Except how could it have happened? Granted, Obito wasn't there all the time, there were nights he didn't see her, but he'd think he'd have noticed if there was a lover or two in the midst! More, she would have known that he'd keep her secret, god she knew about Rin, which was much worse than whatever she'd been up to.

But this meant that she'd kept it from him, that she hadn't trusted him with it, more, that she'd—

Slowly, trying and failing to smile, he said, "But you have to have sex to be—"

"Not always," Lee interjected.

"Anakin," she continued softly, "Didn't have a father."

The fire crackled, somehow deafeningly loud, in the absence of words.

"What are you going to do?" Obito finally asked.
Lee raked both hands through her hair, curling in on herself in front of the fire, and when she spoke her voice was muffled by her own robes. "I don't know, Obito. I don't know."

"Children can't happen in the Order, Obito. Lovers you can get away with, if you're careful, but never children. I can't hide it, I can't even hide the pregnancy, and if they find out then they'll make sure I never see them again. There is, after all, no greater attachment than maternity."

And they would strip Lee of her rank, send her to the mind healers, ask her why and how this happened and question whether she was worthy of the Jedi Order and fit to lead even a single padawan. She would be shamed forever for this.

She looked up, raking a hand now across her face, trying to grin. "And if I get rid of it…"

Her grin turned into a pained grimace, her eyes squeezing shut against tears building in the corners. "But I don't want to get rid of it, I want—I never knew it but, God, I want a family."

She looked like her heart was breaking, confessing that, like she'd never said those simple words and never dared to believe in them until now. That all Lee Eru had ever truly wanted was just a family.

She continued, shaking hand now resting on her stomach. "I want a future outside of this endless war, Obito. More, now that I have this, I want a child, this child, no matter where it came from. I want love, I want family, I want attachment and I can't have it!"

"Lee," he said quietly, not sure what else to say.

She was right; there was no way out, not even for her, if she stayed in the Order. Even with all her gifts, all her horrifying command over the Force, she couldn't escape this. She could hide the pregnancy, hide the births, she could even try and hide the babies among the others and quietly guide them as they came of age, but—

But what kind of life was that? For them or even for her? Why settle only for the bitter aftertaste of everything she could have had?

He moved out of his chair, pulled her out of hers and into his arms. "Lee, we'll get through this."

He squeezed his own eyes shut, feeling the sobs wracking her body, ignoring the wrenching of his own throat as he said, "If you leave the Order, the war, then I will be there with you. I'll leave everything behind, even—"

Even Kakashi. Even Rin.

He took a deep shuddering breath, forcing the words out, "I don't care about this war, not anymore, and I don't care about the Order without you in it. Without you, I would be on Telos—"

His vision flickered, black, then red, the room warping with the tears in his eyes, and he kept blathering, unable to understand what he was even saying, "—I would be in that cave with Madara and the Žetsus, Tobi, his dancing puppet working tirelessly to end the world. Burning Konohagakure to the ground on the back of the Kyuubi, murdering Minato-sensei, Kushina, and so many others."

"Obito?" A hand on his back, rubbing circles, and now it was Obito who was sobbing uncontrollably, words spewing from his mouth, but he just couldn't stop.

"I would go into the pits of hell with you, shishou. Say the word, just hint at it, and I will be there."
Lee tried to pull him back, to look at his face, but he just kept holding onto her, shaking uncontrollably, his vision dancing in and out. "Obito, I don't understand what you're saying—"

A different hand fell on his shoulder. Obito looked up and saw Haruki looking down at him.

Except, for a moment, his mind had whispered an unfamiliar name: Namikaze Minato, Minato-sensei.

"Thank you, Obito," the man said, smiling down at Obito and carefully prying him off Lee.

He then crouched down, pulled Lee into his arms. "I'm sorry, Lee, that you had to find out like this."

Find out…

Oh, of course. Obito could almost laugh. No father—no, there was a father, and she might have even had sex with him, with it, for all Obito knew. Lee hadn't had to tell him anything, Obito should have already known.

Haruki, of course it was him.

Obito pulled himself back into the chair, away from the pair of them, trying not to watch as the Force wiped tears away from Lee's face. It was such a tender, kind motion, like that of a lover, and Obito couldn't watch it.

"It will be alright," Haruki said, curling his hands in her hair now. "I promise, everything will be alright, will always be alright. Whatever you want to do, wherever you want to go, whoever you want to take with you, I promise it will happen."

Lee didn't say anything, didn't thank him or brush him off, but instead collapsed once again into sobbing, clutching him close. Like he truly was her oldest friend, the father of her child, and Obito…

Well, Obito was that little boy who should have been on Telos.
“—And then, Lee, the chancellor said—”

The glasses on the table had been shivering since Skywalker had started talking, barely noticeable unless you stared, and yet Skywalker hadn’t bothered to look at them.

