In All The World
by Fjallsarlon

Summary

The story of how Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi tamed each other, from Naboo to Anakin's early days at the Temple. Slow-building Anakin/Obi-Wan friendship. [Part 1: Obi-Wan and Anakin investigate repeated attempts on Obi-Wan's and Padmé's lives and uncover a far-reaching conspiracy on Naboo.]
The Fountain in the Courtyard

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Just that," said the fox. "To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world . . ." –The Little Prince, Antoine de St. Exupéry

PART I: THE EMPTY PALACE

Chapter One: The Fountain in the Courtyard

The palace was a sprawling complex; grand, with mosaiced walls and arches that swept up around him, so high up that Anakin felt small and insignificant in all that majesty. "There's nothing quite like it," said Sabé, and he heard the fierce pride in her voice. She ruffled his hair, her voice dropping to an almost-conspiratorial whisper. "The old kings and queens of Naboo used to add a wing or two to the palace, after their coronation. And soon enough, you have thousands and thousands of old wings and secret passages, and no one remembers them all."

"Wizard," he breathed, imagining it. But the thrill of adventure soon melted away; for each secret passage he imagined, he saw another empty hallway, a sort of palatial grandeur that seemed too much for him, that told him he was out of place here. And, he found himself thinking, if this was Padmé's home—if she was a Queen—why would she want anything to do with a former slave boy from dusty Tatooine?

The room they gave him was far too large; the elegant tapestries on the walls were in earthen tones and reminded him, with a sharp pang, of Shmi and of home. It had never seemed so unutterably distant from him than now; he lay down in the nest of warm blankets (had someone told them that he got easily cold?) and told himself he wouldn't cry. Shmi had asked him to be strong, to not look back. It was the least he could do.

He would never have landed the fighter if it wasn't for Artoo. Racing a Podracer was one thing; flying an unfamiliar fighter another, and he knew it was mostly blind luck and Artoo that had allowed him to figure out the controls and in the middle of all that fumbling, blow up the Trade Federation Droid Control Ship. When his fighter slid to a halt in the Theed hangar, Artoo letting out a reproachful series of chirps and whistles, the cockpit seal popped open and then Anakin found himself greeted, cheered, and whooped at by a group of exuberant pilots, who proceeded to triumphantly carry him on their shoulders and paraded him all over the hangar.

"The Hero of Naboo," they were beginning to call him, and something in him liked it, basked in their adulation. Day after day in Watto's shop had ground his face in the dust; reminded him that he was nothing more than a slave, easily replaced and worth less than a good droid. Not for the first time in the recent days, something in Anakin—something he could not put words to—stirred. It was the part that bade him endure as Watto's fist smashed into his face for a careless move, an expensive part broken. It was the part that bore deprivation and derogation with a stoic patience; that had spoken through his lips when he'd told Padmé, "I'm a person, and my name is Anakin."
And then, Obi-Wan Kenobi had emerged into the hangar, his expression set in an impassive mask, his eyes red-rimmed, and all Anakin could think was that he looked so broken, so weary, and like someone trying so very hard not to cry. Then it hit him: cradled in his arms was the limp form of Qui-Gon Jinn, the Jedi Master who had freed Anakin from slavery, the man who promised him he would be trained as a Jedi.

He was dead. Anakin knew this. Death was a reality that a slave grew numb to—but was never comfortable with. He knew from a single glance from the way Qui-Gon lay that the man was dead and he slipped from the pilot's shoulders and went over to the pair. He didn't know what he should say. Shmi, he thought all of a sudden, always had the words.

Without looking at him, Obi-Wan said, "Call a stretcher."

The hangar, Anakin realised, had fallen ominously silent. Some of the pilots had joined him; they held out their arms to receive the body. "See that he is treated with respect," Obi-Wan said, as he handed over his burden. And then, "I take it the battle has been won?"

One of the pilots—the man who had carried Anakin—nodded. "Theed is once again under the Queen's control."

Obi-Wan nodded, distracted. He only seemed to be half-listening to the pilot's words. "Good," he said, distantly. "Very good. Then I'll need to find somewhere quiet to contact the Jedi Council to inform them we've won."

He stooped down and picked up the lighter of the two discarded robes from the hangar floor, draped it loosely about his shoulders, and left. At no point did he look at Anakin. It was as if he wasn't even there.

It felt like a nightmare, only Obi-Wan knew he wasn't going to ever wake up. Only this morning, Qui-Gon had been alive, had reached out to touch his shoulder and told him that he thought he would make a great Jedi Knight. And now, Qui-Gon was dead, and the knowledge that he'd slain his Master's murderer was cold comfort.

It was his training—hard-won Jedi discipline—that held him together now, as he struggled not to crack. He found what looked like a deserted storeroom adjoining the hangar, walked into it, and closed the door quietly behind him. It was dark; he reached out blindly until he found the light switch and flicked it on.

He drew a long, slow breath to centre himself and licked his dry lips. It was, thought Obi-Wan, like pulling a sheet of mediplast off a wound: best to do it once and quickly, and to get it over with. He commed the Temple, waited patiently as his call was patched through to the Jedi High Council chambers with the help of a priority code.

"Master," he said, into the comlink, and waited to see which of the Council members was on comm duty this time. Comlinks couldn't transmit holograms, and for once, he was glad for that.

"Padawan Kenobi," came Mace Windu's stern voice, at once both reassuring in its normalcy and a painful reminder of what had happened. An icy knife that swept through Obi-Wan's chest. Was he going to be reassigned to another Master? The Council had insisted he was not ready to be a Jedi Knight. And how was he going to live with, train with, to swear to obey and honour another Jedi Master—whichever it was—whose only fault was that they weren't Qui-Gon Jinn? He realised he'd drifted off in his thoughts as Mace Windu repeated, impatiently, "Padawan Kenobi, report."
"The blockade has been broken," he said. "Queen Amidala has managed to regain control of Naboo. And we encountered the Sith Lord my Master spoke of. I killed him." And then, belatedly, "I regret to report that Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn has fallen in battle."

There was silence; nothing more than the crackle of comm static, and for a while, Obi-Wan had begun to wonder if he'd lost connection to Coruscant when Mace Windu finally replied. "How?"

"The Sith Lord killed him," Obi-Wan said. "He was...dangerous, and highly-skilled in the Force and in lightsaber combat. He used an old model of lightsaber—a two-bladed version, and he fought with extreme aggression."

Mace Windu said, "So you support your Master's report that this was a Sith Lord."

"I do."

There was another silence; shorter, this time, as if Mace Windu was conferring, his voice hushed, with someone else. Or perhaps he was simply coming to a decision: the best he could. "Under the current circumstances," he said, "I feel it best that the Council sends representatives to Naboo, to assess the situation for ourselves." He said it kindly, but it stung all the same. "For the moment, as the only Jedi remaining on Naboo, you are to consider yourself the Order's representative. As such, please arrange for the Jedi funeral and cremation of Qui-Gon Jinn."

Obi-Wan swallowed. There seemed, he thought absently, to be a tight lump in his throat that stubbornly refused to go away. If he relaxed his focus, it would overwhelm him. "Yes, Master Windu."

But Mace Windu wasn't finished. "Although the blockade has been lifted, your assignment to protect Queen Amidala of Naboo still stands."

"I understand, Master Windu."

More gently, Mace Windu said, "He was my friend. For all we fought."

Obi-Wan didn't know what he could say in response to that; he choked out something that might've been thanks or acknowledgement of that admission from the stern Jedi Master.

At last, Mace Windu sighed. "May the Force be with you, Kenobi."

"May the Force be with you, Master." Obi-Wan murmured, and switched off the comlink. He allowed himself the luxury of burying his head in his hands for several long moments, breathing, trying to gain control of the large empty pit that had somehow opened up in his chest, until he felt like facing the world and all its responsibilities again.

Anakin gave up trying to sleep.

There was a consistent murmur in the background that kept distracting him the moment he reached the state of exhausted blankness that bordered sleep, dragging him back into grudging wakefulness. He stood up and padded barefoot across the room, wincing at the cold marble of the floor. The sound was coming from the balcony. They'd locked the access door, but Anakin had been playing with electronic locks since he was three. It was child's play to bypass the lock. The glass access door slid open at his touch, and he stepped out onto the balcony.

Carefully, he gazed down, peering through the wrought iron grilles of the balcony. He barely came up to the top of the rail. Whoever it was in charge of things had placed him in the room overlooking
a wide, open courtyard, lined with trees. The night breeze brought scents Anakin couldn't recognise, and he wondered if Sabé or Padmé knew what they were. They probably would, he thought. Padmé was the sort of Queen who'd be good at everything, who'd know everything in her domain. He didn't know how he knew that, just that it was true.

In the centre of the tiled courtyard stood the culprit: a small fountain, spraying shimmering droplets of water in the moonlit night. It had been the murmuring of the fountain that had kept him from sleep; that frustration, now, was overwhelmed with delight. Tatooine was a desert planet; dusty, with the sand finding its way into anything and everything. He'd had to remember he didn't need to shake the sand from his shoes when he put them on. And water was everywhere here: it wasn't rationed, it wasn't expensive, and people did all sorts of strange things with it (wasteful, said the part of him that remembered being a slave) like make fountains that murmured at all hours of the night, water running over cool, coloured tiles to make pretty displays.

Since he couldn't sleep, and he wasn't about to head down the hallway to where Obi-Wan's room was, for all they'd told him that Obi-Wan was there, as if Obi-Wan was Qui-Gon and supposed to take care of him, Anakin peered carefully at his balcony. There was, he noticed, something gleaming in the darkness, and closer inspection proved it to be a drain pipe. Without pausing to think, he cautiously clambered over the edge of the balcony and clung to the drain pipe. It was cool and slick in his hands and he bit back a Huttese curse, one of Watto's favourites.

He did want to see the fountain close-up, and so Anakin bore with it and patiently shimmied down the drain pipe, dropping the last few inches to the paved ground. He scraped his hands a little but ignored that, running over to the murmuring fountain. The water ran over his scraped hands, and it was cool and slightly painful; but altogether a strange and unfamiliar feeling. It seemed, he thought, to be the kind of thing he could've watched for hours, and Shmi always had difficulty making him stay still. There was something hypnotic about the feel of water pouring through his hands, watching it wash over the coloured tiles of the courtyard, murmuring over smooth, polished black-and-white stones arranged in a pattern Anakin couldn't quite make out.

He yelped as a cloaked figure he hadn't noticed emerged from the courtyard shadows and said, in a wry voice, "Couldnt's sleep?"

"Bantha poodoo!" Anakin blurted out, and then regretted it. "What are you doing here?"

"My pardon for startling you." The figure cast down his hood, and the tired, cloudy blue-grey eyes of Obi-Wan Kenobi glanced at him. There were dark smudges under his eyes. "I was drawn, as you were, to the fountain." He hesitated before adding, "I was hoping to meditate here."

"What's that?"

He almost bit his tongue as he saw something flicker through Obi-Wan's eyes; cold, shuttered, and incredibly distant. He was about to trudge back to his room, the moment ruined, when Obi-Wan heaved a sigh, and said, "Meditation is the source of a Jedi's power."

"Mister Qui-Gon said it was the Force that gave a Jedi power," Anakin replied, cautiously.

Obi-Wan stood very still. He could've been one of the marble statues in the palace, Anakin thought, too grand to touch, too much stone; the human worn away by the sharp lines of the sculptor's tools. "He wasn't wrong," he said, at last. "I misspoke. Our connection to the Force is the source of our strength. But such a connection can be easily...clouded, disrupted, for the want of a better word." He bent down, and picked up a handful of dust, and threw it into the running fountain water, before Anakin could protest.
"Why did you do that?" Anakin exclaimed, but Obi-Wan said, "Look."

For a moment, the fountain water was clouded, murky, and then as more water spilled out, it cleared up again, regaining the pellucid clarity that he had been admiring in the moonlight. "Fear, anger and hatred," Obi-Wan said, "Are like the handful of dust. They cloud your connection to the Force." He closed his eyes, for a moment, and Anakin thought: grief, too, though the older man hadn't mentioned it. "Meditation opens you to the Force, invites it in. It's like the fountain continuously pouring fresh, clean water out, washing away the dust."

"So the Force washes away your anger?"

Obi-Wan considered it. "Perhaps the analogy is imperfect," he said. "As all analogies are. The Force can help you wash away your anger, but only if you allow it."

"And grief?" Anakin asked, before he could think the better of it.

It was so quiet, he thought. Beneath the murmur of the fountain, he heard Obi-Wan's slow, release of breath. "Perhaps," said the Jedi. "Or perhaps only time can do that."

Mum, the thought came, driving a splinter of pain through him. He didn't know if he wanted to let go, for the thought of her to come one day without the accompanying pain. Wouldn't that be the final betrayal?

There wasn't anything more that could be said, so instead, Anakin shyly reached out, and took Obi-Wan's hand. He felt the Jedi pull away from him almost instantly, but then Obi-Wan stopped, caught his hand, and flipped it over, revealing where he'd scraped his hands against the paving stones.

"You're hurt," Obi-Wan said.

"Just scraped it," Anakin replied, trying to pull away.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Boys," he muttered, rolling his eyes. "It's always 'just a scrape'. I suppose you scraped it climbing down that drainpipe."

Anakin blinked. "You saw me?"

"No," Obi-Wan admitted. "But I made it a point to check the points of entry and exit to this area." He added, a beat later, "I just didn't expect you to climb down the drainpipe. They did tell me the balcony had been locked."

"It was locked," Anakin felt compelled to defend the people in charge of palace housing. "They just didn't use a good one."

"So you bypassed the lock," Obi-Wan surmised. "Why am I not surprised?" Despite his words, he reached out and took Anakin's other hand, held it under the running water of the fountain. "Either way, boy, you may consider this 'just a scrape', but we're going to get it cleaned and bandaged. You don't know what's on all of that," he gestured disdainfully at the drainpipe and the paving stones.

"My name is Anakin."

"I know that," Obi-Wan muttered, not unhappily. He reached into one of the many pouches on his utility belt and produced a capsule, which he tore open with his teeth. Anakin watched, fascinated, as Obi-Wan proceeded to sprinkle the contents of the capsule—a thick, viscous and translucent gel that Obi-Wan curtly identified as 'bacta' on his scrapes and then shook his head as he considered them. "You nearly took the skin off your hands, b—Anakin."
Anakin shrugged. "I've had worse," he said, feeling self-conscious under the Jedi's regard.

"I don't doubt you've had," came the dry reply. "Now, I could wrap it up in a bandage, and give your admirers something to coo over tomorrow. Or we can wait here for the bacta to dry so you won't be smearing bacta all over the Queen's palace. Which will it be?"

Anakin bristled at the dismissive way Obi-Wan had spoken of his 'admirers' (they weren't, he thought, annoyed) but said, "I'll wait."

"Good," said Obi-Wan.

As the bacta dried on Anakin's hands, replacing the stinging pain with a cool, numbing feeling that wasn't exactly unpleasant, the silence that returned was an awkward silence; far from companionable.

"It's dried," Obi-Wan spoke up, then, after a cursory examination of Anakin's hands. "Off with you, now."

Anakin trudged away. The fountain had been beautiful, he thought, and maybe he would sleep better now, even with the irritating murmur in the background. But Obi-Wan had a parting shot for him. "Anakin?"

He mumbled acknowledgement.

"Next time, use the stairs."

Obi-Wan tried to meditate. First, he contemplated the fountain, and tried to use the murmuring of the water over the tiles and stones as an invitation to move deeper into the self, to open himself up to the Force. The Force washed over him, arid and fetid like the breath of the tattooed Sith Lord on his cheek. He gave that up as a lost cause, eventually. And then he tried kneeling before the fountain, assuming the unorthodox position that Qui-Gon had favoured, had trained his Padawan to meditate in.

He found little success that way, either. And finally, Obi-Wan sat cross-legged, in the most basic meditation position that Master Yoda always taught all younglings, and breathed and tried to sift through his emotions, to slowly breathe them out one by one.

They shifted but clogged up his head and his heart, and he couldn't seem to budge them. He thought of the dust, stirred about in the fountain, and then washed away, but the anger and the hatred and the grief remained, tightly-wound into his being, and he didn't have the strength to get rid of them.

Perhaps the analogy is imperfect, he had told Anakin.

"The Jedi," Qui-Gon had said, "Is like this stream." Obi-Wan was kneeling obediently by his Master; a part of him, grieving, older, knew this was a dream, a memory, nothing more, but this Obi-Wan was barely thirteen, had yet to stop fidgeting with his new Padawan braid.

There was nothing unusual about the stream, except that they weren't in one of the meditation rooms, or in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Today, Qui-Gon had taken him someplace else, to a wing of the Temple that Obi-Wan had barely seen, within the housing spire, and into a disused room somewhere between the Knight's dormitory and the senior students' dormitory.

He couldn't help but feel as though he was intruding, but Qui-Gon had firmly led him into what Obi-Wan was beginning to realise was a conservatory. The stencilled plaque by the access panel named
this the Memory Garden, but he swallowed his questions. He was still too newly Qui-Gon's Padawan to feel comfortable about asking.

He realised Qui-Gon was waiting for some form of reaction from him, and so he nodded.

Satisfied, Qui-Gon continued. "Understand this, Padawan." He reached out and scooped a handful of dirt and casually dumped it into the stream.

"Master!" Obi-Wan protested, and then quickly bit his lip. *It isn't your place to question your Master,* he thought.

"Watch," Qui-Gon said, sitting back on his haunches. Obi-Wan peered into the stream.

"It's all ruined now," he murmured, watching as the swirling handful of dirt clouded the limpid beauty of the stream, turned the water murky.

"Watch," Qui-Gon repeated, implacable.

Obi-Wan obeyed. He watched as the dirt was washed out as the water fed into the stream, and eventually, there was no sign that his Master had thrown a handful of dirt into that stream. "Fear, anger, hatred," Qui-Gon said. "They are as the handful of dirt in the stream. They can cloud your connection to the Force, Padawan, if you let them."

"And the new water?"

"The Force itself," Qui-Gon explained. "Opening yourself to the Force allows the Force to reach into you, to help you cleanse yourself of the dirt." His blue gaze was steady, willing Obi-Wan to understand. "You are the stream," he repeated. "If I throw a stone into the stream, what happens?"

Puzzled, Obi-Wan replied, "The water flows over the stone."

"And if I throw a very big stone?"

Obi-Wan thought about it. "The water is obstructed," he said, beginning to see. "It can't flow, so it piles up before the stone, like a dam."

"You are the stream," Qui-Gon said, for the final time. "You can be a stream with stones in it, so the Force can't flow in you. Or you can be a clear stream, through which the Force can flow, washing out the dirt." Deliberately, he dipped his hands into the water, washing off the last traces of the dirt that clung to them. "This is your first lesson, Padawan. Which are you going to be?"

"Master Jedi?"

Obi-Wan blinked, realised he had dozed off. It was a new first, he thought, disgruntled. He hadn't fallen asleep while trying to meditate since he was sixteen, and now, his body felt stiff. Had he fallen asleep by the fountain all night?

The sky was beginning to grow light; streaks of scarlet stained the clouds. He wondered how long it would take before he stopped seeing the bloodshine of the Sith's lightsaber in the clouds at sunrise.

"Yes?" he croaked. His throat was dry; he tried to clear it, and with a muttered apology, drank some of the water from the fountain. It was cool and slipped down his throat like soft rain. "What is it?"

The man who had spoken to him was unfamiliar, but wore the uniform of palace security. "Captain Panaka sends his compliments and would like to know if you could speak to him right away, Master
"Jedi Kenobi," Obi-Wan corrected. It had been funny, once, to listen to people refer to him as 'Master Jedi'. But that Obi-Wan Kenobi had had a Master, had not killed a Sith Lord, had not felt laughter die in him. He stood up, stretching out stiff muscles. "Will you take me to him, then?" He made sure Qui-Gon's lightsaber was secured to his belt with a faint pang. In the Force, he could still sense echoes of his Master's presence, as if some trace of Qui-Gon's large hands had imprinted themselves onto the hilt after decades of use.

The palace guardsman nodded. "At once, M—Jedi Kenobi," he said, and Obi-Wan caught the quick correction.

He smiled at the man; a gesture that felt odd and stretched. "Lead on, then."

The guardsman led him down a series of twisting and winding corridors. Obi-Wan frowned and resolved to study the blueprints of the palace at length when he had the time. It seemed to him that such an arrangement was going to be a security nightmare for anyone tasked with protecting the Queen, as he currently was.

_Do not forget, Padawan; you have resources at hand. It is no shame to ask for help._ That admonition came in Qui-Gon's voice; Obi-Wan ground his teeth together. _Yes, Master_, he thought.