Lee’s hand abruptly, slammed down on the table, stopping the subtle shaking. Skywalker jolted startled out of the middle of his sentence. Lee, politely, smiled at him, “Anakin, can we talk about something other than the chancellor?”

Obito was fifteen, his master twenty-four, and Anakin Skywalker himself nineteen just shy of twenty and a newly minted jedi knight.

Nineteen was young for a jedi knight, especially for a human. Most didn’t achieve knighthood until their early or at least mid twenties. He wasn’t as young as Lee had been, only fifteen when her master had disappeared and she’d been shoved into knighthood, but he was still younger than most.

Obito doubted he’d be making knighthood by nineteen.

Before, he’d probably think that it must run in the family.

It was a known fact that, for all their different surnames and complexions, Master Eru and Skywalker had arrived at the temple together from Tatooine. Only a little time before that did Lee mention that, at the time, she’d had the name Skywalker as well.

The temple, upon deciding to accept them both, had tried to sever their sibling’s bond by forcing at least one to relinquish the name. So, Lee had given up Skywalker, and replaced it with the kinless and meaningless syllables “Eru”.

Only later in his apprenticeship did he learn that Lee had been an adopted older sister, taken in by Anakin’s mother only a few months before his birth. The reason for their starkly different appearances (his golden desert tanned skin compared to her startlingly fair complexion) was not because she took after the father but because there was no common lineage between them.
For now, though, once again, he was considering the younger brother Master Eru wasn’t supposed to treat like a younger brother (but did anyway because of course she did) and wondered just what to make of him.

He’d never disliked Skywalker before becoming Lee’s padawan. True, jedi prodigies always irked him a little, the idea that there were people out there who never had to work at anything in their life, but that was just on principle. And for all that he was gifted, Skywalker did struggle his way through as Lee herself had, being selected as a padawan as late as nine. Obito had always respected that, he’d thought he could respect Anakin, and he had for the first few months of his padawan career.

However, as the years wore on, as he, Lee, Skywalker, and Master Kenobi met up for these lunches at Dex’s he found that respect and good feeling fading.

It wasn’t that Anakin was arrogant, well, strike that he was. Skywalker was overflowing with confidence, just bordering on smug. Still, it wasn’t that, that he’d earned at least. No, it was…

It was moments like this, where he’d just start talking, his heart in the right place even if his head wasn’t, and he’d be so obliviously selfish to any effect his words had on anyone else. As if he’d somehow, in all the years he’d known his sister, never noticed how quiet she became whenever he brought up Chancellor Palpatine.

“What?” he asked his sister, golden brow furrowed in a confused and annoyed frown.

“Nothing, just—” Lee cut herself off, allowed her smile to fade away as she bleakly said, “If we’re going to talk about politics, I’d rather discuss the war.”

Anakin groaned, slumping in his seat, “Haven’t you heard enough about that?”

“The senate has elected to send the jedi to the battlefield, supervising clone troopers,” Lee said darkly, fingers tapping against the brightly colored table top, relaying the concerns she’d given Obito when news of the separatist’s droid army broke out, “Jedi haven’t been to war since the Sith wars ended, and even those were not the same. We have no military experience, no command experience, and—”

“And all I’ve heard about for weeks is the war,” Anakin said, “Trust me, I was there on Geonosis if you’ll remember, I know how bad it is. I saw the droid army firsthand with Master. I know we’re
in a kriffing sandstorm with no shelter. We’ve talked about it enough already.”

He sighed, rubbed a hand through his blonde hair, pausing at the lack of braid, clearly still not quite used to his new status as a jedi knight, “Look, whatever’s going to happen will happen. Aren’t you the one always saying that?”

“A civil war is a bit more serious than ‘que sera sera’ usually allows,” Lee said dully, “And it’s not even our war, Anakin.”

“Oh,” Anakin said dismissively as he reached out for another fry, “Whose war is it, the republic’s?”

“Yes, it’s the—”

“We’re in the republic, Lee, we’re knights of the republic,” his own eyes narrowed then, a flash of anger in them, “You’d leave civilians to die just because—”

“No,” Lee said quickly, and then quieter, more slowly repeated, “No just…”

She rubbed at her temples, sighing, “I just have a very bad feeling about this.”

“It’s a war,” Anakin said with an amused smile, “Everybody has a bad feeling about it.”

Well, Obito couldn’t fault him there. To be honest, he didn’t know what to think of Lee’s dread either.

No one was exactly happy about the war, about what it signaled, but no one had the same kind of bottomless fear that Lee Eru seemed to be experiencing either. Some saw a short, brief, struggle, some looked at the resources of the seperatists and the expanse of the republic and saw a long and bitter fight that would stretch out many years, but ask Lee and it was as if she was describing the beginning of an almost inevitable end.

Lee foresaw not only the end of the republic but the end of the jedi order along with it.
Obito wanted to disagree, except, for all that Lee claimed she wasn’t as wise as a master should be, he had never seen her wrong either. If Lee thought this was the end then…

“But what about the chancellor?” Skywalker asked, breaking Obito out of his thoughts. He looked unbearably smug again, his lips curled into a slanted smile, “You thought you could distract me, didn’t you?”

Lee raised her hands in mock surrender, “As always, Anakin, you are far too clever for my schemes.”

“Don’t even think about it,” Anakin said, “Flattery will get you nowhere. What problem do you have with the chancellor? You know he’s always looked out for us, ever since we first got here.”

Lee considered Anakin for a moment; her face expressionless. Obito wondered if Anakin knew what that meant, that she was thinking very carefully, picking and choosing both the answer Anakin would accept and the one that would lead him to where she wanted him to go. Anakin must know, they were siblings, but at the same time for all their closeness sometimes Obito thought Anakin didn’t know her at all.

He was too short sighted. More, given all that Lee had gone through to remain with him, he had come to take her for granted.

“He’s a politician,” Lee finally settled on.

“So?” Anakin asked.

“It means he will always have underlying motivations,” Lee finished, her tone not changing at all, oddly polite and emotionless.

Anakin, again, seemed almost amused, “Oh come on, Lee, would you say that about Padmé?”

“Padmé only thinks she’s a politician,” Lee retorted, this time some amusement coloring her tone.
“What, that stint as queen then senator means nothing?” Anakin asked, but Lee didn’t respond.

Finally, carefully, Lee said, “I just don’t like him.”

“There we go,” Anakin said, “He knows, you know, asked me about it the other day. You’re being very rude.”

If Anakin noticed how Lee’s fingers tensed against the table, he didn’t show it.

“I’m serious, Anakin, I don’t like him.”

“Can’t you at least give him a—”

“No, Annie,” Lee said with a sense of finality coloring her tone, enough of the Force in her words to silent whatever clever retort Anakin had.

The three of them were left in awkward silence, interrupted only by Dex’s jukebox playing the latest Coruscant hits.

Obito cleared his throat, ignoring the way both Lee and Skywalker’s eyes flashed to him, “Well, this has been fun. Now that we’ve gotten all the awkward topics out of the way can we talk about the weather?”

The meal went on, Anakin talked about his mission to Naboo, the extended mission that had seen him knighted after it’d ended with disaster on Geonosis. Anakin was the first to leave, meeting up with Obi-Wan to be briefed on a mission in this new war, acting as if he was still the man’s padawan learner.

In the aftermath Obito looked over at Lee. He didn’t ask, but by that time, he didn’t have to.

Lee looked down at him, her eyes dull and flat, and simply said, “Obito, never meet the chancellor alone.”
Obi-Wan couldn’t quite remember what it felt like to not be worn to his bones by exhaustion. He knew he hadn’t always felt like this, could even pinpoint a period of his life where he didn’t, three years ago before the war had broken out. Regardless, what that had felt like, to be well rested and filled with energy escaped him.

With bitter humor he reflected that it was for the best he became Anakin’s master when he did. As young and dangerously inexperienced as he’d been, stumbling out of Qui-Gon’s funeral and into his shoes, he did not believe he could both manage the war and a young Anakin Skywalker as a padawan.

So, perhaps it had been for the best that it happened the way it did. Anakin, at least, did not seem to have suffered too much more than the rest of them. For all that Obi-Wan… For all that Obi-Wan worried about him.

He was still so headstrong, so passionate and stubborn, filled with anger and emotion even as a jedi master. In peace, Obi-Wan doubted Anakin would have risen to the rank of knight as quickly as he did. For all his talent, his ease with the Force, he had no sense of balance or inner serenity. His feelings were flighty, his loyalties ran like a deep and raging river that one could not ford, and in war it had served him well but in peace…

In peace they would never have made him a knight as young as they did and certainly would never have given him Ahsoka to train.

To be fair, in peace, they also never would have placed Obi-Wan on the council at such a young age. So, it was not only Anakin who had been promoted far ahead of his time.

They were not at peace though, were still mired in a war that seemed as if it would continue yet. Worse, perhaps, that it would not continue and that the seperatists would approach ever inwards. They were in the core worlds now, not just the outer rim leading them on a merry dance, but in orbit of the core systems with the jedi and clone troops stretched far too thin to stop them.

And Obi-Wan felt… tired.

Yes, that was the word for it, he felt a constant, dull, fatigue that threatened to consume him whole. If only he had the time to let it.
“Master!”

Ah, and there he was. Obi-Wan lifted his head, smiling in spite of himself, as Anakin barreled down the hallway like an overgrown child. Sounding like one too, still calling him master even when he hadn’t been a padawan learner in years.

“Master,” Anakin repeated as he caught up to him, blue eyes shining and his face flushed, “It’s good to see you.”

“Yes,” Obi-Wan said, smiling in turn as he continued to walk down the temple hallway, “And off the battlefield, no less, a rare occasion for us.”