Captain Panaka was in charge of the Queen's security, and he had spent years protecting the rulers of Naboo in their palace. No doubt the Captain would be able to help him with the unfamiliar layout of the palace, perhaps by providing a guide.

For now, Obi-Wan contented himself with memorising the passages he was led through, noting tiny distinguishing details and fixing them in his memory. In any event, the guardsman sent to take him to Captain Panaka remained silent, and Obi-Wan preferred it that way.

Finally, they reached the annex that seemed to be serving as the headquarters of the royal guard. The guardsman knocked on the heavy wooden door, and then motioned for Obi-Wan to precede him.

Captain Panaka, looking somewhat worse for the wear, glanced up from a pile of reports, with an expression of surprise. "Master Jedi," he said. "What brings you here?"

Obi-Wan frowned. "You sent a guardsman to inform me you wanted to speak with me immediately," he said.

His suspicions peaked as the Force screamed a warning. He was whirling around, hand going to his Master's lightsaber.

The door slammed shut with a solid _thud_, before Obi-Wan could think to do anything about it. He reached into the Force, tried to pry the door open but it held fast. How? He didn't think there were bolts on the outside of the door.

Captain Panaka was on his feet at once, reports forgotten, his hand going to a blaster strapped to his thigh. "An assassin," he growled.

_In the Force, Obi-Wan said, unsurprised, "He's improvised an explosive device. He's trying to blow the two of us up."_
This is the beginning—a bit of a teaser, really—of a new long fic I'm working on. I can't guarantee I won't go back and revise some of this. A quick note for all readers—I've never watched the Clone Wars, and I've deliberately chosen to play a little with the timeline established by Jude Watson, so if you're expecting me to obey canon in either of these areas, this isn't the right fic. I've chosen to take the movies as the key authority when writing this fic, and it'll show in places.
Chapter Two: The Storyteller and the Boy

Obi-Wan thought quickly. The Force had warned him that there was danger present, to the two of them, and the only answer to why the room had been sealed off was that the assassin was attempting to kill them with an explosive device. He drew on the Force and smashed a powerful Force shove into the door. Some of the wood cracked but it held firm.

Someone grabbed his shoulder. "Stop," Panaka ordered him. He held some device in his hand; the indicator lights were blinking. "Whoever it was, he's activated palace security lockdown. There's a thick blast-shielded durasteel grille outside the door, now. You'll take too much time to cut through that, even with that lightsaber."

Obi-Wan blew out an exasperated breath and nodded crisply. "Understood." He glanced around. The danger was present, though he couldn't tell where the detonator was; the only consolation he had was that if they weren't yet dead, the detonator was likely on a timer.

"How thick is the floor?"

Panaka shrugged. "There are passages below the palace, but here, it's solid rock." At Obi-Wan's disgruntled expression, he said, "Security reasons."

"Well," Obi-Wan muttered, deciding to keep the invective for a time they weren't under so much pressure. "The walls? The ceiling?"

"Walls are reinforced," Panaka said. "The ceiling's..." he hesitated, thinking. "Opens up into one of the receiving rooms," he said, at last. "The floor's not really marble—just plaster painted to look like marble."

"Excellent," Obi-Wan said, leaping onto Panaka's desk and drawing Qui-Gon's lightsaber, scattering reports in his wake. His Master's lightsaber blazed to life in his hands, a fierce, lively green and he began cutting a hole in the ceiling.

Bits of plaster and wood and dust rained down, caking both of them.

"Master Jedi?" Panaka asked.

Obi-Wan let out a grunt of acknowledgement.

"Hurry."

Obi-Wan did not dignify that with a response as he kept cutting. The lightsaber sliced through the material easily; far easier than the blast-shielded doors on that Trade Federation ship, he couldn't help thinking, and finally he was done and he peered up at a distant ceiling. "Can you make it?" He asked Panaka, who looked dubiously up at the hole.

"I can try," came the reply, and Obi-Wan shook his head.
"I'll go first, then," he said. "I've got a length of fibrecord—I'll throw it down to you and you can make the climb then."

Panaka nodded; a lesser man might've been more grudging about acknowledging that difficulty, Obi-Wan thought. He accessed the Force and leaped, pushing off against the desk. Empowered by the Force, he shot up through the hole he'd cut in the ceiling, and managed to land—hard—on the painted-plaster flooring of what Panaka had correctly identified as one of the palace's receiving rooms.

He rolled to his feet, ignoring the pain in his side, and produced the fibrecord from his utility belt and threw it down to the waiting Captain, holding it as steady as he could. He should've tied it to something; instead, Obi-Wan drew on the Force to brace himself, making himself unmoveable.

Panaka swarmed up the rope, climbing hand over hand with the dexterity of a younger man. Still, the Force screamed at Obi-Wan to hurry and so he began pulling on the rope at the same time. It was difficult, and the rope threatened to burn his hands, but he knew it was imperative that Panaka escape the death trap that the office had become.

Panaka was just clambering over the lip of the hole when the office below went up in a storm of flame and flying duracrete. Obi-Wan gave up all discretion and hauled, both with his hands and with the Force. Panaka slammed into him; they were pelted with chunks of wood as the floor trembled and the plaster threatened to give.

Finally, Panaka grumbled, "Life wasn't this exciting when you Jedi weren't around."

He pulled away, checking himself. A splinter of wood had become lodged in his calf; Obi-Wan said, "You need medical attention."

"Your shoulders are all covered in dust and plaster," came the reply. "It'll keep. Come."

The first thing was to establish that no similar attempt had been made on the life of the Queen. Obi-Wan stretched out with the Force as they ran, attempting to ascertain that, but there was no telling for sure. Check, always check, and this time, it wasn't Qui-Gon's voice telling him but his own fears.

Panaka was barking orders into his comlink, barely winded, as though he wasn't injured as he ran down corridor after corridor, commanding all active members of the royal guard to him, while asking some members of palace security under a Lieutenant Voss to secure the destroyed office and to be on the lookout for a rogue member of the guard.

Listening, Obi-Wan said, quietly, "If he is in fact a guardsman at all."

"Uniforms are not that difficult to come by," Panaka agreed, his eyes narrowed. "But then, the question is, who didn't report in?" He added that to the series of commands he'd issued, asking the guards to check against the duty rolls and to report any missing to him.

By the time they reached the office which handled the security and monitoring systems in the palace, it was clear that the mobilised members of palace security had most things under control. They were clustering before a security grille, attempting to break it down and enter the office, but parted the moment Panaka and Obi-Wan strode up to join them.

"Jedi Kenobi," Panaka said. "If you would?"

Lips pursed, Obi-Wan nodded. He retrieved Qui-Gon's lightsaber and flicked it into humming life. "Allow me," he said, and he moved up to the grille and plunged the lightsaber through it. Panaka had been right: the security grille was blast-shielded, meaning that it took his lightsaber several long, slow
moments before the metal began to glow a fiery orange-yellow with heat. He sliced slowly and gradually through the grille, and as the metal bars clanged to the flooring, searing it, he reared back and kicked the door open.

Sometimes, old ways worked best, he thought he could hear Qui-Gon say, bemused. Qui-Gon had done that once, when Obi-Wan had tried to cut his way through just such a wooden door.

Grief reared its ugly head all over again, but this time, he fended it off with the focus needed for the task at hand. He went first, lightsaber sweeping up to deflect any incoming blaster bolts. He caught the first, batted it into the wood of the door, and then his second swing slashed the blaster from the man's hand.

The guardsman—only Obi-Wan suspected he wasn't actually a guardsman—looked at him, expressionless. "You are under arrest," Obi-Wan informed him.

Death might have been an option. He saw the guardsman consider it, and then back away from that edge. The guardsman raised his empty hands. The melted pieces of the blaster on the floor still glowed with heat. "Well, Master Jedi," he said, ironically, "That certainly seems to be the only viable option."

A hand at his back, tapping his shoulder, passing him a set of energy cuffs. Obi-Wan stepped in, grabbing the man by the collar of his uniform. Then, he sheathed the lightsaber and cuffed him, swiftly.

"Captain," he called out. "He's all yours now."

Anakin had been left, mostly, to his own devices. By the time he'd woken up, he noticed that a platter had been left in his room, and frowned at it. It was another of those beautiful dishes, he thought glumly. Padmé certainly didn't seem to lack for finery. There was a simple pattern embossed into the edge of the dish, repeating itself, and he tried to get a better glimpse of it. It was a complex knot, that was the best Anakin could make of it, and he wondered if it had any meaning to Padmé's people.

There was cheese on the platter—Anakin recognised those, at least, and he carefully picked up a piece and shoved it into his mouth. "Wizard," he muttered as he chewed. It was crusted with salt and fine herbs and it tasted rich and smooth and creamy. They'd never had food as fine on Tatooine.

The fruit, he left alone. They were bright coloured, and none of them familiar at all. He didn't know what to make of them. Shmi, he thought, trying to fight away the tears that welled up in his eyes. What would she make of these? She'd know what these fruit were, how they were best prepared, and she'd love to be able to taste these fine cheeses…

He wasn't going to cry about cheese, Anakin told himself. He wasn't.

Instead, he nibbled at a bun. It was warm and flaky, slathered with butter, but not greasy, and he enjoyed every single bite. When he was done, he thought about what he was going to do. He padded over to the door and peered out into the hallway.

It was empty. There was no sign of anyone there.

There was Obi-Wan, he remembered. The people who'd put him in this wing had told him that Obi-Wan's room was just down the hallway, as if they expected him to be in Obi-Wan's care. And perhaps he was. What did he know?
Obi-Wan hadn't said anything about that. All Anakin knew was that Qui-Gon said he'd take care of him, that he was going to be a Jedi, but now Qui-Gon was gone, and he didn't know what was going to become of him, and Obi-Wan wasn't telling him anything.

He wondered if he could see Padmé. She had to be busy, he thought, sadly. Everyone was telling him that there the Trade Federation had left a huge mess and the Queen was in the centre of all of that, trying to clean things up. He remembered the time he'd knocked over a bottle of juma syrup on the counter and tried to hide it from his mum and then the seething morass of ants that had attracted. Padmé was just doing what he hadn't, he told himself. She was cleaning up the juma syrup before all the ants came.

If only he wouldn't feel so…lost. As if he'd been cut off from everything that mattered to him, with no way of finding his way back.

He kicked out at the polished marble of the floor, and decided he was going to go and find the workshop. *There has to be one,* Anakin thought. *All those ships need someone to fix 'em.* It was something to do; working with his hands was his refuge, when even the comforts of home and his mother's love weren't enough of a bulwark against the harsh realities of life as a slave on Tatooine.

Now, it was the last thread, he imagined, stretching out across space and time, connecting him to his old life.

"Assassins," Queen Amidala said, thoughtfully. "But they made no attempt on me."

"No, your Highness," Obi-Wan said. "We're trying to ascertain the extent of the infiltration at the moment, but it seems that the attack was directed primarily against Captain Panaka and myself." He glanced over at the Captain of the Queen's security, who had, at least, consented to have a medic pull out the splinter from his calf and treat the wound. "It is possible they wanted to get rid of us so they could have a clear shot at you. But much of the situation remains unclear."

The Captain said, almost spitting out the words, "Collaborators."

Amidala said, her fingers tapping absently against the polished surface of her throne, "A serious charge."

"We don't have very much to go on," Obi-Wan said, regretfully. He exchanged another long glance with Captain Panaka. "One of the perpetrators has fled; the other has been apprehended and is currently in the custody of palace security. He hasn't yet yielded any useful information."

"Your Highness," Captain Panaka said, "I prefer to work under the assumption that this attack was part of a conspiracy directed at you. It seems the only way to make sense of what happened."

"I don't disagree," Amidala replied. "The Trade Federation's attempt to seize control of Naboo was not entirely external. They knew too much; shortcuts through Theed, holes in our defenses…things they couldn't have known, if it wasn't for an information leak."

"Do you have any suspicions, your Highness?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

Despite the ceremonial face-paint, she was frowning. "Since you asked—I suspect, though I cannot prove this—that the Trade Federation attempted to cut a deal with some of the more disenchanted legislators here."

Panaka whistled. "The Five?" he wanted to know.
Amidala dipped her head in a shallow nod of acknowledgement. "The Five," she repeated. "Yes. But you must understand, I cannot prove this. And I cannot order an investigation—no matter how discreet—based on the suspicions of a single woman, no matter how powerful. Not without reason for such a suspicion. That it would be logical for the Federation to cut such a deal does not imply that they did."

"Are there political reasons as well, your Highness?" Obi-Wan ventured.

Now she did smile. "There always are," Amidala admitted. "The Five are...a coalition of powerful families, with their hands deep in all channels of power on Naboo. The legislature. Trade. Industry. Banking. The public service. Even holiday resorts," that last was added with a trace of wry humour. "Anything that brushes against power or wealth, and you'll find the Five dipping their fingers into it."

"And so you suspect," Obi-Wan said, keeping his voice politely neutral, "That the Five are involved in this?"

Amidala said, "I cannot be sure." Her voice was steel. "I have said, Master Jedi, that I do not have enough evidence. I cannot speak as the Queen of Naboo in this."

He gave a clipped nod. "I understand, your Highness."

"Having said that," Amidala continued, "Tharé the Wise help me—yes. I feel," she emphasised that word, "That they are involved, somehow. My predecessor had passed laws curtailing the power of the Five. He meant to reduce their power, bit by slow bit." Her lips twisted in a wry smile. "He died, of course. An untimely end, most unfortunate. And there was no sign of foul play. Captain Panaka investigated that most assiduously."

He glanced at the man, who nodded confirmation.

"Absence of evidence is not proof of absence," Amidala said. "I know this. But it is convenient that shortly after, a fourteen year old girl, no matter how talented, gets elected to assume the empty Monarchy. It is," she added, without any indication of how the self-deprecation rode on her, "Even more convenient that shortly after, the Trade Federation attempts to pressure Naboo into becoming nothing more than an outpost owned by the Federation. A move which would override attempts to curb the power of privilege on Naboo—and by extension, the power of the Five."

"Vultures gather at the perception of weakness," Obi-Wan offered.

"I know this," Amidala retorted. "Naboo is a small planet; we have little to offer. But I am not the youngest Queen to assume the Monarchy, Jedi Kenobi, and I do not suspect I will be the last. Perhaps those were kinder times, but..." her voice trailed off. "If your investigation now leads you in the direction of the Five, then so be it."

Carefully, Obi-Wan said, "You must remember what my Master told you last morning, your Highness."

She did not blink. "Pray refresh our memory, Jedi Kenobi."

"He said," Obi-Wan said, drawing his hands in front of him, "'Remember that we are not here to fight war for you, Your Highness. We are charged with your protection.' He let his hands drop; spread them out in a polite diplomat's stance. "The Council has informed me I continue to be assigned to your protection, your Highness. But it may very well exceed my mandate to investigate the Five."

Quietly, Captain Panaka said, reproachfully, "You should've told me. I would've detailed some
discreet men to begin an investigation."

"That I would not do," Amidala said, to him, "There must be a limit to executive power, Captain, and if I license the examination of everyone's private lives so long as they seem odious enough and arouse my suspicion without there being a shred of evidence for it..." she shrugged. "The road to tyranny has seldom been more temptingly paved." She looked at both of them. "Do you know what I promised myself on the day of my coronation?"

A sudden shift; Obi-Wan blinked. A glance over at Panaka indicated that the man was just as puzzled. "Your Highness?" he prompted.

"I promised myself that I would not abuse the power of the throne," Amidala said, simply. "Not now, not ever. I promised myself that I would leave after me a Naboo with stronger constitutional restraints on royal power than before. None of that will happen if a Queen is so willing to establish precedents for royal intervention."

Obi-Wan exhaled. There was only so much he could do, he thought regrettfully. He had to follow the example his Master had set out; he clung to that, in the emptiness of the throne room, of the royal palace, and tried not to think about the echoing hollow space in his chest.

"I cannot promise to investigate," he said gracefully, "As that is not implied by my mandate. However," he added, raising a cautious hand, "When I contacted the Jedi Council yesterday, I was informed that due to the severity of the situation, the Council will be sending representatives to Naboo. If the situation permits, I will be able to look into things."

It was the best offer he could give her, he thought. Amidala gave a regal nod. "I understand," she said, even though Panaka was shaking his head. "That will have to suffice."

Panaka drew him up short outside the throne room. "She needs you," the man said.

Stiffly, Obi-Wan said, "I am a Jedi. My allegiances lie with my Order."

"Your Order," snapped Panaka, "Is sworn to help. You are assigned to protect her. Is that not so?"

"It is," Obi-Wan replied, "But—"

"They tried to kill you," Panaka said, stabbing a finger at Obi-Wan's chest, for emphasis. "They tried to kill me, because they knew that if both of us were dead, they'd get a clean run at her. Don't tell me you're going to make your job—and mine—harder by just sitting around and waiting for them to come at her. Because my men and I can protect her, but you can find out why they're killing her, without stirring any of them up the way a visit from the royal guard would. Because you're a Jedi, and Jedi don't take sides. Everyone knows that—it's why your Order is so trusted. Guardians of peace and justice, they call you. You protect people, and maybe you dirty those hands to do it, but everyone knows that if you get a Jedi, the truth will come out. No matter who it hurts."

It was the most Obi-Wan had ever heard from the man.

"So don't talk about mandates," Panaka continued, harshly. "Because they're not worth spit if she dies on our watch."

Obi-Wan knocked the man's hand away. Evenly, he said, "Then answer me this, Captain. If they were trying for her, why didn't they?"

Panaka's eyes narrowed. "You're saying there's another reason they went for us."
"Can you think of why they didn't kill her?" Obi-Wan countered. "Security will be tightened after this. If we were practice for the inevitable strike, then they threw away far too many pieces to no evident purpose. They'd have been better off locking us in the office and then planting a bomb in the throne room, for all the good we could've done."

Panaka swore. He demanded, "Why didn't you tell her that?"

"What good would it have done?" Obi-Wan wanted to know. "It was the truth, from a certain point of view. With us out of the way, they could've done anything they liked to the Queen. Now," his expression grew grim, "They'll have to get through us, first."

Anakin had to admit it: he was lost. He thought he remembered the passageway to the hangar, but discovered that the corridors of the palace seemed to snake and twine into each other, and it wasn't until he discovered that he'd been walking this same section at least five or six times that he admitted defeat. He was thoroughly lost and didn't have any idea where he was.

Sabé hadn't been kidding when she'd talked about the thousands of secret passages, he thought. His clothing was thoroughly smeared with dust now. He'd gone through at least two of those passages in the hopes that they'd lead him back to somewhere familiar. No chance of that, now.

Glumly, he wondered how long it would take for them to realise he was missing. He didn't have a comlink, and even if they found out he was missing, they'd have to find him, somehow. He imagined it would be Padmé, perhaps, or one of the people who worked at the palace. Maybe the people who left behind the platter of cheese and fruit and bread in his room. His stomach chose that moment to growl.

"You lost, sonny?"

Anakin blinked. There was an old man in the corridor, dark-eyed, his skin tanned from the sun. "Yeah," he said, finding his voice. "I think I am. Do you work here?"

"You could say that," the man replied. For some reason, he seemed to find what Anakin said funny. "I'm a storyteller."

"I like stories," Anakin said. "I met a spacer once who told me about the angels singing on the moons of Iego."

"The angels on the moons of Iego," repeated the storyteller. "It's an old story, and a good one." He smiled, and for some reason, Anakin thought it was a sad smile. "It's not told very often anymore; especially not in these parts. You come from a distant planet, don't you?"

"I'm from Tatooine," Anakin replied, "In the Outer Rim."

"There are many stories from Tatooine," said the storyteller. "I could tell you about the Kind Hunter and the Lost Bantha, the Lonely Dragon… or even," and his smile grew almost sly, "About the Son of the Suns."

"I haven't heard of that one," Anakin said, his curiosity stoked. "What is it about?"

The storyteller tapped his nose with a finger. "All in good time, sonny. Some stories are still being written, even as we speak."

"Is this what you're doing?" Anakin wanted to know. "Collecting stories?"
The storyteller nodded. "Stories," he said, "are the life-blood of the universe. They tell us about the things we're capable of, give us reasons to wonder, to see the universe through new eyes...never underestimate the power of a good story, boy." He added, shortly after, "Why, they're telling stories in the barracks and the cantinas now, about the Heroes of Naboo, about the Jedi Master who gave up his life, about his brave student, about the noble Queen who sacrificed for her people...and about a courageous little boy who flew a fighter straight down the gullet of a control ship. 'Into the jaws of death itself,'" he said, with the air of a man quoting something.

"I'm not that little," Anakin protested. "I'm nine, and I'm turning ten soon!"

The storyteller hunkered down and said, "Between the two of us, I wouldn't hurry to grow up." He winked, conspiratorially. "I'll tell you the story of the Well of Songs and the Fallen Star, the next time we meet." He reached into his pocket and scooped out a handful of dust, which he allowed to fall, glittering and bright, through his fingers.

Anakin watched it descend, gleaming, like stardust, and breathed, rapt, "Wizard."

"And now," said the storyteller, "I think it's time to show you back to your room. You've wandered far, sonny, and they're going to be worried for you."

"Are they?" Anakin asked, and then regretted it.

The storyteller placed a gnarled hand under Anakin's chin—his palm was callused, but his touch gentle—and raised it so Anakin was looking into his kind, dark eyes. "They are," he promised. "And if they aren't, they will be." He hesitated, and then said, "Give it time, sonny."

He stood up, then, and led Anakin out of the maze of corridors, talking all this while. "And this room," he would say, "Was added by King Edrin Tariyal. He was a good man, that King. He was the man who turned the monarchy into an elected monarchy, though he never put a limit on the number of terms a monarch could serve. It was Queen Amidala who did that." Or: "This tapestry depicts the life of Queen Idris the Wrathful, named because she led a squadron into combat against a fleet menacing Naboo at that time. It was," he added, "A very long time ago."

"Did they win?"

The storyteller looked at him. "They did," he said. "For a time." His voice was sad. "But that's the best we can do, sonny. Sometimes, that's all we get."

"What happened to her?"

"She was killed," the storyteller said. "That story doesn't have a happy ending. There's always a bigger fleet."

"Oh," Anakin said, downcast. But then they were through a last tangle of passageways, and he was at his room, and the storyteller was saying, "Well, here we are, sonny. Best go in now."

"Thank you," Anakin breathed. And then, "Will I see you again?"

The storyteller smiled, let go of Anakin's hand, and tapped his nose once again. "We will," he murmured, and then—

"Anakin!" Blinking, Anakin looked up at a frowning Obi-Wan Kenobi. "Where have you been?" the Jedi demanded, hauling Anakin into his room.

Anakin heaved a sigh. Well, he thought, dolefully, I'm sure in real poodoo now...
First of all, thanks to all who left kudos or a comment. I hope you enjoy the next installment. I'll say it upfront: the storyteller was one of the characters who became a bit more significant (just a bit) later on, which I hadn't planned, because he was just a cameo of a q-canon character. It's complicated, and the answer isn't yet apparent, but guesses are always welcome. Things will pick up shortly after—a chapter or two later.
Chapter Three: The Council Gathers

"So you went exploring," Obi-Wan said, expressionlessly.

Anakin tried very hard not to fidget. "Yes, sir," he muttered. "I wanted to find the hangar," he was ashamed to find that he was almost whining. "I'm bored."

Obi-Wan passed a weary hand before his eyes. "I'd forgotten about that," he murmured. "I need to remember not to leave you at loose ends." He hesitated, seeming for a few moments to be struggling with something, before he finally said, "Anakin. I need to tell you something."

Anakin glanced at him, curious. Obi-Wan leaned forward in the dark wooden chair he'd commandeered. "There's an assassin in the palace. There may be more."

Padmé. "Padmé," he demanded, instantly. "Please say she's fine, please—" He'd know if she was dead, wouldn't he? Wouldn't he? He'd feel it, the moment they killed her, right down to the very core of his being, like a struck tuning fork.

Obi-Wan rubbed at his eyes. "We really do have to speak about attachment at some point," he muttered. "Anakin—Padmé's fine. The assassination attempt was not directed at her. At least, not in any way that Captain Panaka or I can identify. Whoever it was tried to kill the Captain and myself."

Anakin blinked owlishly. "That's horrible," he protested. "Are you…are you okay?"

Obi-Wan glanced at him, as if he wasn't sure what to make of him. "Yes." His voice was clipped, even without that Coruscanti accent. "But for your safety, Anakin, I must insist that you remain at all times with an adult. Either one of Padmé's handmaidens, a member of the palace security, or one of the mechanics in the hangar. Even," he unbent enough to add, at the end, "Myself."

Anakin said, "I don't understand." He picked up one of the fruit still lying untouched on the platter and frowned at it.

Obi-Wan said, dryly, "It's an orange, Anakin. You peel it first, and then you eat it. Give it here."

Shyly, Anakin passed him the orange and watched as Obi-Wan peeled it with deft fingers, revealing soft pulp that fell apart in neat, sliced wedges. "Here." Obi-Wan handed him a wedge; Anakin took it and tried it. The juice was sticky and sweet and he decided, in that breathless moment, that he'd found his new favourite fruit.

"Did you cut it?" he demanded. "Because I didn't see you do that. Was it the Force? Would I know if you'd used the Force? You've got to try one! Have you tried one? Have you had oranges before?"

Obi-Wan sighed and handed him another wedge; Anakin ate ecstatically, and forced Obi-Wan to eat some of the orange too, until their hands and mouth were sticky from juice. "Anakin," Obi-Wan said, still with that dry tone to his voice, "I really didn't mean to spend the afternoon teaching you about fruit. No, I didn't slice the orange, it's just the way the orange is, and no, if I'd used the Force, you might've felt it, but you mightn't have. You're not trained, yet."
"Will I be?"

Obi-Wan did not meet his eyes. He said, "That's complicated. You know that members of the Council were…against your training to be a Jedi."

Anakin thrust his chin out mulishly. "So are you," he pointed out.

"I was," Obi-Wan corrected, and Anakin felt joy sweep through him.

"You mean it?"

Obi-Wan nodded, and now he met Anakin's eyes; his eyes were still that troubled, cloudy blue-grey, but he was looking at Anakin now, and talking to him as though he were an equal. Part of Anakin really liked that. "Anakin," he said, "I told you the situation is complicated. Please believe me when I say I'm not exaggerating. The matter of your training—or lack thereof—will be decided when the representatives of the Jedi Council arrive on Naboo, which could be anytime from this evening to tomorrow afternoon. Until then, I really don't know. The Council is…understandably concerned about certain factors which might complicate your training."

Anakin felt a surge of anger. "Well, what are they?" he demanded. "And why are they judging me when they don't even know me?"

"But they've tested you," Obi-Wan replied, calmly. "And that's exactly one of those factors, Anakin: your anger. There's a lot of anger in you, and that's what a Jedi must not have."

"Can't you teach me to overcome it?" Anakin pressed. He still felt—not angry, he thought. Annoyed. Being a Jedi was all he wanted, but those stuffy Jedi on the Council seemed to want to keep him out of their precious Order.

"Anakin, it's not that easy—"

"Why isn't it?" he snarled.

"Anakin, control yourself!" Obi-Wan's voice was sharp now; like the crack of Watto's fist. Anakin realised his mouth was hanging open; dumbly, he closed it. Obi-Wan shook his head, like a bantha sluicing off sand, and said, "I should not have snapped. I must apologise to you for that."

Watto had never apologised. But the hurt still remained. Anakin muttered, sullenly, "S'okay."

Obi-Wan ran his hand through his hair. "Let me put it this way," he said. "A Jedi cannot afford anger. We make mistakes; we all do. We feel anger. But we are trained, usually from a very young age, to release that anger. The Council…is worried that the training will not take, when a candidate is as old as you."

Anakin said, "It's not fair." Shmi would've told him that life wasn't fair. And he knew that, knew it in his bones. After all, he had been a slave.

Obi-Wan looked him in the eye and nodded, slightly, in acknowledgement. "It isn't," he said. "But life is seldom fair." He added, "I suppose you didn't need me to tell you that. And I didn't come in planning to have this conversation. I meant to urge you, for your own safety, and for everyone's peace of mind, to please stay with someone when you're wandering the palace."

"But why me?" Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan's mouth twitched in an expression that might have been a smile, if he didn't look so run-
down and haggard. He said, "Understand this, Anakin. No one outside the Order is privy to its inner workings. To the rest of Naboo—the assassins included—you appear to be a candidate for the Jedi Order, under my charge. That means that if the assassin was trying to kill me because they wanted to eliminate all Jedi on Naboo, you would also be a target. Nevermind that you cannot expect to use the Force in a trained, conscious way, or that you don't have a lightsaber, or that you are, really, a child. They will see you as a Jedi," his voice was growing hard, "And therefore dangerous."

Anakin slumped back in his seat. "Wow," he said. "Okay."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "That's all you have to say?" he inquired, mildly.

"What did you expect," said Anakin, before he could think the better of it. "'Gee, thanks, I always wanted to be someone people'd sic assassins on?'"

He was surprised—but not unpleasantly so—when Obi-Wan let out a very short chuckle. It sounded more like a cough. "I suppose," he said, "I should be careful of what I ask for."

It was late in the evening by the time the representatives of the Jedi Council arrived in the Royal Hangar. Obi-Wan spent the time up till then reviewing security holo-recordings and helping Captain Panaka—who was most decidedly not talking to him unless necessary—check for holes in palace security. Though patrols had been sent through the palace, the guardsman who'd brought Obi-Wan to Panaka's office, and evidently shut him in with the Captain, hoping to kill him, was nowhere to be seen.

They had, however, discovered his escape route: there was a winding passage, with clear footprints, leading through the Thadriélen Wing of the palace, leading down to a small dock with an airspeeder still tied to it. That, Obi-Wan thought, tiredly, had been the bright point of the day: the assassin was still trapped within the palace complex. When the palace had gone into lockdown, all people leaving and entering had been stopped, and now they were only permitted in or out after the most stringent of checks.

He'd retrieved the details of the man's mannerism and face from his memory; Panaka had sent for a man who worked in the Theed police, modelling faces of suspects for the officers from eyewitness reports and of the deceased, particularly in cases where decomposition hampered efforts at identification. Working together, as a fascinated Anakin watched on, the two of them had managed to put together a respectable composite of the second guardsman. That composite had then been distributed to all guard posts. If the assassin braved any of them, he would be stopped.

The shuttle made a graceful three-point landing in the hangar, one that drew a whistle of admiration from Anakin. Obi-Wan glanced at him; the boy had, at least, been silent, drinking in what was going on as Obi-Wan and palace security sought to tighten the net on the assassin. "I couldn't manage that," Anakin said, in admiration. "No one goes three point with a shuttle like this!"

Obi-Wan murmured, "Jedi Master Plo Koon is a very skilled pilot."

"If I get to be a Jedi, will I fly like him?" Anakin asked, wonder clear in his voice.

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said. "Not all Jedi fly as well as Plo Koon."

Anakin was looking at him, now. "And do you fly like—"

Obi-Wan shushed him. "Not right now, Anakin," he said, distractedly. He was glancing towards the shuttle, which had just completed docking procedures. He could sense it in the Force: so much for representatives. Most of the Jedi High Council had come, which only spoke to how seriously they
were taking Qui-Gon's death and the reports of a Sith Lord. In the Force, they blazed; like starlight, like the fierce sun at noon in an open meadow, and for the first time since they'd landed on Naboo, he allowed himself to relax a hair. Hadn't even known he'd been tensed up.

The first Master to emerge was Master Yoda. He headed slowly and painstakingly down the boarding ramp, his stick tap-tap-tap-ing against the durasteel. As the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order approached him, Obi-Wan went down on one knee; a gesture of respect and deference.

"Master Yoda," he greeted.

"Obi-Wan," Yoda sighed, leaning on his gimer stick. His ears drooped. "Sorry for your loss, I am. Burned bright, your Master did; bright and fierce!" His eyes darted to where the escort of guardsmen waited. "Speak of this later, we will. Respects to pay, we have."

*The worst moment is the exact moment you must follow the Code, Padawan.* Qui-Gon's voice breathed into Obi-Wan's ear. He drew himself up; held himself erect and proud. "Yes, Master," he said.

He greeted the emerging Masters of the Jedi High Council, one after another. Mace Windu, who glanced at him with hooded eyes and murmured, "Kenobi. Your loss is ours," and unbent enough to touch him, lightly, on the shoulder. Eeth Koth who Anakin flinched from; Obi-Wan reached down and gripped the boy's shoulders and muttered a swift apology to the Zabrak Jedi Master, who only bowed his head and said, "I am proud to have known him. And few have died as much in service to the Force as he was. Ki-Adi-Mundi who said, "Remember the Code, Kenobi." His voice was kind. Obi-Wan knew what he meant, and struggled not to break. *There is no death, there is the Force.* Saesee Tiin mouthed the words with him, clapped him on the shoulder, and went on. Adi Gallia gave him a regal nod. No words were necessary there; he and Qui-Gon had gone on countless missions with her and her Padawan, Siri Tachi. Depa Billaba took his hand, pressed it lightly, and whispered, "There is no shame in grief, Padawan." Even Piell, whose fierce gaze met Obi-Wan's and who said, "If you hadn't killed him, I'd have gutted the Sith Lord that did the deed myself."

One by one, they spoke to him, acknowledging his grief, taking a little of it and placing it on their shoulders, revealing to him the life his Master'd led. For all that Qui-Gon seemed to be at odds with the Council for most of Obi-Wan's apprenticeship, they'd respected each other as equals, Obi-Wan noticed, and this was most apparent now.

Last of all came Plo Koon, who'd flown the shuttle. It was very hard to tell what the Kel Dor Jedi Master was thinking beneath his breathing apparatus, but finally, Plo Koon said, "Kenobi."

"Master?"

"You are not alone."

Tugging his robe about him, Plo Koon nodded to both Obi-Wan and Anakin, and joined the Council members being escorted off by palace security.

Anakin's eyes were wide; Obi-Wan wanted to ask him why, but the boy seemed to collect himself. Instead, he asked, "Where are they going?"

"To meet the Queen," Obi-Wan explained. "When so many esteemed Jedi Masters gather on a planet, it was right for me to meet them first, if only briefly. But then, they go to greet Queen Amidala and to thank her for extending her hospitality to them." Among other things, he thought. He had no doubt that Amidala would need to discuss the arrangements he'd made so far for Qui-Gon's funeral, and the Council would ask for room to confer, perhaps to see the Sith Lord…
"Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan went very still. It was, he realised, the first time Anakin had used his name, much less directly addressed him with it. He said, "Yes?"

"You feel sad, inside." Anakin made a strange sort of squished-up expression, as though he was concentrating hard. And perhaps he was. "You're thinking about him again, aren't you?"

He stared at the boy—the one Qui-Gon had foisted on him. He is the Chosen One...He will bring balance...Train him. The boy looked at him, fearlessly; bright blue eyes guileless. He didn't know what he'd done. Couldn't have been aware that he'd effortlessly reached into Obi-Wan's mind and sensed something of the emotions he was desperately trying to keep hidden.

Jedi Masters did that, Obi-Wan thought, as he reached a shaking hand up to rub at his eyes. Not untrained boys newly freed from slavery. Not someone who wasn't even an Initiate.

"Yes," he said, at last. "I am."

Anakin gave him a long, considering look. "I miss him," he admitted, simply. "He was kind to me. And I miss Mum."

"I know," Obi-Wan said. He reached down awkwardly to press a hand to the boy's slender shoulders. "That makes the two of us, I guess."

Because Obi-Wan was unwilling to let him out of his sight until the issue of the assassin had been resolved to his satisfaction, they had dinner in Obi-Wan's room, which was very much like his, Anakin noticed, only the 'fresher was on the other side of the room, and there was a very old washbasin of scratched bronze on a stand. He said as much, Obi-Wan's reply was, "I don't doubt it. Much of the layout of this wing favours both symmetry and geometry."

Anakin blinked. "Really?" he asked, over a mouthful of noodles.

Obi-Wan gave a long-suffering sigh. He was, Anakin thought, very good at this; Anakin'd begun to recognise the exact quality of those sighs. "Anakin," Obi-Wan said, "Kindly do not speak with your mouth full." He accentuated the point by deftly scooping up some of those herbed noodles with his own fork and thereafter keeping his mouth firmly shut and eating for what Anakin personally felt to be an excruciatingly long period of time before he said, "Remember the courtyard?"

"'Course I do," Anakin said, reprovingly. "I don't have that bad a memory, you know."

Obi-Wan waved that comment off, fork still in hand. "Well," he said, "If you go down to the courtyard and take a look, the line of symmetry can be drawn directly through the fountain. The buildings on either side reflect each other. And within this wing, they liked smaller symmetries: rooms built around a particular axis reflecting each other, opposing colour schemes, reversed tiling patterns..." He made a face and then commented, quietly, "They were going to put me in a bright red room. I requested somewhere else."

"Why?" Anakin asked, curious, and then his face fell as he realised why; as Obi-Wan's face took on that pained, shuttered quality. "Oh."

They ate in silence for a while after that. The broth was good, Anakin thought, nutty, with the faintest hint of spices, even though it had nothing on his mum's cooking and he asked Obi-Wan if the Jedi Temple had food that was as good. Obi-Wan shook his head; his lips twitched as though he wanted to smile, but had thought the better of it. "I'm afraid the food at the refectory, which is where
the Initiates and younglings eat, isn't very good. Enjoy palace food while you can."

He didn't say, Anakin noted, that his fate hadn't yet been decided, that there was a good chance those crummy old Council Masters would decide he wasn't good enough for them because he was too angry and too old.

Besides the noodles, there was fruit again; Anakin was beginning to think that the people of Naboo seemed to like fruit a lot and then his eyes lit up as he noticed several oranges on that platter. "Oh boy," he muttered, happily. "They brought oranges again!"

"Your fondness for oranges has been noted," Obi-Wan remarked, dryly. This time, he showed Anakin how to peel them—working his thumbnail into the skin and then carefully peeling it from there. Anakin copied the man's deft movements, and before long, he was devouring an orange of his own.

He noticed that Obi-Wan wasn't helping himself to the oranges as enthusiastically and said, "You're not hungry, Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan looked at him. "I don't like oranges that much," he said, eventually.

"Oh," Anakin said. He felt his face heating up. "I…I didn't know."

"You had no reason to," Obi-Wan said. He sighed, then. "I don't detest them, Anakin," he said. "I just don't enjoy them as much as you do."

"Well, what do you enjoy then?" Anakin wanted to know.

Obi-Wan's comlink chose exactly that time to signal him. Obi-Wan excused himself and headed into the 'fresher. If Anakin listened carefully, he could make out hurried snatches of conversation.

"…yes, yes, I understand. Anakin? I'll need to…yes, Master, I'll get someone to watch over him. Where are you? Understood. Kenobi out."

Finally, Obi-Wan emerged from the 'fresher. He said, "Anakin—"

"I don't need a babysitter," Anakin blurted out, and felt newly embarrassed as Obi-Wan stared at him and raised an eyebrow.

"Do you think I'm a babysitter?" he asked, calmly. It was a tone that made Anakin feel the way he had when Shmi caught him lying about extra hours at Watto's shop so he could go watch the Podraces.

Cursing his tongue, Anakin said, "No, I guess not."

"The Council requires my presence," Obi-Wan said, "And they specifically require my presence alone. And as I daren't leave you alone, young scapegrace, I have exactly two options for you."

Anakin wondered what a scapegrace was, but he certainly wasn't going to ask now. "And?"

"First," Obi-Wan said, unperturbed, "I comm Captain Panaka and the Queen and see if either of them can spare someone. The mechanics will be coming off their shifts now, so that isn't an option." Anakin shook his head wordlessly. He couldn't think of anything worse than being dragged around by a security officer. But maybe being with one of Padmé's handmaidens wouldn't be so bad. Would it?
"What about Padmé?"

He recognised the disapproving way Obi-Wan shook his head. "We really do have to talk about her at some point or other," he murmured. "No, Anakin, she's very busy at the moment. The second option is this," he reached into an intricately carved wooden cabinet and produced a black device and tossed it at Anakin without warning.

Reflexively, Anakin caught it, and then realised it was a comlink.

"This is—was Qui-Gon's comlink," Obi-Wan said. "I suppose it's too much to hope that you stay in your room or mine?" he sighed as Anakin tried to give him his most innocent look. "Nevertheless. Comm me the second you think something's wrong, understand?"

Anakin nodded. "I can do that," he said. He couldn't find words for what this must've meant to Obi-Wan, giving him one of Qui-Gon's things. If it had been Shmi— "Thank you."

Obi-Wan looked as though he might say something, but instead, he shook his head and settled for, "I'll try not to be long, but I can't make any promises. Be careful."

"You be careful," Anakin said, watching the Jedi's retreating figure. More softly, "You're the one he tried to kill."

The soft sound of the door closing was his only answer. Sighing, Anakin slumped down in his seat. There were a few more oranges on the plate—really, they'd been given far more than the two of them could've hoped to finish, even if he didn't factor in Obi-Wan's distaste for oranges. He looked at Obi-Wan's plate and realised that the Jedi'd left most of his broth untouched and a good amount of noodles remained. Either he was eating slowly, or…

Anakin frowned.