It wasn’t that he didn’t see Anakin often, he did, more than he ever would have expected once Anakin obtained knighthood. However, rather than seeing him at the temple most of Anakin and Obi-Wan’s time was spent on the front with their troops. Both of them inside the temple was a nice change of pace.

“It wouldn’t be if I was on the council,” Anakin said, ignoring Obi-Wan’s sigh.

“Anakin, you know—”

“You don’t think I’m ready,” Anakin accused before Obi-Wan could get the words out, could twist them to his liking as Anakin liked to say. Anakin wasn’t wrong, he always did have good intuition and excelled at reading Obi-Wan’s hesitations, but he was too eager to forget why.

“Sometimes, Anakin, I don’t think I am ready for the council,” he said instead, unspoken were the usual arguments he had already given. Anakin was too young, ten years younger even than Obi-Wan who was perhaps the youngest human to ever take a seat on the council, he was inexperienced with only one half-trained padawan under his belt and no time as a knight or master in a time of peace. Anakin was too hot headed, he had strength, but no wisdom.

“Don’t give me that,” Anakin chided, “You’re the only reasonable one on there, Lee agrees with me.”

Oh, he knew very well that Lee agreed with Anakin but Anakin’s sister had always been… Well, she and Obi-Wan were close, they had always shared an inexplicable bond of sorts. Early, when he
had been so young and Anakin had been so difficult, he had wished that Qui-Gon had begged Obi-Wan to take her as a padawan rather than the boy.

The boy was so angry, so afraid, so passionate and all he could think was that the girl, old as she was, would have been so much easier.

However, Qui-Gon hadn’t, for all that he’d liked the girl his eyes had always been focused on Anakin Skywalker. So, Obi-Wan had passed her over and promised her nothing, leaving her fate in the order dangling by a thread.

A part of him had been both relieved and disappointed when Master Senju had taken her as his learner instead.

It was no surprise that, for whatever reason, Lee considered his the most reasonable voice of the council.

Still, Anakin brought up an excellent point, “And even your sister, Anakin, who has been a master longer than you have been a knight, is still too young and inexperienced for a seat on the council.”

Anakin just gave him a look as they entered the elevator, “Master, Lee’s never getting a kriiffing seat on the council.”

Obi-Wan winced but, well, Anakin had a point. Qui-Gon, as wise as he was, had never obtained a seat on the council and for very similar reasons Lee Eru, Lee Skywalker, likely would not either. More, if Anakin earned a place as he so desperaetely wished to, that guaranteed that Lee never would.

The jedi had always tried, and mostly failed, to keep them separate.

“Why do you even want a seat on the council?” Obi-Wan asked, “I can assure you that you’d find it very boring, Anakin.”

True, during the war, the council drew up the strategies and battle plans as the jedi high command, but the war would fade and they would return to looking outward for the future of the republic and jedi order.
That would involve mostly discussion, philosophy, and research that would bore Anakin to death.

Anakin grimaced, determination only growing in his eyes, “Because this is stupid. There’s so much wrong with the jedi order—”

“Just because it is difficult, Anakin, does not mean that it’s—”

“It isn’t wrong for me to miss my mother!” Anakin bit back, “It isn’t wrong to want to see my sister; to let her keep our name rather than pretend we didn’t come from the same place. We shouldn’t treat attachment like it’s garbage, master.”

Obi-Wan let out a shuddering sigh, as Anakin had hit it on the head, the true reason Obi-Wan was so hesitant to push him forward and always would be. Attachment, Anakin’s pervasive attachment that had only encouraged his own.

Rather than say that, though, he said instead, “You should become a master first before—”

“And when will that happen?” Anakin balked, anger rising in him and through the bond that still connected the pair of them, “I’m already a general, I’ve had a padawan, I’m ready and the council won’t—”

“There’s time, Anakin,” Obi-Wan soothed, “You’re so young, forget your sister, you have plenty of time to become a master and even a council member if you wish. There’s no rush.”

For a moment Anakin was silent, Obi-Wan hoped that would be the end of it, discussing the council was becoming one of his least favorite subjects with Anakin. He almost wished he had never been selected for it, as that just seemed to fuel Anakin’s ambition for the seat he shouldn’t have.

Anakin always had to follow in Obi-Wan’s footsteps, accomplishing everything he did younger and faster, neverminding that Obi-Wan was ten years his elder.

Unfortunately, Anakin didn’t appear to be done, “What if there isn’t time?”
Obi-Wan was about to asked why then figured, “The war?”

Anakin looked to the side, “Well, that, or… Or anything else? What if—What if I leave, like Ahsoka?”

He let the statement hang in the air. He’d never said that before. For all that had happened, for all he’d struggled, for all that had happened to his own padawan, he’d never said he would leave. He’d never hinted at it being an option, always Anakin stayed, always he fought and moved forward. He didn’t—

Obi-Wan took a shaky breath, feeling like the floor was moving out from under him, “Will you?”