That, he thought, definitely didn't look good. In fact, it stank more than Sebulba's breath on a good day.

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The Jedi Council—including Yaddle, Yarael Poof and Oppo Rancisis—had gathered in a large, round chamber in the Esthién wing of the palace, generously offered to them by the Queen. Obi-Wan drew in a short breath and wished, for a moment, that he was anywhere else. For the first time; far sooner than he'd imagined, he was reporting to the Council on his own, without the reassuring presence of his Master beside him.

How did Qui-Gon do it? he wondered. In their latest missions, Qui-Gon had begun allowing Obi-Wan to make a substantial share of the decisions, to write up the mission reports, and to present some of their findings verbally to the Council. But that had always been with the understanding that Qui-Gon was watching him to make sure he didn't make a mess of things. Now, he was on his own: completely and utterly, in a way he had not thought he would be, even when he imagined a distant future in which he was at last a Jedi Knight in his own right.

But then, as Mace Windu nodded, indicating that the impromptu Council session had begun, he found his training taking over. Privately, Obi-Wan was relieved that that was the case. He wasn't sure how well the Council would take it if he fell apart in front of them.

"Report on the events that led to the death of Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn," Mace Windu instructed him.

"Well," Obi-Wan said, and then he had to clear his throat and try again, because his voice had
cracked and wavered on that word, "The Council had instructed us to protect Queen Amidala, who was determined to regain control of her homeworld." *Don't spend too much time on the obvious.* Qui-Gon's voice, again. *It annoys them, especially Mace.* "The Queen contacted and forged an alliance with the Gungans, a separate nation of beings on Naboo, though relations between the Gungans and the people of Naboo have been consistently poor. The Gungans provided the army the Queen needed to engage Trade Federation forces. In addition, the Queen smuck into Theed and made contact with some of the dissident forces in the city. The plan was to create a second distraction, so as to free the captured pilots and to put starfighters into the air—as many as possible. The central weakness of the Trade Federation's droid armies is their reliance on a single Droid Control Ship, rather than a more dispersed form of control. The objective of the pilots was to knock out that ship, bringing the invasion to a complete halt. The secondary objective," he glanced at them to make sure he wasn't 'spending too much time on the obvious', "Was to capture Nute Gunray and Rune Haako, the leadership of the Trade Federation. Upon doing so, the Queen felt she would be in a better position to negotiate the end of the blockade."

Ki-Adi-Mundi nodded, slowly. Even Piell simply shook his head. "Foolish business, that blockade," was all he said.

"Carry on, Padawan Kenobi," Adi Gallia said, not unkindly. "What happened, then?"

"The Gungan army attacked and was very nearly overrun." He'd seen the reports of the casualties; those had been frankly astounding and horrific, once the Trade Federation droids had passed the high-energy barriers the Gungans deployed. "My Master and I infiltrated Theed with the Queen's forces, as per our orders to protect her." He willed his throat not to lock up, forged on because he had to. "We were not part of the group meant to take the second diversion; we were headed straight for the throne room, to apprehend Gunray and Haako. We passed through the hangar where we were waylaid."

He drew a deep, shaky breath, and then another. *Breathe, Padawan,* said that voice. Qui-Gon's voice. "Breathe, Padawan Kenobi," Depa Billaba said. He gazed into her dark eyes; saw the reassurance there. "Take your time."

"As long as we are done by sunrise," Mace Windu said, dryly. Obi-Wan was treated to the very rare sight of Yoda hammering his gimer stick into the Korun Jedi's knee—at the same time as Depa elbowed him, sharply. "Continue, Padawan."

His eyes had somehow found Master Yoda's, seeking comfort in the familiar green-flecked amber eyes of the revered Jedi Master, strangely old and young at the same time. "Yes, Masters," he said, sketching a short, deferential bow. "We were ambushed by the Sith Lord. He was as Qui-Gon described him—a tattooed Zabrak male, wielding a double-bladed lightsaber, very powerful in the Dark Side, and terribly skilled with his lightsaber. At that point, my Master and I split off from the Queen's party, under the assumption that the Sith was the most dangerous threat at hand, even above concerns of the Queen's safety." At the nods from the Council, he continued, sketching out the desperate struggle that had taken them from the hangar to the power core to the melting pit.

"And then?" asked Eeth Koth, leaning forward in his seat.

Obi-Wan wished he had a glass of water; his throat was beginning to feel bone-dry. "I was separated from Qui-Gon by cycling laser barriers, meant to keep out unauthorised personnel. Qui-Gon fought the Sith along the melting pit and was struck down." He described that last movement—the ferret-quick twist of the Sith's lightsaber, the shift from a scything slash to the fatal move: smashing his lightsaber hilt into Qui-Gon's chin. It'd been too swift for Obi-Wan to make it out clearly then, but in his mind, he'd replayed the move again and again with excruciating slowness over the past day.
"With Qui-Gon stunned from the blow, the Sith Lord ran him through in the chest." The Council nodded.

"We've seen him," Saesee Tiin said. It was the most he'd said since the Council session had begun, and not unusual for him.

"Nasty work," Even Piell said, quietly.

Obi-Wan made a sound that was somewhere between agreement and curiosity. The Lannik Jedi Master glanced at him and added, grimly, "That wound? Blasted thing's not meant to kill immediately, Kenobi. That thing wanted him to die and suffer while he did."

"Even!" snapped Adi Gallia, but the damage was done.

Obi-Wan swallowed. "Yes, Master," he said, unhappily. "May I continue?"

"You may," Mace Windu said, shooting a scathing stare at all his colleagues.

"When the barriers cycled down, I emerged and engaged the Sith Lord." He hesitated. How was he to describe that frenetic life-or-death struggle? Finally, Obi-Wan settled for saying, "I was furious. I came at him as though I wanted to tear his throat out with my teeth. We fought but he was better. He kicked me into the melting pit, but I managed to grab a protrusion and hung on."

He remembered. He'd wanted nothing more than to die beside his Master.

"The Sith Lord had disarmed me, and proceeded to kick my lightsaber into the melting pit. He was toying with me, slashing at the protrusion—not deep enough to cut through it. He wanted to sense my fear, and so he was left open." He met Yoda's gaze again and sighed. All younglings at the Temple had a special relationship with Master Yoda; despite being the oldest and most respected Jedi Master, he had a whimsical, childish side, which he displayed to the younglings, winning their trust with that strange melding of age and wonder. Even now, looking into Yoda's eyes, a long way from home, Obi-Wan felt echoes of that connection, of safety.

"And you struck him down," Plo Koon summarised.

"Yes," Obi-Wan whispered. And more loudly, "I managed to put aside the anger that was driving me when I fought the Sith Lord. I noticed that Qui-Gon's lightsaber was lying where he dropped it." Unconsciously, his hand brushed the lightsaber hilt on his belt. "And so I summoned the Force and leaped out of the pit, calling the lightsaber to my hand." He grimaced. "The Sith could've stopped that movement, I believe, if only it wasn't unexpected. He had the high ground. But I succeeded, and took the first opening I saw. I cut him in half."

"How?" demanded Ki-Adi-Mundi, and not without reason. Cutting a foe in half was taken to be an act of brutality more in line with the wanton bloodthirstiness of the Dark Side, and he sensed consternation in some of the Masters, but resigned acceptance and curiosity in some of the others.

Obi-Wan demonstrated the cut with a quick movement of his hand. "Like this, Master," he said. "At the waist."


"I felt it in the Force as he died," Obi-Wan said, quietly. "It was..." he resisted the urge to run his hand through his hair as he sought the words to describe that visceral experience. It was unfair, he thought, that the passing of the Sith Lord stirred the Force; stirred him, more deeply than the passing of his Master. "A tremor," Obi-Wan said, finally. "Like an earthquake."
The Masters exchanged uneasy glances. "Powerful, he was," said Master Yoda. "But more to say, have you, Obi-Wan? Hmm?"

He bowed his head and set his shoulders. "Yes, Masters. I went to see to Qui-Gon." I held him in my arms as he passed on, he wanted to say, but that was irrelevant to the report. "He told me that Anakin Skywalker was the Chosen One, and made me promise to train him, and I will keep that promise I've made to my Master, one way or another."

*That* startled and annoyed the Council. He could see it in the sudden tension that filled the room; Mace Windu drew up, Adi Gallia sat bolt-upright, Ki-Adi-Mundi narrowed his eyes. Yoda merely blinked, though his ears flicked in what could be a gesture of annoyance; Depa Billaba shook her head, and—most surprisingly—Even Piell laughed.

"Like Master, like Padawan," he said. "Starting to defy this Council as well, Kenobi? Try not to make that a habit."

Obi-Wan swallowed whatever response he might've made; there seemed to be no good one in this situation and merely offered the deferential bow of a senior Padawan to a Council member.

Adi Gallia was the first to speak up after that. "Thank you for making your feelings on the matter abundantly clear, Padawan Kenobi," she said, dryly. "But the Council is not yet concerned with the fate of Anakin Skywalker."

This, it seemed, was the signal for the real inquisition to begin. "Describe once again the battle with the Sith Lord around the melting pit," Plo Koon would say, and there was no knowing what the Master was looking for.

Or, "Explain to me how you felt when the Sith Lord ran Qui-Gon through," Depa's kindness was now replaced by business. "Did you *feel* him die in the Force then, or did you know that he'd taken a fatal wound?"

As Obi-Wan answered their questions, haltingly, trying to make sense of what they were probing him for, he noticed that they exchanged meaningful glances often but kept up the interrogation. While some of the questions involved how he'd fought, most of them seemed to concern what he'd felt at various points in time, which was completely unknown for a Council briefing.

This, he realised, was something else.

"An epiphany, you have, young Obi-Wan." Yoda said, and he was, Obi-Wan noticed, smiling softly, his ears upright. "What is it?"

Obi-Wan licked his lips and said, carefully, "Masters—there were security cameras in the hangar and in the power core. So I must assume that you've had access to the security footage." He drew his hands behind his back, assuming the formal posture of a student reporting to the Council. "I'd thought this briefing was to ascertain if the attacker was, indeed, a Sith Lord. But on hindsight, the fact that the Sith had killed a Jedi Master would be enough to prove his identity, when corroborated with my report and Qui-Gon's."

The Significant Glances, Obi-Wan noticed, sourly, were increasing.

"And, Padawan Kenobi?" asked Mace Windu. "What is your point?"

"My point, Master," Obi-Wan said, "Is that this is not a briefing meant to determine if the attacker was a Sith Lord, or to determine if there was anything the Jedi team could've done to handle the fight better. This is not even a briefing. You've been asking me questions about what I *felt* at various
points of the battle. My only conclusion is that you are assessing me for…” Did he dare say it? “… For suitability as a Jedi Knight.”

Saesee Tiin said, "Audacious." Master Yoda merely blinked, but, Obi-Wan thought, he didn't seem to show any disapproval. Adi Gallia raised an eyebrow, but the gesture seemed directed to Mace Windu, as if to say, see? I told you so.

"Insight," Adi-Ki-Mundi said, and Obi-Wan could not be sure who the comment was directed to, "Is one of the Trials required of a Jedi Knight. And Trials, young Padawan, take many forms." That last was definitely meant for him.

"Thank you, Padawan Kenobi," Mace Windu said, at last. He glanced around at the Council. "Are there any further questions?" When none were forthcoming, he said, turning back to Obi-Wan, "The Council will further confer. Do you have any further comment?"

And then, he remembered. "Yes," Obi-Wan said, and he quickly outlined the situation with the assassin and with the Queen.

"I don't like this," Even Piell muttered, darkly. "That assassin is bad news."

"You were correct to inform Queen Amidala that active investigation of the Five would overstep your mandate," Depa Billaba said, and there was no objection from the Council. "However. The Council must take most seriously an attempted murder of a member of the Jedi Order."

Obi-Wan folded his hands in the sleeves of his robe. This briefing, he thought, all of a sudden, was taking very unexpected directions, today.

"The Council will confer on that matter as well," concluded Adi Gallia. "Thank you for bringing it to our attention."

And with that, the grilling had ended. Obi-Wan emerged from the temporary Council chamber, locking his knees to keep his legs from trembling. He checked his chrono and was surprised to discover he'd been in there for over three hours, as the Council had grilled him and grilled him and grilled him about everything that had happened on the day Qui-Gon died. He drew a calming breath, and then another.

Just as he'd reached some semblance of Jedi serenity, his comlink went off.

Chapter End Notes

If Obi-Wan had not been so distracted, and it had not been so late, he might've considered that leaving Anakin alone in his room with a comlink was still not going to be the best of ideas. And since Naboo has generally been conveniently Earth-like (with the exception of the ocean tunnels), I'm taking the liberty of developing it along those lines.
Chapter Four: Adventures Underground

Anakin knew he wasn't supposed to be wandering, but figured that Obi-Wan wouldn't have given him the comlink—*Mister Qui-Gon's comlink*—if he really hadn't wanted Anakin to head off on his own. That Obi-Wan mightn't have ever found himself in a position where a youngling was solely in his care within a possibly-hostile palace full of secret passages and confusing corridors and was, as a result, possibly very far out of his depth, had never crossed his mind.

He'd waited the first hour patiently, trying to keep from screaming, bouncing on Obi-Wan's bed, or rolling around on the carpet, or accessing the balcony. He tried to use that Force Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon talked about an awful lot to make that vase of flowers dance, but try as he might, screwing up his eyes and trying to *feel* that stillness, that fountain Obi-Wan talked about, the blasted poodoo vase just wouldn't budge. Anakin sighed, crestfallen. Maybe they were right, he thought, dully. Maybe that anger meant he wasn't good enough to be a Jedi. Even Obi-Wan had said—out of Anakin's hearing, or so he thought—that he'd called Qui-Gon's lightsaber to his hand with the Force and used it to kill that Sith Lord.

*He hated* the Sith Lord. Scowling, Anakin kicked out at the wall, and yelped in pain. Blasted wall. It was in shades of pale blues that was supposed to make him feel restful, but all he could think about was that it was the exact shade of the sky on Tatooine on one of those scorching hot days when water went for fifty wupiupi for a ladle, if you weren't lucky to have access to a communal well.

Everything reminded him of home, and when he'd nothing to do, the pain welled up inside, and he thought it was going to swallow him all up.

By the second hour, Anakin was surreptitiously opening and closing the door. *Well,* he thought, *Obi-Wan didn't exactly say I was supposed to stay here...*

That rationalisation was enough. He opened the door and left.

Where to? That was the next question. He'd given up on trying to find the hangar, and Obi-Wan had said something about the mechanics having gone off their shift. Instead, he decided he was going to explore the palace. He thought about the wing that the storyteller had rescued him from; honeycombed with passages and corridors and hallways and grinned. He'd been scared, then. But he had a comlink now, and when he was staring boredom right in the eye, it suddenly seemed like the *best* idea ever.

The problem was, he couldn't find where he'd met the storyteller. All the tapestries seemed the same after a while, and he couldn't seem to locate any of the secret passages he'd previously used.

Then he found something: a painting, askew on the wall.

Anakin couldn't verbalise what was *strange* about it, just that something was demanding he look at it. Everything in Padmé's home was prim and proper and right in their places: a painting carelessly tilted on the wall just didn't seem to make sense.
He tugged at it. The painting didn't budge. It was a strange painting; Anakin thought, full of greenery and water. Much like most of Naboo. He pushed it, trying to slide it back into place but it seemed to take more strength than he had. All of a sudden, something seemed to give. There was a loud click, as though he'd triggered some mechanism. "Uh oh," Anakin managed to whisper, right before a hidden door in the wall ground open.

He gazed fearlessly into the blackness that loomed before him.

"That's how you have an adventure," he managed, excited. He strode on in, not flinching as the door swung shut behind him.

"Jedi Kenobi," said a voice that Obi-Wan vaguely recognised but couldn't quite place. He tried to ID the call, and then his blood froze as his comlink displayed a hauntingly familiar number.

Qui-Gon's comlink.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

His only answer was a soft tsk. "I'm not that stupid, Kenobi. Now, I understand you and the Captain are trying to trap me in the palace. I've seen what you've done to my airspeeder. But guess who's wandered into my hands?"

"Comlink signatures can be falsified," Obi-Wan said, with confidence he didn't feel. He found he was gripping his comlink, white-knuckled.

You will fail him. Right before you even kept your promise to him.

The only answer the assassin gave was this: "Let me go, you kriffing koochoo son of a banth—e chuta!" Obi-Wan sighed. Anakin's profanity, he thought dully, was something they were going to have to work through. If he got Anakin back. If Anakin was allowed to become a Jedi.

And if he wasn't?

Focus on the here and now, Padawan, Qui-Gon's voice admonished him. Do not worry about what you can neither affect nor change.

Yes, Qui-Gon.

"I can tell from your silence," said the assassin, "That you do in fact recognise my captive."

"What do you want?" Obi-Wan rapped out. Because if the assassin had genuinely wanted to kill Anakin, he wouldn't have bothered contacting Obi-Wan. He'd just have killed Anakin and have done with. If he was trying to lure Obi-Wan into a trap, he must be vastly disappointed by the number of Jedi now in the palace. That move was doomed to fail.

Something about that nagged at him, but Obi-Wan wasn't sure what. Still, he set aside that feeling and concentrated on what was important.

The assassin said, "I want my airspeeder prepared, fuelled, with three days rations loaded on it. Neither you nor the Captain will attempt to detain me, or I kill your young apprentice here. If you try to use that Force of yours to track him, I will kill him. I've got a dead man's switch that'll make sure he dies if I die. If you want to see your apprentice back, you'll do exactly as I say."

Obi-Wan said, calmly, "It's unrealistic to expect palace security to be dropped indefinitely. And you
haven't given me any assurance that I'll see him again."

"You know this comlink," came the amused response. "I'm sure you can figure something out. I'll contact you with further details. When I get clear of Theed, I'll drop your apprentice off at the very outskirts, his hands still bound. You can collect him then."

Obi-Wan said, "And—"

But the comlink went dead in his hand. Wearily, Obi-Wan pinched the bridge of his nose. It couldn't have gone worse, he thought, taking slow breaths to calm his hammering heart, though he wasn't sure whether it was from anxiety or from anger—or even from fear. Still, he thought, the assassin had said two very revealing things.

First, he thought that Anakin was Obi-Wan's apprentice.

Second, he didn't at all seem aware that the Jedi Council (or at least most of them) was now on the premises of the royal palace.

"Is he in danger?" Padmé asked, radiating concern. She'd bonded with Anakin, over the long journey to and from Coruscant, and now the knowledge that the assassin had him did not sit well with her. Obi-Wan appreciated how difficult it had been to attain a private audience with the Queen, but it was worth it, if only because the more people who knew of Anakin's situation, the less room they had to manoeuvre.

Either way, he thought, Padmé, at least, had the right to know; whether Queen Amidala needed to know the intricacies of the situation was a separate kettle of cy'een.

"Possibly," he temporised. "It is very hard to say, your H—milady."

Padmé accepted a steaming mug of coffee from one of her handmaidens, and turned to them. "Master Windu? Jedi Kenobi?" They both declined, politely. "I've instructed security to provide the Jedi all assistance they possibly can in this matter," she said. "Anakin saved my planet. Nothing I can do for him can possibly thank him for this."

"We understand, milady," Mace Windu said.

"But tell me," Padmé said, "Is it true that you can track Anakin through the Force?"

Mace Windu and Obi-Wan exchanged a long glance. Tell her, the Korun Master gestured, and waited. Obi-Wan said, almost apologetically, "It's...complicated." He unbent and accepted a mug of coffee. Sipping from it, he said, "Most people—it seems, the assassin included—believe that the Jedi can talk to each other using their minds. Particularly a Master and an apprentice."

Padmé smiled and said, "I suppose you're about to tell me that such rumours are unfounded."

"It would not be untrue to claim that," Obi-Wan said, and sighed. "You understand, milady, that the Force can allow a Jedi to do many things considered impossible. But—I daren't say 'no Jedi', for the Archives often reveal that there will be some exceptional case—very, very few Jedi are capable of transmitting words into another mind using nothing but a Force connection to that other person."

Padmé sipped at her coffee, visibly enjoying the fragrant beverage. She observed, "You and Qui-Gon seemed to have many such moments on the journey."

He smiled; a sharp riposte, he thought. "Well," he said, "If the Jedi truly could communicate by the
strength of a bond, it would, alas, mean that we would find comlinks superfluous. It is not to say that the bond between Master and apprentice is...not special, but that it is simply an intensification of the connection between two very close friends. Or siblings."

"I don't understand," Padmé said. Mace Windu, Obi-Wan noticed, from the corner of his eye, was starting to look both thunderous and impatient. She smiled at him, and he quieted. "So how is that connection in any way different?"