Anakin paused for a long time, seemed to deeply consider it as he stared across at Obi-Wan, then he deflated, “No, no I can’t. Not like this, not with the war, with you, with Lee here, with everything stuck like this… I’m staying. But I want that council seat!”

“Well wait, Anakin,” Obi-Wan chided, stepping gratefully out of the lift and almost sighing as Anakin relentlessly followed.

Anakin usually disappeared whenever he was on Coruscant, enjoying the sights of the city a little more than a jedi should, finding company with either the chancellor or Senator Amidala… The senator, Obi-Wan tried not to notice, almost willed himself not to notice, how dangerously close Anakin and the good senator were. He didn’t know, wasn’t certain, but wouldn’t allow himself the proof needed to become certain.

Thankfully, that was the push Anakin needed to finally change the subject, “Do you think we’ll catch that bastard Grievous this time?”

Obi-Wan could almost groan, as that was also one of his least favorite subjects. Grievous, the separatist general, had been leading them on a merry chase for years as he collected new droid soldiers and jedi lightsabers for his growing collection.

“That would be nice,” Obi-Wan said, though after three years, hew as growing pessimistic.

“Do you think it’d end if we caught him?” Anakin asked with a shark like grin.
It was a stupid question and Anakin knew it. Grievous was just the tip of the iceberg, there was still Dooku in command, the other sith in hiding somewhere and still undiscovered. No, the war had time to go yet before it burned itself out, and then there would be its bitter aftermath.

Instead, Obi-Wan gave what reassurance he could, “We have been in wars longer and deeper than this.”

The wars with the sith had spanned centuries, had nearly destroyed civilization and the jedi order time and again. A civil war, even one as expansive and brutal as this, could be overcome.

“That’s not making me feel better, Master,” Anakin said with a shuddering sigh.

When they finally stepped outside the temple he blinked up at the sunlight. Quietly, morosely, he said, “You know, Lee never has to go to the front.”

Obi-Wan blinked staring at him, “Excuse me?”

“Lee doesn’t have clone soldiers, doesn’t have to go to the front, shivering and starving for weeks on end. Just her and her apprentice, coming in and out whenever they want.”

“Anakin,” Obi-Wan said slowly, “What your sister does—She’s alone, Anakin. Whatever she does, whatever she accomplishes, it is entirely alone. If she falls, is even injured, no one comes for her.”

Obi-Wan would much rather be on the front then do what Lee had voluntarily put herself through. Whether Anakin was convinced or not was hard to say, whatever his thoughts were, he shrugged them off and released them into the Force.

That, or more likely, he stuffed them down where he stored all his feelings, waiting for them to consume him. One day, Obi-Wan thought with a sigh, Anakin would learn to let these things go.

Obito wasn’t often in the library. He’d never really been an academic, much more interested in the
practical aspects of being a jedi rather than the philosophical bent. None of this was helped by the fact that, when it came to the philosophy of the jedi order, Obito always struggled. Reading through the archives just reminded him how close he was to failure.

As a result, even if he did wander into the archives, he was usually tempted away by Kakashi, Rin, or even Lee to a far more enjoyable afternoon.

Today though, he was not to be distracted, nevermind the fact that Kakashi was on the front right now anyway. Instead, obsessively, he’d pulled down every record he could think of and was pouring through for some hint of an answer.

The Force had gotten Lee pregnant, the Force had gotten her pregnant as it had gotten Shmi Skywalker pregnant. The Force was both life and death but it could not be made to induce life, should not have been able to induce life, and the Force itself never induced anything.

The Force flowed, moved through a cycle towards various futures, both clouded and not. The Force did not decide for itself, did not act for itself, or at least that was what the order chose to believe. All except Lee and Obito himself who had known the secret truth for years now.

The Force was far more active than they thought it was, far more aware, and it was not necessarily on the side of the jedi.

It, after all, had never directly helped with the war effort, only with Lee. And now—

Now he was pouring through ancient texts, so old they were almost considered heretical, as well as acquired texts from the Witches of Dathomir for a hint of something the jedi had chosen to forget. An answer, as solution, or perhaps just an explanation by someone other than Lee…

A golden hand blocked the text, forcing Obito to look up where, Haruki, in the robes of a jedi looked across at him.

No one looked at him, no one blinked. As always, it wasn’t as if they didn’t see him, as if they couldn’t see him, but that they saw him and marked him as utterly unremarkable. As if he was perfectly natural in this setting, not just an unknown jedi among hundreds, but one they all knew so well they didn’t even have to look at him twice. A quiet, unacknowledged, and comforting presence.
For everyone except Obito.

“Obito,” Haruki sighed, his smile rueful and distant, though amused and somewhat fond.