"It isn't, most of the time," Obi-Wan admitted. "It just means you have an affinity for each other in the Force." He glanced apologetically at Mace Windu. "I could sense Master Windu approaching the receiving room from several yards away, but less if he were shielding. If..." he swallowed, and forged on. "If it were Qui-Gon, I would know the moment he was in this wing of the palace. It's not so much deliberate connection, as little flashes of insight, the same way a twin might know if their sibling broke their arm. And I would be able to read him, much, much better than I'm able to read Master Windu. To think of it as a way of communication is not incorrect, but it's a connection on a very deep level, one that doesn't need any words."

"I seem to have realised," murmured Mace Windu, deliberately, "That Padawan Kenobi is wasted as a field agent." The look he shot Obi-Wan from hooded eyes was not reproachful, not quite, but it treaded close. Obi-Wan offered him a small bow of apology.

Padmé interjected, "On the contrary, I am grateful to Jedi Kenobi for that revealing explanation of the nature of a connection. Am I correct in presuming that you do not have even that type of connection with Anakin?"

Obi-Wan exhaled and shook his head regretfully. "I'm afraid not, milady." He offered her a gentle smile. "I believe we're going to have to work entirely through traditional means. Master Saesee Tiin is examining the security recordings as we speak." He finished off his coffee and returned it to the handmaiden with a murmur of thanks.

"Of course," Padmé said. She wasn't smiling now. "You have my thanks, and that of all Naboo for your efforts in locating him."

The two Jedi bowed. "He's in our charge, milady," Mace Windu said, simply. "The Jedi take our responsibilities very seriously, particularly when that same culprit has made an attempt on the lives of one of our members. To that end, the Council will be undertaking an investigation into that assassination attempt. Oh, do shut your mouth, Padawan Kenobi, you're gaping."

He was, Obi-Wan realised, as he dutifully assumed a proper, composed Jedi expression. He'd never heard of the entire Council—short three members—undertaking a full investigation before.

"...These are extraordinary circumstances," Mace Windu was saying, "And the Council retains full confidence in Padawan Kenobi's ability to protect you, milady. We cannot discount the possibility that a strike was meant against you."

"I share your confidence in Jedi Kenobi's abilities," Padmé acknowledged with a faint smile, her dark eyes meeting his. "But if there is, in fact, a conspiracy collaborating with the Trade Federation?"

"Then we will deal with it," Mace Windu was no stranger to staring competitions and his stern expression did not waver. "If evidence of such a conspiracy turns up in our investigations."

Padmé broke their locked gazes first and said, handing over her emptied cup to her handmaiden with a whisper of thanks, "I have every confidence that your presence alone may flush them out, Master Windu. But there is a second matter to discuss—" and here, her eyes flicked over to Obi-Wan. "Jedi
Kenobi has assured me that there is no need to defer the victory celebrations out of respect for the dead."

With Mace Windu looking at him, now, Obi-Wan said, hurriedly, "Qui-Gon, at least, would not want the celebrations delayed on his account."

"No," murmured the stern Jedi Master, "He would not. Is there something of concern, milady?"

"Only this," Padmé said. "I've considered delaying the celebrations anyway; Captain Panaka has assured me that these incidents have left palace security in hysterics and they would be much happier if I left the celebrations for until the holes in palace security have been sufficiently patched. And in any case," her chin firmed up, "I intended the delay out of respect to all who fell in defense of Theed."

"Milady, I don't understand where this concerns the Jedi," Mace stated, his expression grave.

"I would be honoured," Padmé explained, looking between the two of them, "If the Jedi were to be present at the celebrations. Certainly, much was only possible because I had the support of the Jedi Order—" her lips twisted in a tired smile here, "—unlike the Senate."

Mace Windu did not acknowledge her baldly expressed misgivings. He said, "Milady, it is we who would be honoured." And that was that.

"E chuta," Anakin cursed, struggling futilely against his energy cuffs. He felt like the galaxy's greatest fool. He'd trudged down the passageway, excited, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dark. He did that on those dark nights on Tatooine when it wasn't worth the truguts it took to turn on a light and so he had to fumble with his tools in the almost-dark until his eyes adjusted. Mum always insisted he use the lights, but he could see that worried look in her eyes: the one that said she was counting every wupiupi and wasn't going to tell him just how bad it was. Shmi was like that; they danced around each other and tried to protect each other, because they were family.

The air in the passageway wasn't as musty as he'd imagined it might be, which should've been the second warning. The first should've been the askew painting. Either way, as the passage kept descending, Anakin shivered slightly, realising that he was going underneath the palace and that it was getting colder. Eventually, the passageway opened out to a large cistern; with the same grand arches he was starting to get tired of seeing, overgrown with thick green moss and almost-translucent water, reflecting the mosaiced ceiling. Glow-lamps, crafted to look like blazing rods of plasma, were fixed to each of the large pillars.

He was thirsty, so he stepped timidly to the water's edge, knelt, and drank. The water was cool and clear, if a little stale. He wondered belatedly how long the water had been here for.

As he gazed out into the cistern, trying to make out the subject of the carved friezes on the far end, rough hands grabbed him; one slipped over his mouth, and he felt something cold prick his throat. And then he felt a trickling warmth and realised he was bleeding. "Don't move," said the assassin—for too late, now, Anakin realised who that man was and what he had stumbled upon. "I know you—you're the Jedi's boy, aren't you?"

"Lemme go," Anakin snarled, trying to twist away, until the assassin said, coldly, "I don't want to kill you, boy, but I shall if you force me to."

He dragged Anakin bodily, away from the water and Anakin strained to see where the man was taking him to. They passed one of the many platforms in the cistern, the man wading in the water,
until they reached their destination: another platform.

There was someone else there, bound; Anakin gaped as he recognised the storyteller. The old man gave him a nod of recognition and a wide-toothed smile. "Told you we'd meet again, sonny," the storyteller said.

"Shut up," the assassin replied. He snapped energy cuffs around Anakin's wrist—and Anakin froze. He remembered those—sometimes, slavers used metal cuffs which sent electric shocks through disobedient slaves, but energy cuffs could be worse. They resisted most attempts to break them open, and the worst sort gave persistent slaves bad electrical burns when they tried. They used them on Mum, he remembered. That thought alone filled his head with an angry red mist.

Once he was trussed up, the assassin searched him, swiftly and ruthlessly and discovered the comlink. "Excellent," the man murmured, tossing the comlink idly from one hand to another. Unlike the storyteller, his dark eyes gleamed like Watto's. They weren't cruel; just greedy and flat. "I bet this goes to your teacher, doesn't it boy?"

"It's mine," Anakin snapped, "So give it back to me, you...you koochoo!"

But the assassin wasn't paying attention to him. He studied the comlink in his hand closely and then—and then he'd smiled.

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Everything was so surreal Obi-Wan half-wondered if he would wake up in his bunk back at the Temple. There was the unhealed sting of Qui-Gon's absence, but more than that: It was working with the Council to secure Anakin's return. Although the Masters mostly worked independently, Adi Galli was organising everything, and Obi-Wan was surprised at how well she put everyone's efforts together, until he remembered that she was one of the Temple's best diplomats, and that often involved organising negotiations and peace talks.

Even Piell said, "You need to talk to him."

Obi-Wan blinked down at the small, one-eyed Master. The easiest, safest response when confronted by a Jedi Master making a cryptic statement was always, "I don't understand."

Even Piell snorted. "You lost, Kenobi? That pekketak thinks you're that Skywalker boy's Master. Now, he don't know you're not, and you said it yourself: he don't know we're here. So you're the one who's got to make all the deals, negotiate with him. You follow?"

Slowly, Obi-Wan nodded. He'd handled his share of hostage negotiations in his time with Qui-Gon (hurt like breathing), but Even Piell, he remembered, was the Order's specialist when it came to terrorists or hostage negotiations.

"Good," Even said, rubbing his hands together briskly. "So now that you're with me, Kenobi, we need to start making a list of how you're going to talk to him."

Obi-Wan said, half-remembering, "Conditions, specifics..."

Even nodded. His grin was wolfish. "Ever lost a pair of underwear, Kenobi?"

"Ah..." The deportment handbook, Obi-Wan thought, never did cover exactly what to say to a Jedi Master like Even Piell.

Even Piell waved a dismissive hand. "No need to confess to me," he said. "But if you've ever lost a pair of Temple-issue underwear—"
Although Saesee Tiin was staring fixedly at the security recordings, Obi-Wan heard the Master sigh. Adi Gallia was shaking her head.

"Even," she said, "We've heard about the underwear ten times, I'm sure Padawan Kenobi doesn't want to—"

"Look," Even said, cutting across Adi Gallia to speak to Obi-Wan, "Nevermind about the karking underwear, just think about how the—"

"Language," Adi sighed.

"—Temple Quartermasters get bloody-minded every single time you lose a pair of underwear. Or a boot. Or a robe. Real pain in the kosit. 'Do you want a brown robe? What sort of brown do you want? What size is your underwear? Do you want stripes or polka-dots?' he mimicked the infamously serious tones of the Head Quartermaster, Master Turang, and Obi-Wan noticed Adi Gallia bring a hand to her mouth, as if to conceal a yawn.

Obi-Wan rather thought he got the point. "The more time I give him to think, the less time he spends planning," he surmised.


"Even," Adi said, in that same tone she'd first used. "I think you've just about beaten that metaphor to death with your lightsaber."

"But what do you want me to ask for?" Obi-Wan said, and Even's eye glinted dangerously, as if he might repeat the entire lecture about the Temple-issue underwear all over again, so he hurriedly added, "I assume we're planning on extracting Anakin. I need to know if we plan on extracting Anakin before the exchange, during, or after."

Even chewed on that for a few moments. Adi said, "Saesee?"

Saesee Tiin glanced over at them and said, apologetically, "It's a big palace. It'll take time to find the correct recording."

"Fine," said Even. "Then we assume we want to get your boy without any of that stabbing and killing we're usually good at. And on the side—just because kosit happens in an eye-blink, we prepare an extraction team and have a plan for that." He frowned. "Best time's during a negotiation, but I reckon he's not going to come out of that hole until it's time, so if we're going to run an extraction, we'd need to do it at the moment he puts his hand on that airspeeder." He looked at them, idly running a hand along his scarred eye. "But talk first. Extract later. Just how good at talking are you, Kenobi?"

Anakin lay back against the cool stone and tried to sleep. Moonlight filtered in through slitted grates at the side of the cistern; the water was still, except for the occasional breeze. Although the distracting murmur of the fountain was not here, he found he missed it. It was as though he'd grown accustomed to it, over the course of the night.

The storyteller slept in an odd position; he knelt on the platform and closed his eyes and seemed to doze off immediately. Anakin tried to do so, but he felt far too restless to doze off; keyed up with nervous energy. He'd overheard the demands the assassin made to Obi-Wan, and then he'd forced the comlink to Anakin's mouth to make him speak. All he could think about was that it was Qui-Gon's comlink and it seemed unfair that a man who'd tried to kill Obi-Wan should be holding it.
Would Obi-Wan even rescue him? He'd thawed a little in the past days but Anakin figured that the Jedi had a distaste for him since Qui-Gon first introduced them, and in recent days, Obi-Wan had seemed distracted with the weight of his duties and then with the grief from Qui-Gon's death…

He cast his gaze over to where the assassin slept; far enough that Anakin couldn't kick him, but close enough that he could shoot them if they tried to escape. Not that they could make much of a run for it with their hands bound, Anakin thought, irritated. And there was all that water, and some of it was higher than he was tall…The blaster, though. He scowled at it. The assassin carried his blaster in a shoulder holster, and Anakin thought he recognised it. A simple SoguSteel Enforcer DT-17, the favourite model for law enforcement and criminals alike. He only knew this because many of Jabba's men used SoguSteel Enforcers as well, and he'd caught a glimpse of it in a holomagazine that Shmi had saved because it discussed the latest Vantage Tech shields and Watto wanted her to start salvaging *those* from a ship he'd won in a bet.

So many coincidences, Anakin thought, staring at the blaster and trying to will it to move. If he *had* the blaster, then the shoe would be on the other foot. Besides the blaster, the only weapon he could see was the knife. He thought the man was bluffing about the dead man's switch: he didn't recall any explosives having been strapped to him.

Unless…

The transmitter, he thought, with that flash of mingled fear and anger, had been *disabled*. But the actual, physical transmitter was still implanted in him, as it had been since the day he was born. Surely there was no way the assassin could've had a way of re-enabling it?

On the heels of that came a second thought: that which can be disabled can be re-enabled.

Anakin's breath hissed out between his teeth. No, he thought, frustrated, he couldn't do this…

The blaster *twitched*.

"Couldn't sleep, sonny?" the storyteller asked.

Anakin started, and tore his eyes away from the assassin. "No," he said. "I couldn't." The storyteller had cracked open an eye and was watching him. He didn't at all seem bleary or sleep-fogged.

"Thought so," said the storyteller.

"Why are you here?"

The storyteller smiled. "Ah, sonny. Don't we all want to know that?" He stretched out, as much as he could, given the energy cuffs binding his wrists together. "I'm here because I wandered into the wrong story. The Great Cistern beneath the palace of Theed is a sight for the eyes," he murmured, "And I'd wanted to examine some of the friezes—some of them date back to the very beginnings of the monarchy on Naboo, or so the stories say, when Queen Faraé first drove back the Gungans into their gleaming bubble-cities far beneath the swamp-waters and set the first cornerstone that is the heart of Theed today." He watched Anakin's reaction and added, "It's whispered that the day the Heart of Theed cracks, the city will crumble and be no more."

"It shouldn't crumble," Anakin said, at last, disturbed by the thought. There was grandeur here, that whispered he didn't belong, but it was a stately, grand sort of beauty, and beauty nevertheless, and something in him quailed at the idea of that being destroyed.

The storyteller shrugged. "Sonny, time marches on. All things change," and his eyes were too knowing, too kind. They were, Anakin thought, for no reason at all—the kind of eyes that had
"I don't want them to," he whispered. He drew up his knees against his chest, as far as he could. "They shouldn't." Changes meant Shmi; meant never being able to turn back, Qui-Gon's death... But there're good changes too, part of him argued. Did you want to spend forever as a slave on Tatooine?

"If there's something I've learned, it's that wanting doesn't help things," the storyteller remarked, tiredly. "In fact, it quite often makes things worse."

"Wanting makes things happen," countered Anakin. It was true, he thought. He'd wanted to win the Boonta Eve Classic so badly, had known that all of Qui-Gon's and Padmé's hopes were riding on him. That had driven him in the final lap, when his Pod'd gotten entangled up with Sebulba's. You had to want; wanting was what made you a person. Slaves weren't supposed to want.

The storyteller raised an eyebrow. "It does," he said, mildly. "So does a hammer. It doesn't mean you want to go around carrying a hammer in your hand all the time, does it? Hammers are dangerous things. Could break your own finger with it. You've got to know when to put it back in your toolbox and keep it away for another day."

"Maybe," said Anakin, unconvinced. He sighed and shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position on the cold, hard platform. For a while, there was a companionable silence, and he tried unsuccessfully to fall asleep.

Eventually, the storyteller spoke up again. "Boy?"

Anakin opened his eyes and glanced at him.

"Do you want to hear a story?"

Chapter End Notes

Somewhat late. Life's been hectic of late. Somewhat frustrated with my job at the moment. As I'm writing so far, Even's one of the looser Jedi Masters, the kind who's ready to go at things. Sometimes he uses words to get his point across. But he always does things with a reason in mind. And the Storyteller returns.

It may be apparent that this fic is diverging from some of the fanon tropes about the nature of Jedi bonds. I've done this in part to take a fresh look at how a Master-Padawan bond might work—or one between friends. In doing so, I've taken my cue from the Jedi Apprentice and Jedi Quest series.
Chapter Five: The Well and the Star

"Listen," said the storyteller, at Anakin's nod. "I'm going to tell you the story of the Well of Songs and the Fallen Star."

Anakin thought there was a rock, digging uncomfortably into his behind. He shifted slightly until he was more comfortable.

"Have you seen the stars?"

Anakin blinked. "Yes?" he said, cautiously, when it became clear that the question wasn't part of the story and that it was directed at him. "I mean, Mum was talking about all that light per—per—pollution, I think it's called—and she was saying we don't get much of that on Tatooine. That's why we could see so many stars."

"They're beautiful, aren't they?"

Anakin nodded.

The storyteller went on. "Stars are wondrous things; they are born in a wash of fire, spend billions of years gleaming in the darkness of space and shed their light over everything—" he made an aborted gesture with his cast hands, "—everything beneath the night sky. And then, after billions and billions of years, they burn out. They die."

Something in Anakin whispered, like an echo, even stars burn out. Even stars die. He shivered, all of a sudden.

"This story," continued the storyteller, "Is not about a star that burned out. It's not about a star that died. A long time ago, a star fell in the desert. Those who saw the fiery passage of the star knew that change was coming to the desert, for they studied the night skies and they knew how things worked. There were some stars, blazing more brightly and fiercely than the others in the sky; they would burn for weeks and months, sometimes years, and then finally, they would be gone. The falling of a star meant changes in the way of things."

Anakin listened, thinking, for a moment, of Shmi. She'd loved the stars, loved them with a passion and at the same time, they'd made her so unutterably sad he'd have to put his arms around her, and comfort her the best he could.

"Some time later, travellers were stranded in the desert; far from water, far from civilisation and therefore far from all hopes of rescue. They had only a few days of water with them and they knew only a little of how to survive in the desert. They did not know how to walk across the sand, nor did they know the signs of life in the desert. And they did not know how to read the signs of hidden wells."

"That's horrible," Anakin said, for he'd grown up on a desert planet, and so he couldn't help himself.
The storyteller nodded serenely and went on. "There were three of them. One of them was a man who had lost himself and didn't know where to look. The second was a woman: a powerful warrior whose heart was proud and cold and distant. The third was another man, who had seen his world burn to ash and who carried that pain and distrust with him ever since, like a scar."

"How do you lose yourself?" Anakin wanted to know.

"Losing yourself," said the storyteller, "Isn't the problem. Finding yourself again is," he shook his head. Anakin tried to make sense of that, but the storyteller was already returning to his story. "But let us return to the travellers. They were desperate, but not without hope. For they had heard about the Well of Songs, and now they knew their only hope lay in finding the Well."

"They knew it was there?"

The storyteller nodded, again. "There are few stories about the Well," he admitted. "Spacers prefer talking about the angels on the moons of Iego, or the Lost Ship that the unwary freighter will encounter on hyperspace jumps in some areas of the galaxy." Now it was Anakin's turn to nod, though sheepishly. He'd heard about both of them from the spacers at the local cantina. "But the man without a name; the man who had lost himself—he had heard of the Well; a rumour from an old spacer making his last cargo run. And he believed. And he knew he wanted to find that Well."

"And?"

"And so they wandered the desert for days." The storyteller shrugged. "They tried to be sparing with their water, but it was slowly running out. And in the desert, water is life."

Anakin nodded. He knew that all too well.

"And at last," the storyteller's voice dropped to a hushed whisper and Anakin leaned forward to be better able to hear him, "When they were on their last legs, dazed from the heat, confused enough to chase the slightest of mirages—they found it. The nameless man peered into the Well and saw in its depths many wondrous things. Above all, he saw the distant glimmer of fallen stars, at the very bottom of that darkness. For the Well is deep, very deep. But they were half-mad with thirst. And so one by one, they dipped their hands in the Well—" the storyteller did the same, as best as he could with bound hands, cistern water dripping between his fingers, "—and drank from it. It was the sweetest water they'd ever tasted, faintly metallic. It was cool, but burned as it slipped down their throats, like the banked fire of the fallen stars at the bottom of the Well."

He paused, seeming to wait for something. "What happened next?" Anakin asked, wide-eyed with astonishment.

"They lived," shrugged the storyteller. "All of them. They managed to find rescue at a nearby settlement, and they soon repaired their ship and went offworld. In the months and years to come, the man who had watched his world die was able, eventually, to let go of his pain. To trust again. He waited, years and years, to be able to keep a promise that he'd made. And for someone to keep a promise made to him." He was, Anakin realised, very sad.

"What about the woman?" he asked, instead.

The storyteller's expression changed; became thoughtful. "She fell. Far and fast, like a star, setting everything in her wake ablaze. She wandered far into a cold and dark place—and it was a bad kind of darkness, because it was a friendless place. But then one day, the first man—the nameless man—found her, as he had found his own name. He found her there, in the friendless dark, and spoke to her. For she, too, had drunk of the Well and seen in its depths the light of fallen stars. For such
people, sonny, the darkness...is never truly dark."

Anakin said, "I don't get it."

"In the darkest night," said the storyteller, "The distant stars still shine."

It sounded like something Shmi would've said, but Anakin didn't tell him that. For one, the storyteller didn't know who Shmi was. For another, he wanted him to finish the story. "And so? What happened then?"

"She took his hand," the storyteller said, and smiled. It lit up what had been a grim if thoughtful expression, turned it into something warmer, less ragged. "She took his hand, and he drew her out, back into the world they'd left behind. She became wise and brave and strong, because she'd gone once into the dark, but she'd come out again, and that was a very, very difficult and brave thing to do."

"Did the Well have anything to do with that?" Anakin asked. "It seems to be special. Like the stories of lightsabers and the really special sword General Yusanis used."

"It's just a story," said the storyteller, eventually. "But all stories have a grain of truth in them, sonny. You just have to know where to look. The water from the Well was special because all water is special." He smiled gently at Anakin's confusion. "In the desert, water is life," he repeated. "Lots of times, water is good for the body. I knew a crazy fool once, who ventured into the desert without any water. Lots of people die that way. But sometimes, water's good for the spirit. It nourishes it. It gives life to something dessicated, the same way it feeds the plants and animals and beings."

"...'kay," mumbled Anakin, who had begun to decide that the story had too few lightsabers for him to find it that interesting. But then, something caught his attention. "What happened to the other man? You said he found his name."

"Yes," said the storyteller, and for the first time, he appeared to have been caught off-balance. "So he did," he murmured. "He found himself again, over the years. It was a long and painful task, and his journey took him to dark places no one should have to endure, and he had to leave behind everything he cared for. But he found himself." His eyes glittered, fiercely. "Sonny, it was the one bright, shining thing that gave him strength. Made all of the dark years worth it."

Anakin lapsed into a long, thoughtful silence. At the end of it, he said, "I think I'm going to sleep now. Thank you for the story, Mister...?"

"You do that, sonny," said the storyteller, glancing out into the waters of the cistern, ignoring the question. "You do that, now."

Obi-Wan held the comlink before him and tried desperately to not think about underwear. It was hard to do so, when Even Piell was standing right at his elbow.

Finally, the assassin replied. "Kenobi," he said. "Are you calling me to inform me that the airspeeder is prepared?"

"Actually," Obi-Wan managed, "I'm comming to inform you that I'd like to know what kind of rations you want in your airspeeder."

There was a few moments of disbelieving silence. Even Piell's elbow smashed into Obi-Wan's shin and he fought hard to not cry out into the comlink. Oh right, he thought, form a rapport first. The few times Obi-Wan had dealt with anything like hostage negotiation, Qui-Gon had been the one to
gently talk the hostage taker into surrendering, and how he did that with his leonine build and intimidating height, Obi-Wan just didn't know. It probably had something to do with his Master's connection to the Living Force.

"Any kind," replied the assassin. "Do you have nothing better to do?"

"You might remember," Obi-Wan said, "That you've got my apprentice. The very last thing either of us wants is for you to decide that the rations are some sort of trick and to kill him. I do appreciate your difficulty; Captain Panaka is terribly thorough and rather much of a pain in the neck, but I do have to do things the proper way."

There was another long silence, and Obi-Wan was beginning to worry when the assassin hissed, "Fine. I'll take the standard rations Naboo gives its military."

"Do you have any allergies?" Obi-Wan asked. No nudge from Even Piell was forthcoming, so he assumed he wasn't making another tactical blunder. "There're several types of rations," and before this morning, he would never have believed that the Naboo military used five different sorts of rations, not to mention the trail mix.

"I know that!" the assassin was beginning to sound most definitely nonplussed. After yet another awkward pause, he said, "I don't care. Just give me three days worth of rations."

"I'll get you the Type C rations," Obi-Wan said, "Which is the standard trail mix with figs and dates. Will these satisfy you?"

"Yes," said the assassin, impatiently.

"Good," Obi-Wan said, "And now, on to the next item on the checklist—I'll need you to confirm that the airspeeder runs on 20% fuel. Would you prefer us to use 20% leaded, or would you prefer us to use a different kind of fuel?"

"Jedi," the assassin said, "I didn't know you were some narrow-minded bureaucrat. If you don't fill the karking airspeeder, we see how good your boy flies with a hole in his head. You understand me?"

"I want to be able to assess his condition," Obi-Wan said. "Consider this a condition of any deal we cut."

All he got was dark laughter. "No conditions. If you don't want to deal, I ventilate your apprentice and find my own way out."

"I think," replied Obi-Wan dryly, "That if you had a good way out of the palace, you'd have taken it and you'd have, as you put it, 'ventilated' my apprentice from the very beginning."

"Perhaps," came the reply, but it was the assassin who folded first. "I'll bring the boy with me at the point of the exchange," he said, grudgingly. "You can take a look at him then, but nothing more."

"Agreed," Obi-Wan said, crisply, moving on to the next point on the list he'd painstakingly devised with the help of Even Piell.

Saesee Tiin made a subtle gesture with his hand and Obi-Wan recognised it instantly. He was signalling with the silent code Jedi used on missions and sensitive negotiations, indicating, we've got him. He glanced over at the comm centre screen where Plo Koon was tracking the comm calls. As Qui-Gon was—had been—a Jedi, his comlink had been last set to a secure Jedi frequency. Obi-Wan had seen no reason to change that; Anakin had no reason to know or fiddle with the comlink. But
that also meant that it was an easy task for Plo Koon to track the ongoing transmission to its source: the holographic map of Theed palace whirled, zooming in until they reached a final glowing red dot, deep underneath the palace, in the cistern that provided the palace's water.

*He's in the cisterns,* Obi-Wan realised, but he couldn't let that rattle him in his ongoing exchange. "We need to arrange how you'll approach the airspeeder. For obvious reasons, we can't permit you access to other parts of the palace."

The Council members, he noticed, were already beginning to leave. Saesee Tiin paused to speak to some of Captain Panaka's guardsmen, and then left with them. *"I'm not going to be enough of a fool to give you my location, Jedi,"* the assassin said, flatly, and then hung up.

Obi-Wan exhaled, still holding his silent comlink. "Well," he said, keeping his voice neutral, "That could've gone better."

"Could've gone worse," Even Piell said. "Stars, Kenobi, your Master said you were trained as a diplomat! What happened there? You went charging in like a rutting nerf!"

Obi-Wan tried very hard not to flush. "You suggested I stall for time," he said, quietly.

"Yes, I did," Even Piell said, arms folded across his chest. "I didn't say to make him angry."

"You asked me to be like a Temple Quartermaster," Obi-Wan pointed out, dryly. "They tend to be rage-inducing." The words had hardly left his mouth when he realised what he'd said. Quickly, he turned to look, but Adi Gallia was, mysteriously, coughing into her hand.

Even Piell said, flatly, "I didn't expect that to overtake your common sense." He sighed. "That makes both of us, Kenobi. Well, we've got him. Saesee will be pinning him down, but before that..." He glanced at Adi Gallia, eyebrows raised.

Adi Gallia took over, smoothly. "Depa's got results," she said.

Depa Billaba and Eeth Koth had taken over the task of tracking how the assassin and his counterpart had even infiltrated the palace. "He killed two guardsmen," said Eeth Koth, in his softspoken voice. "We found their bodies shoved into an old well on the palace grounds."

"Androl and Jens," Captain Panaka said, grim anger flashing in his dark eyes. "Those were good men, Master Jedi. I aim to see their murderers brought to justice."

"The prisoner," Depa Billaba said, folding slender arms across her chest, "Had more interesting information to share." As she moved, the sunlight glinted off the golden beads affixed to her forehead and brow: the Greater and Lesser Marks of Illumination worn by the Chalactan Adepts. "He was an ordinary tough, hired by the man who made the attack on Padawan Kenobi and the Captain. Theed police said he'd been arrested before for small-time petty crime: mostly to do with slicing computers and stealing data."

"So he was hired for his skills, to slice into the security system," Obi-Wan said, trying to feel the shape of the puzzle as it had been presented to them.

Depa Billaba looked at him, and nodded slowly. "That would be my conclusion," she agreed. "But there is another interesting piece of information: he knows the identity of the man who hired him. The assassin is none other than Arvol Resnik."

Obi-Wan frowned. The name sounded familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. Meanwhile, Captain
Panaka cursed, quietly but fiercely.

"Resnik," Panaka spat. "What a surprise."

"Who is he?" Obi-Wan asked.

"A bounty hunter," Adi Gallia said at last, speaking up. "A rather good one too, known for taking on dirty jobs. Last year, he took on a lucrative contract to assassinate the King of Lithun and succeeded. The only question is, why would he take on a contract to assassinate a Jedi Padawan and Captain Panaka?"

It was Captain Panaka's turn to scowl. "She's right," he muttered. "It doesn't make any sense. You don't hire someone like Resnik to murder the head of security and a Jedi. You send him after Queens." He looked at them and blanched. "Excuse me," he said, and bowed out of the conversation, heading over to a corner and speaking hurriedly into his comlink.

"My main conclusion," Depa said, at last, "is that someone badly wanted Padawan Kenobi and Captain Panaka out of the way. Or, they thought that it would be an excellent distraction to tie up security: a wounded or dead Jedi and head of security would mean that no one in the palace would be paying attention elsewhere."

"But there's another problem," Obi-Wan said. "If Resnik is as good as you say," he nodded to Adi Gallia, "then bounty hunters like him don't come cheap. And they don't work except through a factor, which means whoever hired him needs contacts."

Adi Gallia let out a long slow breath. "What are you thinking of?" she asked him bluntly.

"Unless it's the Trade Federation," Obi-Wan said quietly. "In which case, we would expect them to have attempted to assassinate Queen Amidala. No, it seems to me that she might have been right about the Five. They seem to have the resources—in particular, the money to be able to hire someone of Resnik's calibre."

"That's speculation," Adi Gallia said, but she relented and added, "Padawan Kenobi, that can be investigated later. Don't lose your focus. Right now, it's imperative we get Anakin back unharmed."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'm sorry, Master Gallia."

She shook her head. "It happens to us all the time." Her comlink blinked, and she answered it. "Gallia." After a brief conversation, she looked up at all of them. "Saesee's in position," she informed them. "Mace and Ki-Adi-Mundi are making sure all exits to and from the cisterns are being covered. Yoda's securing the airspeeder as we speak."

Obi-Wan could not quite hold back a gasp. The idea of Yoda being deployed in the field was...had Yoda even taken a mission in Obi-Wan's lifetime?

"You know," Even Piell remarked, "he may be old, Kenobi, but he's not quite decrepit yet."

"Yes, of course, I mean..." Obi-Wan stammered.

Adi Gallia took pity on him. "He's set up operations some distance from the main entrance to the cistern. Come."

He followed.
Blearily, Anakin opened his eyes. The first thing he realised was that the roaring he was hearing was shouting. A touch on his shoulder. The watchful eyes of the storyteller met his; the man shook his head, and then withdrew.

*I knew that,* he thought, impatiently. Enough of Watto's rages had taught Anakin when to keep his mouth shut.

The assassin was pacing, shouting into the comlink. All of a sudden his eyes fixed on Anakin. "You, boy," he gritted out. "I told you not to tell your teacher where we were!" He grabbed Anakin by the scruff of his neck—

"Lemme go!" Anakin snarled, kicking out at him, but the man had a tight grip on his collar and wouldn't relinquish it.

"Shut up," he snapped, and out came the blaster, the one Anakin had noticed, pressed to his temple. "Come out now, Jedi, or I kill him!"

"Really," came a familiar voice, and Anakin had never before known how glad he could be to hear that voice—and then the shadows disgorged the robe-shrouded figure of Obi-Wan Kenobi. "I had thought you'd made your feelings on the matter amply clear by now, Arvol."

The assassin—Arvol—said, "I want your hands where I can see them, Jedi. Remember, I have a dead man's switch."

Obi-Wan looked at them, evenly, but his eyes flicked for a moment to Anakin's. *I'm okay,* Anakin mouthed, even though he felt the cold muzzle of the blaster pressed roughly to his head. Sure, he was hungry, and he was cold, but now Obi-Wan was here, and since the Jedi had wanted Anakin to stick close to him, Anakin was pretty sure Obi-Wan wasn't going to let Resnik kill him.

Slowly, deliberately, Obi-Wan raised his hands. He said, his voice gentle, the sort of voice, Anakin thought, you used to talk to an injured bantha when you didn't want it to stampede, "I'm unarmed." And sure enough, Anakin couldn't catch the glint of his lightsaber hilt anywhere on his belt.

Arvol said, "You're a Jedi. You don't need a laser sword to be dangerous. How did you find me?" All of a sudden, the emotion in his voice flicked off; there was nothing, except coldness and curiosity. In spite of himself, Anakin shivered.

"As a professional courtesy," Obi-Wan said, "You were right to figure that being in the cistern would block your comm signals from being traced. But the comlink you were using was a Jedi comlink, and Jedi frequencies can be traced in unique ways." He added, a few moments later, "You must be aware; we've prepared your airspeeder and loaded the rations on it. Type C rations, in fact. Three days worth of them. You don't need the boy."

"No," Arvol said, evenly. "I believe the boy is the only thing keeping you from taking me, right here. Because if we're exchanging professional courtesies, Jedi Kenobi, I heard your comm chatter," he snarled, the last few words dripping with menace. "You've surrounded the cistern, and this boy—" the blaster muzzle dug even further into Anakin's skin, "—is just about the only thing keeping them from going in."

"I'm surprised," Obi-Wan said, at last, not admitting it explicitly. "I was under the impression that the comlink couldn't access the channels being used."

"Trade secret," Arvol said, shortly.

"The point stands," Obi-Wan said, when it was clear that the stand-off was going nowhere. "Arvol,
I'm sure you're aware of the fact that a dead man can't spend his credits. And I'm equally aware of the fact that a dead apprentice does no learning. So we have something each other wants."

A nudge on his shoulder. Out of the corner of his eye, Anakin thought he could see the storyteller, mouthing something at him. He tried to make out what it was.

Wanting, he thought. That was it.

Wanting. They'd spoken about wanting and making things happen. What did he want? Slowly, almost as though in a trance, he saw the assassin's blaster in his mind, saw where the muzzle was pressing into his temple. He broke it apart in his mind, then, laid the blueprints he'd seen in that holomagazine against the actual physical blaster. The Enforcer DT-17 had one main weakness: the power-pack was externally fastened to the handgrip by a slender pin.

If he could—

"Arvol, you must understand that when you say that I don't need a lightsaber to be dangerous, you are correct."

Everything happened at once. The glow-rods in the cistern flickered out. For some reason, Anakin knew that a pin slipped; a power-pack fell to the ground. And in the next moment, he was buried in Obi-Wan's arms and an arc of blazing green light swept through hand and blaster, severing them both.

"Don't let go," Obi-Wan whispered to him. *This is what safety smells like*, Anakin thought, bemused. Desperation, exhaustion, and sweat. He clung to Obi-Wan like a limpet as the Jedi turned, compensating for Anakin's weight, to bring the lightsaber up before him in a guard position.

"You are under arrest," Obi-Wan said, formally, to the captured assassin.

"He's got a remote!" Anakin shouted, at once, as Arvol's other hand reached into his jacket pocket. He couldn't see, but somehow he knew what the man was trying to do—

"Close your eyes, Anakin!" Obi-Wan barked, a moment before his lightsaber plunged into the man's chest.

The lights came back on. Anakin saw that faint look of surprise in those dark eyes, as Arvol sank to his knees, and very slowly, died. Obi-Wan flicked off his lightsaber.

"Are you all right, Anakin?" he asked.

Anakin nodded. "I am," he said, and he realised he was still clinging on to Obi-Wan, and the Jedi had almost reflexively pulled away from the hug. For no reason, Anakin realised someone was sobbing; and then a few moments later, realised it was him.

"There, there," Obi-Wan said, awkwardly, patting Anakin lightly on the back. "You're safe now. I promise."

Chapter End Notes

One of the biggest hints as to the identity of the Storyteller is in this chapter, but he will not be a major feature from here on out. This is the most we're going to get to see of
him. As I said, he was an interesting element, but I didn't want that part of the story to get out of control. This is not his story, but Anakin's and Obi-Wan's, and so what he's really on Naboo for is orthogonal to what's going on.

To those who are surprised that the assassin thread got resolved so quickly-surprise ;) They had a really tight schedule, and this wasn't set up to be the major point of this part of the story at all.
Chapter Six: All Yesterdays

Anakin was crying—probably a hysterical reaction, Obi-Wan thought, absently. The boy had been ridiculously brave, and well...he looked down at the corpse of Arvol Resnik, bounty hunter. He had tried to take Resnik alive; the man might've yielded more information about who had hired him. He'd been forced to kill him when Anakin had warned him about the remote.

He might've disarmed Arvol, but it was a risk that was difficult to take.

_Acknowledge the death, Padawan._ Qui-Gon's voice reminded him. _Then move on._

He did exactly that; breathed out, let loose the feelings of frustration and guilt and anger, acknowledged that he'd killed Arvol because he'd needed to save Anakin's life, and Arvol's death had been unavoidable. He acknowledged that the act of taking a life—no matter how deserving the person might have been—was a heavy act, one that weighed down on him.

And then he let it all go; let the Force pour into him, clean and pure and full of light.

Carefully letting go of Anakin and setting the boy down, Obi-Wan said, "Hold out your hands and hold still." Anakin obeyed. In a quick motion, Obi-Wan brought his ignited lightsaber down on the cuffs, shattering them. He did it swiftly enough that all Anakin would feel was a flash of heat.

He looked over at the old man; the other prisoner that Resnik had taken. He was old; dark-eyed, with a neatly-trimmed beard gone white. "Jedi,' said the man. "I suppose I have you to thank for my rescue."

"I'm Rian Tamir," said the old man, "A travelling historian and storyteller. I was visiting Theed palace during the time the Trade Federation came down on us all," he frowned, "Nasty business, that. Anyway, I came to admire the architecture. There are many very, very old stories about Theed palace. And the cistern is beautiful, isn't it?"

Obi-Wan smiled, politely. "Yes," he said, in reply. "Yes, it is."

But it was the truth he'd spoken. The cistern _was_ beautiful. He hadn't the eyes to see it earlier; his vision had been clouded by worry, tension and fear. Now, as they bled out of him, he saw the marvellous arches, almost rivalling the hallways of the Jedi Temple in splendour, but while the Temple was stately, austere, even, the cistern was magnificent, and he drank it all in. The carved friezes, still preserved. Motes of dust drifting in the rich sunlight that spilled in through the vents that opened up to the day. The water around them, smooth and still. And then, he looked up and felt the breath stolen from his lungs. The ceiling was a vast mosaic—depicting the rising sun, glorious and blazing and the various settlements and cities of Naboo; a whole herd of the famba beasts, and
majestic birds, each feather a vibrant jewel—it was all Obi-Wan could do to gaze upon the work of a nameless craftsman's hands in wonder and not want to fall to his knees before that splendour.

"That ceiling," Tamir said, nodding to it. His voice was gruff. "Commissioned an age ago by King Valerian of Naboo. It pierces you, doesn't it? Right through to the heart when you first see it. A beauty that lasts the test of the ages, and hidden right beneath the palace, to boot."

Obi-Wan whispered, "Yes."

The moment was shattered abruptly; his comlink buzzed, dragging him back to the world and his responsibilities with a sudden, dizzying jolt. "Kenobi," he said, into the comlink. "Yes, Masters, I've got him." He switched off the comlink and turned back to Tamir. "Some other Jedi and the rest of palace security are waiting outside for us. If you'd come with me, we'd need to have you assessed by a medic and debriefed."

Tamir inclined his head. "Of course," he said. He seemed amused, for some reason.

Anakin said, hysterics finally gone, "You didn't need to tell me to close my eyes." His eyes met Obi-Wan's, unfazed. "I've seen people die before."

"You didn't have to see this one," Obi-Wan replied. "Never witness a death you don't have to."

Padawan. Qui-Gon had told him that; had pulled Obi-Wan away from the edge all those years ago on Nar Shaada when the smuggler Jorax had plunged to his death and Obi-Wan had failed to save him.

He realised what he was doing: passing on Qui-Gon's lessons to Anakin. *Is this what you wanted, Master?* There was, of course, no answer. He was on his own now. He'd known that all along. But here in the cistern, having just saved Anakin's life, having admired the glory of the craftsmen of old, the pain seemed strangely distant. He knew it would engulf him again, the moment they emerged and allowed the world to enfold them with all its pains, all its duties, and all its responsibilities, and yet for that moment, he felt as though he stood strangely apart; in a portion that somehow reached beyond the here and now, as Qui-Gon would've referred to it, and into the infinite depths of Time itself.

Anakin's eyes grew dark. "No one looks at slaves when they're alive," he said, matter-of-factly. "The least anyone could do was to look at them when they die."