Obito always wondered if it was a coincidence, that the Force made himself look somewhat like Anakin Skywalker, like Shmi Skywalker. There were differences, extreme differences, their eyes were different, Haruki’s skin not quite as tan, hair lighter, and yet there was something about them that made it look as if Haruki could have been his father.

Obito wondered despite himself if Lee’s child would look the same.

“What do you want?” Obito asked, heart pounding. He… Had Haruki ever confronted like this on his own? Whenever they met, Lee had always been there, not just a buffer but the true focus of Haruki’s attention.

Somehow, today, Obito alone had pulled Haruki’s interest enough to physically manifest.

He didn’t like that. Except, shouldn’t it make him feel relieved? You’d think it’d mean he was important, like his opinion mattered to the universe at large, but nevertheless he didn’t like it. Unlike what he’d screamed about for years, Obito would gladly go back to being one of many rather than something exceptional in this moment.

“Why are you so hostile?” Haruki asked, gently moving the datapad out of Obito’s numb fingers, “I do not wish you harm, Obito Uchiha, I never have. Yet, you have never liked me. Why?”

He looked as if he meant it, pale blue eyes burning as he waited for Obito’s answer. Obito swallowed dryly, his throat suddenly raw.

“Why don’t you?” Obito asked in turn, but Haruki just smiled, chuckling to himself at the question.

Haruki lifted himself, sat on the table, lounging even as he eyed Obito speculatively, “I do like you.”

“You have a funny way of showing it,” Obito said. It was a bit brazen, to speak to any elder like
that, let alone the Force, but Obito just couldn’t help himself. However, the Force never seemed to mind, if anything it seemed to find it almost endearing.

“No, I truly do, you have spirit,” he leaned forward, uncomfortably close to Obito’s face, “Only, sometimes, you forget your place.”

“And what is my place?” Obito asked.

Haruki didn’t answer, didn’t move, just smiled politely. Obito couldn’t read him, not even reaching out to the Force which you’d think would give him something. There was the war of course, the pain of all the jedi, the bitterness and exhaustion, the republic tearing at the seems. Past that though, in the Living Force there was only a buzzing amusement and bubbling excitement for the future.

A feeling entirely unsuited for civil war.

Haruki didn’t leave Obito time to think on this as he asked, “Do you enjoy being a jedi?”

“Having only been a jedi,” Obito said slowly, dully, “I can’t say I can offer much comparison to anything else."

This wasn’t the answer he’d give to anyone else, the answer he would have given years ago even to Haruki, but something in him bristled at saying a simple ‘yes’ or a gushing answer that being a jedi knight was both all he knew and all he dreamed of.

That, he instinctively knew, was the sort of answer Haruki was looking for.

“Isn’t it everything you wanted it to be?” Haruki pressed.

Well, now that he could answer easily, “I didn’t want a war.”

Now it was Haruki’s turn to laugh, a hearty laugh rather than a small chuckle, “Oh, but I tried that, Obito Uchiha. Neither you nor Lee accepted paradise, you could not believe in such a thing.”
"What do you—"

Haruki interrupted, pressing a finger against Obito’s lips to silence him, “Soon, perhaps, I can make a world without war soon.”

Obito jerked back, out of the man’s touch. Haruki didn’t seem to mind, just lazily withdrew, still smiling as he observed Obito, watching for what he’d do next with hooded blue eyes. Like a cobra, slowly unwinding itself as it watched its prey.

“Then why don’t you?” Obito asked, “Why do you let sentient suffer if you don’t have to?”

“Because they choose to suffer,” the man answered without hesitation, “I created the worlds, the laws, the rules, and the paths to travel but men are the ones who choose to travel them. Their wars, their sufferings, are not my concern.”

Perhaps, there was a seed of something to that, something even Obito couldn’t deny. However, it was the ease with which he said it, the utter disregard as if it really did have nothing to do with him even when he was at the center of it all.

Maybe Obito didn’t want to know the answer.

Instead, he asked what really mattered, “What do you really want with Lee?”

“Everything.”

A word, just a word, and yet it was more than that because he meant it. He hadn’t chosen the wrong word, one too broad, just by the look on his face Obito knew that he truly wanted every part of Lee.

If Obito had been holding the datapad, it undoubtedly would have cracked.

“There is a place for you, Obito,” Haruki said, reaching out to Obito with a palm upturned in
offering, “There is a place for you in her life, our life, even beyond the jedi order. You will still, will always, be her apprentice and I would never take that from either of you.”

Obito didn’t move forward, didn’t reach out, just stared forward as if he could see through Haruki to the true heart of him.

“You will come with us, Obito, when we leave this place.”

It was a slow awakening, despite everything. He wished he could have been startled, screaming in terror, but perhaps that was a part of Force visions even in dreams. Whenever he woke up, even from his mother pulled limb from limb, it was never with surprise.

Only horror, fear, and dread for what he had seen but could not change.