With Anakin safely in the charge of Adi Gallia, and with Rian Tamir having gone off with Saesee Tiin for a check and a debriefing, Obi-Wan and Even Piell returned to the cistern to search for any clues Resnik might've left behind.

"That boy," said Even Piell, the moment they were out of earshot. "You've got your work cut out for you, Kenobi."

"Master Piell," Obi-Wan managed, "I—"

He felt the Master's grip on his forearm and he turned and looked down into the dark eyes of the Lannik Jedi. "The Council will see him trained," said Even Piell, matter-of-factly. "Danger notwithstanding. We'd be daft not to, with his role in the liberation of Naboo, and the Sith out of hiding. The Force is moving us, Kenobi, and even if we can't see the greater game being played, we sometimes have to close our eyes and allow ourselves to be moved." His lips twitched in a wolfish grin. "He's strong in the Force. We all know this. They'll be drawn to him like kozigi flies to a glowrod." That grin faded, now, and his gaze met Obi-Wan's, searching. "He must be trained. He must be
"I will train him," Obi-Wan replied, to the first. And then, "I will protect him. I promised Qui-Gon as much."

Even Piell released his hold on Obi-Wan's arm. "Seems to me your Master made you promise you'd see the boy trained," he said, simply. "Nothing was said about who would do the training."

Obi-Wan read the subtext in the Master's voice. "You, Master?" he barely hid his surprise. "You mean to undertake his training?"

Even Piell sighed. "That boy, Kenobi. He's going to be trouble. And he could use someone who can deal with that." His mouth twitched in that wry smile again. "I think even Yoda might offer to train him."

"I…I don't understand," Obi-Wan said.

"Spit it out," Even instructed. "Or we'll be standing around all day waiting for someone to get to the point."

"None of you wanted to see him trained," Obi-Wan said, and amended hastily at Even's quirked eyebrow, "Enough of you didn't. I know Master Yoda felt Anakin was dangerous. Why the sudden reversal?"

Even said, "Because we mean for him to be trained." He gave a short chuckle at Obi-Wan's expression, his long, bat-like ears flapping with his amusement. "Look, Kenobi. The Council is cautious. But it doesn't do things by half-measures. It has agreed that the boy will be trained. So it's not going to do that half-arsed by throwing the boy into the pool of Initiates and leaving him to sink or swim. Someone like him, with all that anger in him…" he shrugged. "Well, it was a thought. That he could use a Master who would stabilise that out."

"But…" Obi-Wan spluttered. "You're telling me that I've got my work cut out for me."

Even Piell said, calmly, as he stooped to inspect the body of the bounty hunter, "Kenobi, you're not going to have a career as a negotiator if you don't learn to control that…" he waved his hands in a rough, choppy gesture, "…jumping around. Not smooth. A negotiator must be smooth. You must gain their trust. You cannot be like a landed fish, flailing around." He added, "I could've sworn Qui-Gon did say you had undergone some diplomat training."

Obi-Wan ignored that familiar stab of pain, said, "We were primarily trained as field operatives. It sometimes included diplomacy."

Even's mouth twitched in that half-smile again. "So I see. Aggressive negotiations, eh?" He studied the body, began to rifle through Resnik's gear. "All I'm saying is, that boy's starting to trust you. Maybe it's attachment. But maybe it's a good foundation for a Master-apprentice relationship. But it'll be difficult, Kenobi. Mark my words on it."

"Because of my experience?"

Even looked up at him and shook his head, the motion making his ears flap a little. "No," Even said, calmly. "And yes. It's because of what you are. He's a handful and a half; exuberant as anything, but whatever the case, he's not going to be like those disciplined little hellions you find at the Temple. He's wild, through and through, he won't laugh at some things, and in some ways, you'll find that being a slave and having only his mother for company's going to make him more grown-up than you'd expect. You're going to have to deal with all of that, with nothing else to lean on. In some
ways, he'll be very different from you as a Padawan, and you're going to have to accept that.”

Something crumpled caught Obi-Wan's eye, but it was just the wrapper from a ration bar, discarded. He picked it up, shoved it into one of the evidence bags.

"Well, well," muttered Even. He plucked something out of the assassin's clothing and showed it to Obi-Wan. It was a datapad. "Plo'll probably be able to do something with this. Might give us some hints about his employers." It went into yet another evidence bag, along with his knife and his blaster. The power pack, Obi-Wan noticed, had mysteriously fallen from the blaster, and it took them several moments to discover the attaching pin.

Anakin had managed to slip the pin out, using the Force. It was a small thing, but it had saved his life, Obi-Wan thought, in that startling moment where palace security had managed to bungle things up by shutting off power to the cistern.

He'd no time to think about losing Anakin—perhaps he would've reacted before Resnik had pulled the trigger. But perhaps not. It was a risk he wouldn't have taken, given the choice.

"He moved it," Obi-Wan said, surprised.

"So he did." Even bagged the attaching pin separately from the power pack. Obi-Wan wondered why—it wasn't as if fingerprints mattered, now. It was why they weren't wearing evidence gloves. He plucked Qui-Gon's comlink off Resnik's belt and tossed it to Obi-Wan, who caught it and tucked it away in his tunic with the intention of returning it to Anakin later.

"Training a Padawan, Kenobi—that's the ultimate negotiation. You have to build a rapport with him and gain influence before he'll listen to you."

Obi-Wan said, dryly, "I suppose you're telling me I have to tame him."

Even laughed. "Or will he tame you?" He glanced at Obi-Wan; his amusement clear in his eyes. "I'm interested to see what will come out of it."

Anakin dug into another spoonful of mash and tried not to look up. Even so, he could feel the Jedi's gaze boring into him, like the lasers of a starfighter. It was a funny sort of mashed grain that Anakin hadn't tasted before, but rich and creamy and—like everything else, with herbs to offset the blandness. And of course, there were oranges.

Whatever the Jedi's name was—Obi-Wan had mentioned it but Anakin hadn't been paying attention—she seemed to be his minder for now. She'd gotten him checked over by a medic, who'd cleaned the blood off from the small cut on his throat and pronounced him okay except that he needed a meal.

And so the Jedi had taken him to get something to eat. Dutifully, he followed her into the palace kitchens, where she'd conferred hastily with the chefs and gotten the mash, and the platter of oranges and taken him to a quiet side-room to eat. Occasionally, Anakin's spoon would find a shrivelled dark oval in the mash. The first time, he'd recoiled. "Ew!" he'd yelped, and then, "You put droppings in your food?"

The Jedi raised an eyebrow and looked at it. "Haven't you had raisins before?" she asked him.

"No! What are they?" Anakin wanted to know. Inside, he felt a small tendril of anger coil in the pit of his stomach. Surely it wasn't his fault that slaves on Tatooine never got to try exotic foods.

"Do you know what grapes are?"
Another mute shake of his head.

"They're a kind of fruit," she sighed. "Grown in the vineyards of the highlands here. The Naboo ferment the fruit to make a kind of wine—but you're too young for that. Still, they keep some of their crop to eat. Raisins are dried grapes."

"Oh," he muttered. Still, he poked at it dubiously. He wasn't going to touch something that looked like womprat poodoo.

"Just try it," she said, as if she'd read his mind. "You'll like it, I think."

He wrinkled his nose, but she was watching him, and somewhere in the back of his head, Shmi was reminding him he had to be polite, so he ate one, cautiously, just about ready to spit it out. It was sweet, he realised, surprised. He dug for another raisin and ate it. It seemed to blend with the mix of herbs, making the mash more fragrant.

He wolfed down the bowl of mash and started in on the oranges. He was hungry; he hadn't eaten in what seemed like a day, and he wondered what would've happened if the assassin had needed to feed him. Maybe he should be glad it hadn't come to that.

In the end, he was the one to break the silence first. The Jedi simply shifted on the bench, and seemed to close her eyes and to—Anakin frowned; was she doing that meditation thing Obi-Wan had talked about?

"Ma'am?"

Without opening her eyes, she said, "It's Master Gallia, young one."

Anakin scowled. Funny how that word could darken his mood. He jammed the next slice of the orange in his mouth, but it tasted like sand.

"Calm down," Gallia said, her eyes still closed. "You have too much anger in you, Anakin."

"Could've fooled me," he muttered.

"Anakin," Gallia said, and now she cracked open an imperious eye and regarded him, "You are really going to have to learn to be less rash and judgemental. I apologise for not explaining myself well. I'd forgotten that your background might leave you sensitive to this matter. The title 'Master' is not a title of ownership; it is a title of respect. By referring to me as 'Master Gallia', you acknowledge what the Jedi do—that I have demonstrated a level of self-mastery that is unrivalled in the Order."

"'kay," he mumbled, still unhappy. "So you call people who master themselves 'Masters'?"

She nodded, encouragingly. "That's exactly it," she told him. "There are exceptions. Padawan Learners—apprentices—call their teachers 'Master', even though those teachers may only have the formal rank of a Jedi Knight. But they refer to their teachers as 'Master' because these teachers are taken to have 'mastered' the skills they are now conferring onto their apprentices."

"S'tupid," Anakin said. He glanced at her, challenging her to disagree.

Gallia sighed. She said, "Anakin, you're going to learn that in a lot of places, people do things differently. And if being different is enough for you to consider them stupid, then you're going to have a lot of difficulty in life."
He said nothing.

Her lips quirked in a wry smile. "But," she said, "Having said that…I must agree that the honorary
title of 'Master' these Knights get is little more than flattery. In this case, flattery backed by tradition."

"I guess," he said, grudgingly. "But then why do it?"

"Why flatter people? Or why follow tradition?"

"Both," Anakin said, finishing off the rest of the orange and surreptitiously drying sticky fingers
against his tunic. It was getting grimy, he thought, and sighed. Back home, Shmi would've scolded
him for doing that. It's not clean, Anakin, and you know better than that, she'd have said. Or she'd
have reminded him to change and shower more often.

She seemed to be considering his question seriously. "What do you think?" she asked him.

He frowned. "Well, flattering people seems to be good if you want to get them to do something you
want to. Even if it's mostly lies," he added. "But…it's polite, I guess." It was an admission he didn't
want to make. "But traditions are pointless."

"Traditions give society its structure," Gallia contradicted him, leaning against the table. "Traditions,
customs, laws—they may seem pointless, and they may sometimes be wrong, but they help people
make sense of things. What is that?" she pointed at his spoon.

"It's a spoon," Anakin said, hesitant, wondering where the catch was.

"What does it do?"

"I use it to eat?"

"What if I told you," Gallia said, "That there is a society on the planet of Ukaruwa that is based on
nomadic hunter-gatherers? They don't have soup; they eat with their hands. What do you think they
would make of your spoon?"

Anakin frowned. "But it's a spoon," he spluttered.

She took his spoon, held it before him. "Your traditions and customs tell you what this spoon is.
They tell you how to use it. An Ukaran gatherer might tell you that this is a pretty ornament for his
hair. An Ukahran hunter might ask you if this was a toy for her children." She set the spoon down

Head buzzing, Anakin said nothing.

"Am I interrupting something?"

He would know this voice, Anakin thought, even twenty years later. Padmé, almost glowing in the
simple clothing of one of her handmaidens, swept into the room; he noticed two members of palace
security flanking her discreetly. They moved into position at the doorway as she came up to him and
captured him in a big hug.

"Oh, Ani," she murmured. "I'm so glad you're safe."

"Me too," he said.

She released him and greeted Adi with a nod. "Master Gallia," she said. "My apologies."
"You weren't interrupting anything important," Gallia said, with a smile. "Nothing but a small conversation about the uses of a spoon."

Padmé laughed. "Korsaran, I presume?"

Gallia looked gratified. "I'm surprised to see you've read of him, your Highness."

"My tutor loved him," she said, with a mock-shiver. "Made me read him all the time until I swore I could recite Korsaran backwards and I hated it. I don't believe that traditions and customs and laws are all derivative from social conditions, Master Gallia. I believe that some principles are universal."

Anakin said, "What?"

Padmé smiled and ruffled his hair. "Don't worry about it," she said. "I just wanted to pay you a visit and to be sure you're fine. And I wanted to thank you again for what you did for my people. Naboo owes you a debt we can't ever repay."

"S'all right," he said. He confided, "I wasn't really sure what I was doing, anyway."

She and the Jedi Master exchanged glances. Anakin didn't know why.

"I hope you'll be less sad now, Padmé."

"I believe I will be," she said, favouring him with a radiant smile.

"Will we still be friends?"

Padmé said, "Of course."

"I don't think Obi-Wan is all right," he informed her.

"He will be," Padmé told him. "Just give him time." But she was more distant now, and try as he might, Anakin could not quite figure out why.

"Master," Obi-Wan said, waiting respectfully on the threshold of the room that was now serving as the impromptu Council chamber on Naboo. "You sent for me."

The only response he received was a sudden surge in the Force and the almost-simultaneous clatter as a gimer stick, gnarled with age and smoothened by Yoda's clawed hands, clattered to the marble flooring.

In the next moment, Obi-Wan threw himself to the floor as the Force screamed a warning—just in time as Yoda shot through the space where he had been, his lightsaber a neon streak of bright green plasma.

"Master?" he managed, uncertain. The Force prompted him again and he rolled aside just before Yoda landed where he had been. His training took over and he performed an agile backward flip, landing on his feet in a fighting crouch and drawing Qui-Gon's lightsaber. But he did not ignite it. "I don't understand. What's going on?"

"Guard yourself, you should," was Yoda's only enigmatic response.

In the next moment, he hurtled towards Obi-Wan, and the only possible response was to flick his Master's lightsaber on. He was still startled at the forest-green blade; the lightsaber hilt was too slender, too strange in his grasp. He beat off the Jedi Master's first blow and barely fended off the
next few whirling slashes Yoda had delivered. His robe swirled around him, hampering his movements, but he barely had a moment to rip it off.

They fought; Obi-Wan tried moving into an attack combination or two, but Yoda moved with a liquid ferocity that Obi-Wan had never seen in the Master. He was motion itself; his lightsaber seemed to flare with an incandescent light as he struck from all directions, forcing Obi-Wan to parry madly if he didn't want to find himself spitted on that lightsaber.

He drew on the Force; with Yoda in the room, it was easy to reach out to the Force, despite the emotions that marred his grasp of it—grief, rage, frustration, worry—and it rushed into him like the mighty headwaters of a thundering river, sweeping him up with it.

His leaps and flips and somersaults became more fluid; he blocked Yoda's slashing spins and tried to gain leverage to bind Yoda's blade and then cut at him, but Yoda reversed direction all of a sudden and a clawed foot lashed out at Obi-Wan's face.

He staggered backwards, the Force leaking from him and Yoda collected himself but charged again, utterly silent.

As well as Obi-Wan fought, he could not withstand the Grandmaster of the Jedi Order and he knew it. Surely Yoda knew that too. So why were they fighting?

He blocked a cut aimed at his midsection and turned the movement into a spinning backslash that batted Yoda's blade out of the way, but the pommel of Yoda's lightsaber smashed into him and it was all Obi-Wan could do to keep hold of his Master's lightsaber.

Fighting the Sith hadn't been like this. The Sith had been fluid, primal aggression, but he hadn't been a whirling dervish that was impossible to pin down, impossible to engage. Ataru had three axes of motion, and Yoda seemed determined to make that four. As he fenced Yoda, Obi-Wan understood why Qui-Gon had chided him numerous times for falling into the trap that Ataru meant axes of motion which meant linear motion.

Yoda was using all of the space; when Obi-Wan slashed at him, he would dodge at an angle and then reverse direction and come at Obi-Wan from a different angle.

"Master," he pleaded, "I don't want to fight you!"

"But fight you do," Yoda replied, his robes flaring about him.

And then, Obi-Wan understood.

He flicked off his lightsaber and swept it down and to the side in the formal salute. He bowed to Master Yoda and waited.

Up came the green blade, swept past his neck and then—

There was the lightest of tugs and then his Padawan braid fell, severed onto the marble floor.

Yoda sheathed his lightsaber. A feather-light nudge of the Force guided his gimer stick back into his hand. He looked, Obi-Wan thought, terribly tired, as though his use of the Force had drained him. As Yoda approached him, he knelt, so he was meeting Yoda's eyes.

"Confer upon you the level of Jedi Knight, the Council does." Yoda said, simply.

Obi-Wan blinked back the tears from his eyes as he said, "Thank you, Master Yoda."
might've choked up on him if he'd attempted to say more. "But, why?"

Yoda stooped down and picked up Obi-Wan's Padawan braid. Clawed fingers pressed it gently into Obi-Wan's unresisting hand. "A sorrow it is," said Master Yoda, "That here your Master could not be, to cut your braid." To look into those green-flecked gold eyes was to behold a sadness that was, somehow, as deep as his, Obi-Wan realised, but tempered with wisdom and Jedi discipline. "Proud of you, he would be."

"Master," he murmured. "You…" he fumbled for words to express what he had seen.

"Trained all of you, I have," Yoda replied, mincingly. "Think you that Master Yoda does not remember?" More wistfully, he said, "All of you—as younglings, I remember. Your childhoods were my yesterdays." He prodded Obi-Wan in the shin with his gimer stick, lightly. "Your sorrow is mine as well, Obi-Wan. Bear it, I do."

Mutely, Obi-Wan nodded, and tucked his Padawan braid away into his tunic. Finally, he managed to work around the lump in his throat. "Master, why the test with the lightsaber?"

Yoda looked at him. "True tests," said Yoda, "Never end. Fight well, you do. But insight? Remember, do you—when a lightsaber must and must not be used? The most important thing a Jedi must know is restraint."

"If I hadn't remembered…" Obi-Wan murmured, and Yoda jabbed him again with the gimer stick. Harder, this time.

"Of 'if's, speak not! Happened, it did not. Knight, you now are. Knight you must be, however you feel."

He bowed his head. "Yes, Master. What about Anakin?" He thought of the conversation with Even Piell, but did not quite know how to bring it up.

Yoda solved that dilemma by saying, "Spoken with Even Piell, you have. Hmm?"

"Yes, Master. He mentioned that the Council had decided that Anakin was to be trained."

Yoda said, "Rash, this was."

Obi-Wan stifled the thought of Even Piell as a rash youngling, being whacked by Yoda's gimer stick. It was a difficult task. He said, "I will take Anakin as my Padawan Learner."

Yoda blinked slowly; he appeared unsurprised. He said, "Misgivings, I have."

"Even so, Master," Obi-Wan said, firmly. Against Yoda's caution, he set his promise to Qui-Gon. Barely—just barely—his promise to his dear, dying Master won out.

"Agree with you taking on this boy as your Padawan Learner, I do not."

"Qui-Gon believed in him," Obi-Wan replied. "I believe in Qui-Gon." He must hold on to that.

"The Chosen One the boy may be," Yoda said. The gimer stick tapped as he shifted and paced. He turned back to look at Obi-Wan. "Nevertheless, grave danger, I fear in his training."

"Master Yoda," Obi-Wan said, "I gave Qui-Gon my word." He drew a deep breath, clenched his hands into fists, forcing himself to say the rest of it. "I will train Anakin. Without the approval of the Council if I must." He knew that bringing up Even Piell would do no good here; Yoda was the
Grandmaster of the Jedi Order, and his voice swung the Council. Not even Even Piell would override Yoda with a clean conscience.

There was only one thing—one very narrow thing—that could overrule dissent from the Council. It was a very old rule that had not been invoked in millenia: the right of a Jedi Knight to train whoever he saw suitable as his pupil.

Yoda sighed. He looked, Obi-Wan thought, his heart clenching in his chest, very, very old. "Qui-Gon's defiance, I sense in you," he said, at last. "Need that, you do not. Agree, the Council does. Your apprentice, young Skywalker will be."

"Thank you, Master Yoda," he breathed. Felt relief move through him, loosen the nervous tension in his muscles.

"Thank me, you should not," Yoda said. "Grave danger, I fear. Grave danger…" his ears flicked.

Carefully, Obi-Wan said, "Master Piell said most of the Council had considered taking Anakin on as their Padawan Learner."

Yoda gestured irritably. "Set on this course, you are," he replied. "Considered the matter, we did, long and hard. If danger, there is, how will it be averted? By doing nothing? By training him? By whom?"

"But why let me…ow!" The gimer stick whacked him across the shin, and Obi-Wan yelped in pain and wondered grouchily if whacking Padawan—Knights with a gimer stick was part of the path to the Dark Side.

"Busy, a Council member is," Yoda said, simply. "Many duties, they have. And attention, the boy needs—more than anything else! Attention, you will be able to give him. Important, that is. Split, your time will not be—between Order and Padawan! And you have been trained well. Knew what he was doing, Qui-Gon Jinn did. Enough reason, that was, to permit this."