He was drenched in sweat, breathing heavily, but Padmé fast asleep beside him did not wake. She looked peaceful, beautiful even in dreams, and nothing like the face that had tormented him tonight.

He should be pleased, he’d seen her often, more often than he usually was able to. Grievous still loomed at large, could be just about anywhere in the galaxy, but Dooku’s fleet was inching ever closer to the core worlds. Other jedi were already at the front, spread across the republic’s many systems. Anakin and Obi-Wan, for now they were needed here, a last line of defense in case worst should come to worst.

As a result, he’d been given more days with Padmé than he had in a very long time.

Yet, instead of celebrating, instead of thinking about the future, the future haunted him.

He rolled over, sat up, only glancing at his wife to see that she wasn’t awake and then bent over raked both hands, organic and synthetic, through his matted hair. Sleep eluded him though, he wished it to elude him because with sleep came dreams and certainty of a future he could not accept.
He stood, grabbed his cloak, and walked out of the apartments and onto the terrace. There were no stars in Coruscant, instead only false ones created by the many speeders, ships, and hovercrafts flying through the nighttime city. If there was anything he missed from Tatooine, from that hell planet, it would have been the stars staring back at him.

The speeders brought him little comfort.

He tried to think of something else, anything else. His future in the order, yes, there was something to think about. He should leave, he had to leave, and yet he kept questioning that decision. Once he left it was over, finished, Obi-Wan would have little reason to see him and Lee even less so. More than that, nothing would change for the next Anakin who came along, and there would be another one. And the war…

Leaving was the coward’s way out, it was giving into everything they had ever said about him, admitting he had never been suited to jedi life when jedi life should have been suited to him. The pervasive fear of attachment, if the jedi just let him have Padmé he would have had no reason to cower in shame and hide in shadows.

And with the vision…

As if summoned, Padmé stepped out of the apartment. Dark curls cascaded over her shoulders, her pale silk nightgown making her appear as a vision rather than anything else, one of Lee’s angels from Earth and deep space. She was so beautiful.

She walked across to him, unbothered by the cold stone beneath her bare feet, and on reaching him reached out gently to stroke his face, “What’s bothering you?”

“Nothing,” he said with a sigh, then reaching out, lifted the wooden pendant from her chest, “I remember when I gave this to you.”

He had been nothing more than a child then, to Padmé and everyone else around him, and she’d kept it all the same. Waited for him, perhaps, the way that he’d waited so long to meet her again.

She just sighed, placed her hands on his shoulders, and asked, “How long is it going to take for us to be honest with each other?”
That was another fault that the jedi had placed upon him, them, this marriage of secrecy was not good for either of them. It fostered resentment, doubt, and bitterness that in a lesser couple would break them apart.

She was right though, he could keep secrets from everyone else, must, but if he kept secrets from her it would be the end of everything.

“It was a dream,” he said, turning away from her so he didn’t have to see her face.

“Bad?” Padmé knew, of course, she’d witnessed his dreams before, she’d witnessed everything about his mother’s death.

“Like the ones I used to have about my mother,” he admitted, still looking anywhere else but at her, “Just before she died.”

“And?”

At this he did turn, finally looked back at her. The question was soft, comforting and gentle, but that didn’t soften it’s blow. And, she said, as if they could just talk about this, as if it didn’t concern either her or him or even the child.

“And it was about you.”

He couldn’t look, he couldn’t wait for understanding or incomprehension to dawn on her angel’s face. He quickly turned his head away again, back to the safety and lights of this corrupted city.

Her gentle fingers reached out, traced comforting circles on his shoulder, “Tell me.”

He stood, walked forward, “It was only a dream.”

It wasn’t, he knew that, he knew the difference. Peering through the future was like looking through a dark haze, a veil of shadows between him and it, but beyond that there was a lucidity and clarity one could not find in ordinary dreams.
She stood with him, staring forward, unbending and waiting for his true answer. So brave, as she had always and always would be brave…

“You die in childbirth.”

There it was, the nail in her coffin, the words that confirmed what he’d seen and hadn’t dared to speak aloud. Their future, stopped before it even could start, only three years and every second from now until the end counting.

Her hand fluttered to her abdomen, “And the baby?”

A breath, then, “I don’t know.”

He hadn’t seen the child, only Padmé.

She paused, and for a moment, he could see it sink in. Then she shook her head, a bashful smile on her lips, “It was only a dream.”

Yes, because it was terrifying, wasn’t it? Looking at the future and knowing that you would die. A dream could be brushed off, but a vision, oh those had never failed Anakin before. Always, no matter the circumstances, they had always in one way or another come true.

Lee, when they were young and still on Tatooine, had once told him the story of an ancient king who had been told a prophecy. His son would murder him, seize the crown, and then marry his wife, the boy’s mother. The king in desperation had ordered the son, Oedipus, murdered but the boy had lived. He grew up unaware of his heritage, later, returned and murdered the king and took the queen for himself.

Only later, was he told that he had murdered his father and married his mother, just as foretold. The knowledge drove him into madness and despair.

Anakin had thought it was a silly story at the time, had told Lee so, but after his mother… He had understood the desperate madness to fight against the certainty of fate.
He stepped towards her, took her in his arms, and assured, “I won’t let this one become real.”

He’d find a way, no matter Lee’s cynicism or the certainty of his visions.

Padmé just looked up at him then admitted, “The baby will change our lives. I doubt the queen will continue to allow me to serve in the senate, and if the council discovers you’re the father then—”

He hushed her quickly, “I know, I know.”

“Do you think,” she paused, hesitant, and then continued, “Obi-Wan might be able to help us?”

He considered it for a moment, considered turning to his old master, perhaps even to Lee, and begging for help and guidance. Obi-Wan would tell him to let her go, Lee—well, he had no idea what she would do. They were jedi, far more of jedi than him, and Obi-Wan would only rub Padmé’s inevitable death in his face. A lesson, in the dangers of attachment.

“I don’t need his help.”

He tried to smile as his hands hesitantly reached out to her abdomen, “Our baby is a blessing.”

Then he pulled her in, gently embracing her, as together they ignored the future looming over their heads.

Obito hadn’t gone to sleep. Haruki had left hours ago, and he could just imagine him lounging like a pleased cat in Lee’s quarters. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw that smug face, the glitter in those blue eyes, and his hand stroking Lee’s face.

Instead he’d wandered from the archives in a daze, feeling almost drunk on apprehension, as he stumbled through the corridors and back to his own small and unimpressive rooms.
As he walked, he felt as if he was stumbling into some world he didn’t know. The walls kept pulsing, in and out, flickering between black and red. When Obito covered his right eye it didn’t stop, only lessened, as a pounding headache grew with every step.

Something was wrong, not just with Lee but with him, something had happened to him and he would blame the Force if he had any idea what that something was.

No, no that wasn’t right, it wasn’t just him, it wasn’t just Lee.

Everything looked wrong. Right enough at a glance, right enough if you stared at it your whole life, but undeniably wrong if you looked just under the surface.

When he reached his cot, he crawled onto it without hesitation. He lay on his side, nauseaus and sweating, with both eyes squeezed shut. He wasn’t well, he needed to get help, either find Lee or—Something in him balked at the idea of finding Rin, even though she was a medic more qualified than Lee had ever been. Instead everything pointed to Lee as if she was the only thing he could trust in this place.

Everything was made of shadows, everything, except her.

Had he always felt like that? He didn’t think he had, but it was hard to remember. His head was heavy, and the heavier it became the more it felt like this was the way it had always been. Didn’t he, after all, always go to Lee rather than the council or even his old friends?

He breathed out, tried to sit up, rubbing at his temples, “Alright, Obito, get yourself together…”

He tried to open his eyes and immediately regretted it.

It wasn’t that it looked different, not truly, but like opening his eyes made something scream “wrong!” It wasn’t different, there was no underlying truth, it was just a sense of wrongness pervading everything.

Except the sense of wrong didn’t leave even when he closed his eyes.
Breathing out, bracing himself, he opened them again and… Nothing.

Everything was fine, there wasn’t any flickering, no itching, no pounding headache or inexplicable sense of doom. It was just his quarters, empty and barren as most jedi quarters were.

He leaned back against the wall, breathing out and trying to relax. He did not need this right now, not when Lee was pregnant with a demigod. If one of them had to keep their shit together for at least nine months, it had to be him.

They needed to talk, decide what they were going to do and when. They still had some time, but not much, and if Lee was going to be pregnant then being on the battlefield pretending everything was fine was a terrible idea.

Which meant, if he could, he’d have to convince her to leave tomorrow. Better now while they were on leave, recovering from their latest disaster, then out in the field again. He didn’t know what they’d do after, where they would even go, but the sooner the—

Obito flew off his bed, rolling and scrambling to his feet before he could think.

Nothing had shifted, nothing had changed this time, but where before there was only thin air, now there was the soft blue of the Living Force in the shape of a man. As Obito focused, the glow faded, grew muted, and instead there was a real physical human man standing inside his quarters.

A man Obito had never met, had never even seen a holo of, and yet knew all the same.

At the sight of him, it felt like a dam broke. The headache stopped, so did the flickering and aching in his right eye, but instead the wrongness gained solidity as well as a name in a language Obito was not supposed to remember: genjutsu.

Infinite Tsukuyomi.

Obito’s voice, when he spoke, was ragged yet confident, worn down by a war that had been fought and won in a different world and a battle he knew was only just beginning.
End Notes

Now this one is... an epic that stemmed from something rather small. Someone asked for a glimpse of the world in which Kushina doesn't go through with her threesome plan in "How I Met Your Other Mother". That turned into this.

Thanks for reading, comments, kudos, and bookmarks are greatly appreciated.

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