Obi-Wan said, "But Siri?" Felt the pain and the disbelief, as he had on the day Adi Gallia returned, grim, without her Padawan. The day he'd learned that Siri had fought with her Master, had been cut off, and had left the Jedi Order.


"Is sacrifice," Obi-Wan completed.

Yoda nodded, slowly, seriously. "Even more so for a Master," he said. "Even more so."

His hands tucked in the sleeves of his robe, it was Obi-Wan's turn to nod. "I understand, Master. I will not fail you, Qui-Gon, or Anakin."

Yoda shook his head sadly. "Make that promise, you should not." He gazed out into the distance. "Unavoidable, failing may be."

Chapter End Notes
Apologies for the late update. Currently handling three part-time jobs and uni, so I was swamped with some RL issues. Would like the scholarship committee to get back to me ASAP but we know how those guys are like, unfortunately. Not particularly hopeful either.
Assembling the Five

Chapter by Ammaren (Fjallsarlon), Fjallsarlon

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seven: Assembling the Five

Anakin thought, glumly, that everything had taken a turn for the worse since his rescue. The Jedi Master—Gallia—seemed determined to watch him like a kutaka hound, just in case he got off into any trouble. The result was that he wasn't allowed to do anything remotely interesting and he was bored. Gallia didn't seem inclined to let him head off to the hangars to watch the mechanics work. Instead, when the moment he finished eating, she hauled him off to the palace library and told him he could get a datareader there, and she'd see that a few books he liked were loaded onto it.

"Can you read?" she asked him, very directly.

"'Course I can," Anakin said, indignantly. "Look, I know plenty of slaves can't read or write, but Mum—" he hid the pain of separation. Something told him that Gallia wouldn't regard that well. They'd asked him enough questions about his mother, back when Mister Qui-Gon had put him before them and explained to him that the Council was going to test him to see if he could become a Jedi. "They're cautious, Anakin," he had said, then, kneeling, but even then, he towered over Anakin. "Perhaps cautious to a fault, but they want to get to know you before they decide."

"'Kay," Anakin had replied, determined he wasn't going to wash out. In some of the dreams, he came back to Tatooine as a Jedi. There wasn't any other explanation, he thought, then. After all, only Jedi carried those laser swords, and he'd just somehow known—dream-Anakin had known he was a Jedi and that he was doing…for some reason, the other traces of the dream eluded him. I will become a Jedi, he told himself. I'll return to Tatooine and then I'll free them all, and Mum. And then no one will ever be a slave again.

"But?" Gallia prodded, and Anakin realised he'd faltered mid-setence, saw the flicker of concern in her eyes.

"But Mum taught me," he said, firmly, and then clammed up. He wanted to talk, to tell her about how wonderful his mum was, how Shmi knew everything about the stars and planets and treating wounds and what she called 'nebulae' and 'pulsars' and 'black holes'; and that she taught him his figures at night, with a small glowtorch, using their water flask to magnify their scant light. But he looked at her and he couldn't bring himself to tell Gallia all that. She was on the Council, he knew. She disapproved of him.

When it was clear that he wasn't going to say anything more, Master Gallia simply nodded and went over to speak with the librarian, a tall woman, stately, with greying hair; some of which escaped the braid she'd put it in.

Anakin trailed after her, feeling like an unwanted add-on. As Master Gallia and the librarian continued to speak, he glanced cautiously at them and decided they weren't looking at him. He snuck away, as quietly as he could, tiptoeing for a random row of shelves, towards the far right. As he heard no outcry, no indication that he'd been detected, he found himself grinning wildly. This was more like it! He darted among the shelves, scanning shelf-labels and book spines. He'd thought libraries were dusty places, but this one seemed to have been kept meticulously clean.
It was by sheer luck that he stumbled upon the fifth shelf to the right, almost hidden behind a tall shelf full of references to Naboo law. It was a mess that hadn't been tackled: books were strewn all over the carpeted floor of the library.

He bent down, frowning at them. Books on Tatooine were made from cheap pulp paper: the sort you could get by mashing the flesh of the mawaa cactus. It was more efficient than datapads or holobooks too: the sand always got everywhere—in eyes, in clothing, and in circuits. He hadn't expected the palace library to have books too, and as he tentatively picked one up, he realised that the pages were smooth and creamy, nothing like the rough grain of the mawaa pulp paper.

It creaked though, as he leafed through it, and realised in dismay that the characters were nothing like the Basic his mum had taught him. Why would someone mess up the shelves, Anakin wondered.

He answered himself a moment later: because they were looking for something, dustbrains! But then, looking for what? He sifted through the pile of books but most of them involved that same script he couldn't read. Then, Anakin discovered one book he could. He leafed through it at random before settling down to try and read it.

"The King or Queen of Naboo must be elected by the Council of Five," he read, picking out one line. "With a simple majority sufficient to elevate the candidate to the throne of Naboo for the rest of their years. Previously, the Reigning Monarch was elected by the Council of Four, but then the Deadlock of 577AS proved that the Council representatives were wont to…" he scanned the rest of the book and sighed. It was boring, dusty and dry, rambling on about the rules and conditions required to elect a King or Queen of Naboo and try as he might, Anakin couldn't see Padmé having been elected—was she even elected?—on the basis of those rules. He frowned. Some of the words had been unfamiliar, too. It seemed strange to elect a king or queen, he thought, closing the book.

"Kings or Queens just were. In the stories, they were born to the throne. Their blood made them royal. Wasn't it what made them different from people like Gardulla the Hutt, or the Senators of the Republic?"

"I see you've found the stack," said an unfamiliar voice, and Anakin started. He glanced up to realise that the librarian had come over to him, thin lips pressed together in disapproval. Gallia stood beside her, arms folded over her chest. The problem with those Jedi Masters, Anakin decided, was that it was impossible to tell what they were thinking.

Even Obi-Wan got like that, sometimes. But then the rest of the time, there was this distant, torn look in his eyes, and then you knew he was thinking about Qui-Gon.

"It's a terrible business," the librarian went on. "I kept informing the Queen that security cameras ought to be installed in the library, but the security budget has never quite permitted it…" she shook her head. "In any event: I first noticed the disruption yesterday. Someone had accessed the library and broken into that particular stack. Books were everywhere on the floor when I entered. Such a mess." She scowled at the books strewn on the floor, clicking her tongue in disapproval.

Gallia was frowning. She said, "What is in that stack?"

"That?" the librarian asked. "Books. Very old manuscripts, most of them pertaining to the history of Naboo." Gently, she picked up the book that Anakin had discarded, stroking it lightly on the spine. "This one, for instance. It's an account of the role of the Council of Five—today, they're just referred to as the Five—" out of the corner of his eye, Anakin thought he saw surprise flash across Gallia's calm features. She seemed to stiffen slightly. "—but they have long roots that trace to the old Naboo practice of electing their Kings and Queens by nominating a pool of suitable candidates who would be accepted or rejected by a vote from the Council of Five."
"Essentially, a bicameral system, then," Gallia said.

The librarian nodded. "A very old one, of course. It's been easily centuries since the Maréan Reforms first abolished the Council of Five and allowed for direct planetary voting. Although the term limits, as you doubtless know, are a far more recent policy, championed and signed into the constitution by the Queen herself."

Anakin blinked. The what?

Perhaps sensing his confusion, Gallia explained, "The Queen of Naboo—or the King—" she corrected herself. "—has an existing term limit of four years. She's elected into power by the people, and after four years, she must step down."

Anakin blinked again. He tried to imagine someone like Gardulla the Hutt or Watto doing that, and just couldn't. "What if they don't?"

The librarian said, "What do you mean?"

"You know," he said, slightly frustrated. "I mean, what if they just decide they like being Queen or King, and decide they're not going to step down?"

"It would be unconstitutional," the librarian said. "They would almost certainly have to be removed from office."

"Who's going to make them?"

Her lip twitching in what might've been amusement, Gallia said, "The people of Naboo might appeal to the Senate for assistance, through their Senator. Or they might directly seek Jedi assistance. In which case, the Order would send a Jedi to settle the situation. In the very best scenario, the Queen or King agrees to step down peacefully."

"Otherwise?" Anakin asked.

The librarian put the book she was holding back on the shelf.

"Things get messy," Gallia said. "And sometimes, there's no right answer."

Anakin thought about that, long and hard. "I'm not sure that's a good thing," he said, quietly.

"I'm not entirely sure of that myself," Gallia admitted.

"Well?" Even asked.

Plo Koon let out a quiet breath, filtered through the black antiox breath mask he wore. His face was tinted blue from the light of the data terminal screen. "Well," he replied at last, "You're lucky Resnik wasn't that much of a slicer."

"Meaning?" Obi-Wan asked, peering at the lines of code streaming across the data terminal. As much as he'd passed his slicing classes back in the Temple, he could not make head or tail of what the Kel Dor Master was doing. It was, he thought, bemused at the analogy, like asking a youngling to counter one of the advanced-level whirling kick sequences from Ataru.

"What else?" Even wanted to know. "You hire it out, Kenobi. To someone more competent. How's that good for us?"
Plo said, "He went to Orvij & Parek. A very, very famous data security firm. They hire some of the best slicers in the galaxy to work for them; known slicers, of course. In the Deep HoloNet, there's always someone better." He kept keying in commands, working as he spoke.

"What's the Deep HoloNet?" Obi-Wan asked. "I've never heard of it before."

A sound came over Plo's breath mask that might've been a snort. "You wouldn't. It's in one of the higher level slicing modules the Temple offers. Imagine a lake," he said. "You want to find a Selonian Yellow-whisker, so you trawl through the lake with a fishing net, looking for it. Now, imagine your fishing net is so well-calibrated that it catches only things that fit the parameters of what you consider to be a Selonian Yellow-whisker."

Obi-Wan nodded.

"The Deep HoloNet is whatever your fishing net can't reach," Plo said, shortly. "Maybe because your net is too short. It's everything out there—a sheer wealth of information on the HoloNet that standard search engines can't locate, for all sorts of reasons. Lots of excellent slicers operate on the Deep 'Net. There's bound to be someone better than the Orvij & Parek crew when you look there."

"What about you?" Even asked.

Plo shook his head. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe not. The good news is, I've cracked O&P encryption before. But this one's somewhat different. Still, I have some contacts on the Deep 'Net. I'll feed them some of this, see if we can crack this fast. I've already transmitted the contents back to the Temple. We have a few very good slicers there." He leaned back in his seat, fingers steepled, and gazed at the other Jedi. "The thing is, O&P protection doesn't come cheap."

"We already knew that Resnik was very good at what he did," Obi-Wan countered.

Plo Koon shook his head; the gesture solemn. "Not this kind of money," he said, and named a figure that made Obi-Wan goggle at him. "O&P slicers work primarily for business magnates; people who want to keep their dealings safe from corporate espionage. Most small-time bounty hunters, as good as Resnik might be, can't afford their services. Not even with his earnings from the Lithun contract."

"So the data pad isn't likely to be his," Obi-Wan said, frowning. "Or at least, a client provided him with this kind of security."

They traded glances. "I think," Even said, at last, "Looking very closely at the Five might be a good idea."

"Do they even have that kind of money?" Obi-Wan wondered, still amazed. Naboo was, after all, a small planet and what counted as wealth and power on Naboo did not necessarily translate into assets across the galaxy.

"Likely not," Even Piell said, grimly. "But I'm betting the Trade Federation does." He turned to Plo. "Think you can pull up some of those transaction records?"

"Possibly," Plo said. "But risky, given the laws on Naboo about citizen privacy. It'd be easier to pull up the finance records of the Trade Federation from their last few audits and have Ki-Adi-Mundi scan through them for any sign of tampering. I'll do that now."

Obi-Wan's comlink signalled and he quickly answered it. "Kenobi," he identified himself.

"This is Mace Windu," replied the stern voice. "The Queen is requesting your presence in the private audience chamber."
"I'll be on my way, Master," Obi-Wan said, signing out.

The private audience chamber was a small but opulently designed room adjoining the throne room; mahogany-panelled and carpeted with many ornamental vases and sculptures lined with streaked marble. Obi-Wan noticed a mosaic on one wall of the chamber.

Queen Amidala was already there; flanked by Mace Windu. Two of her handmaidens were in the same room, but quietly retreated so as to be unobtrusive.

"Jedi Kenobi," she said, nodding to him. "I understand that I am to congratulate you."

"Thank you, your Highness," he said, with a polite bow. At that moment, Obi-Wan could not say that becoming a Jedi Knight felt like an achievement; in fact, he thought, he felt he'd paid far too high a price for the distinction.

"Representatives from the Five have requested an audience with the Queen," Mace Windu stated.

"Is this unusual?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

"Hardly," Queen Amidala said. "At least, not as a request. Citizens of Naboo have the right to request an audience with their Queen, and I have heard the Five out often enough."

"The timing, however, gives me reason to pause," Mace said. "That the Five should seek an audience with the Queen two days after Naboo has been freed seems unusually swift of them. Particularly at a time when all efforts might reasonably be expected to be devoted towards rebuilding and mourning." He looked at the Queen, who nodded, seeming to agree with whatever decision had been reached when Obi-Wan wasn't in the room. "Obi-Wan," he said, "We want you to remain in the throne room as an unobtrusive bodyguard when the representatives from the Five arrive for their audience with the Queen. Study their expressions, and report your impressions after the audience."

Obi-Wan nodded, taking it in. "How much time do I have to prepare?"

"A standard hour, no more," the Queen said. Even behind the painted mask, her distaste was clear. "Wealth and connections buy swifter audiences than most. Even a Queen daren't ignore the Five completely."

"I've been examining the records," Mace explained, holding out a tiny, black data-stick in his hand, "And have compiled together a short briefing—no more than twenty minutes—of what you need to know."

Obi-Wan nodded again. "I will study it," he said. As an apprentice, there were times when he'd had to make a very quick study of available materials before proceeding to a negotiation or a new mission with Qui-Gon. It wasn't common, but it happened. Padawan Learners were trained in quick recall and memorisation and the assimilation of data, just as they were trained in so many other skills.

He accepted the data-stick from the Korun Jedi Master. "Is there a place where I might review the information?" he asked, and was guided to the side of the audience chamber.

"The Queen will prepare for her public audience here," the handmaiden explained, as Mace Windu exchanged farewells with the Queen and strode out of the chamber, his dun Jedi robe flapping about his ankle as he left.

Obi-Wan wondered, for a moment, what Mace Windu was doing. And then he firmly shut out that thought and focused on the task at hand.
"You know," Anakin grumbled, "I'm pretty sure I'm old enough to take care of myself."

"By whose standards?" Gallia asked, unruffled.

Anakin just stared at her. "Does that matter?" he demanded, huffily.

Gallia raised both hands, palms upwards, in a silent shrug. You tell me, that gesture seemed to say.

Anakin sighed and looked down at his data-reader. She'd gotten him a number of e-books from the library, sure. Most of them were on dead boring things like the basics of politics and elections and proportional representation systems and majoritarian systems and all Anakin could think was that Padmé had to be sun-crazy if she wanted to deal with all that stuff.

But of course; she was Padmé. Her people mattered to her. She sounded sad everytime they'd spoken about them dying and being killed by the Trade Federation. And then he thought: doesn't it make you angry, to think about all the other slaves?

So maybe they were both alike after all. But then the next, obvious conclusion was that if he wasn't sun-crazy for wanting to come back as a Jedi and free all the slaves, then maybe Padmé wasn't sun-crazy for wanting to do all those politics things if she thought that could save her people.

He sighed, woefully. Things, Anakin thought, had been so wonderfully un-complicated before Padmé and Mister Qui-Gon had come.

Except that it wasn't a bad thing, though. Was it?

He stared suspiciously at Gallia. She had closed her eyes, and was sitting in a strange cross-legged posture he'd never seen before.

"Yes, Anakin?"

She still hadn't opened her eyes.

Anakin sighed and scrolled through the list of e-books. There had to be a text that was more interesting, he thought. Or he could—he froze. The data-reader was, after all, a modified data-pad, meant less for personal computing than to access and read texts. But maybe he could modify it; tweak it so he could code on it.

He tried to hide his grin. That would be fun, if he could do something like that. It seemed like a worthwhile challenge. He'd always been better with building things than with programming them. When he'd worked on C-3PO, he'd had to cobble together the algorithms, bit by painstaking bit from snatches of code he'd cannibalised off an aging translator-droid that Watto had him repair.

Could he do something like this here? Write a program that he hadn't taken from elsewhere?

There was, Anakin reflected, really only one way to find out.

Obi-Wan's first impression was that the representatives from the Five seemed similar. He chose to leave his hood down. A quick tug rumpled his tunic and he shifted his utility belt so Qui-Gon's lightsaber was set at an awkward angle.

Queen Amidala glanced over at him, and her lips twitched. She'd noticed his efforts, then. He wasn't supposed to speak, as her assigned protector, so instead, he stared blandly back and allowed the
sleeves of his robe to droop loosely over his hands, as though it was far too big for him.

If the robe was a darker hue than the usual robe he wore—well, no one commented on it. A Jedi did not get sentimentally attached, but it felt, even then, as though Qui-Gon's presence was here, now, enfolding him in his robe.

Did it ever get better? He wondered, distantly. Did the pain ever go? He remembered the blankness in his Master's gaze, as he sat by Tahl's side, cradling her hand in his; strangely gentle. He remembered the way a flash of sudden pain would come over Qui-Gon and he would withdraw into himself as they passed a location in the Temple that held particular meaning for himself and Tahl.

What did you do for grief, he wanted to ask. But now Qui-Gon was gone; he felt rudderless, drifting. What are you doing, Kenobi? he asked himself. He'd agreed to take Anakin as his Padawan and he didn't know the first thing about teaching. He was, in many ways, still very much a Padawan Learner, for all the braid on his right shoulder had been severed. Traditionally, the Padawan's nerf-tail should've been discreetly sheared off afterwards—it was the Master's responsibility, but Qui-Gon had not been here to do that for him either, and it seemed that it had either been forgotten among all the concerns pressing upon the Jedi Council, or just as likely, none of them had felt they had the right to assume Qui-Gon's prerogative.

He closed his eyes, and then composed himself as the representatives from the Five entered the throne room. He scanned them with a Jedi's trained gaze, taking in all the relevant details and sorting them out in his mind for later analysis.

One of them walked slightly before the rest. She was, thought Obi-Wan, likely the leader of this group. She was tall and human, like most of the Naboo, with pale hair that was cropped just above her shoulders and almost-colourless eyes. Her clothing was tasteful silk of a dark colour, and whispered as she moved. Likely Ottegan silk, Obi-Wan thought. Ottegan silk was both expensive and did not gleam in the light. In addition, Ottegan silk stank awfully when it burned. He'd had cause to discover that, on a mission with Qui-Gon. That, then, was likely to be Sirdaé, the young and ruthless head of the Ersken family.

At her shoulder, but a pace slower was a man with squat, powerful shoulders, darkeyed. He moved, however, with a casual, graceful arrogance that immediately set off warning bells in Obi-Wan's head. Their eyes met; the man smirked. He'd taken in all the signs of disorder: Obi-Wan's sleeves, his rumpled tunic and badly-fastened utility belt, and dismissed him as a symbol, nothing more.

It was just as well, Obi-Wan thought dryly, that the word on the street was that the Jedi had helped to free Naboo, not that Jedi Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi had killed the first Sith Lord to appear in millennia.

As each of them offered no more than the tiniest of bows to the Queen in polite greeting, Obi-Wan counted off the other members of the group. Besides Sirdaé Ersken and the arrogant man—whom Obi-Wan decided was Ren Yvar, the pampered family heir, there was another woman: aging gracefully, with threads of grey in her dark hair. He noticed that her hands were callused and had difficulty placing her until a gleam of silver and a glitter of opalescent fire around her neck indicated that this was Jurité of the Velarra family, which controlled most of Naboo's mineral wealth in form of opal and malachite mines. The man who wore thin, wire-rimmed spectacles and a loose cravat was likely to be Iben Derriva; of the family which had connections everywhere in the Naboo legislature and judiciary.

That made the last member of the group the representative of the Helukala family: a short, compact, woman with curling dark hair tied at the nape of her neck. Her eyes glinted a bright, amused hazel with flecks of gold.
"I greet each of you," Queen Amidala said, to each of them. "What is your concern, then?"

It was as though Qui-Gon stood, once again, at Obi-Wan's shoulder, urging him to pay attention to the slightest of movements that indicated a being's thoughts and inclinations. See how most of them glance towards Ersken, Padawan, he imagined his Master saying. She entered the room at the head of them, if only by a fraction. She therefore has influence. Or: see how Nurié Helukala shifts so she presents herself as leaning away from Ersken. She does not want to be associated, however unconsciously, with her. Pay attention to divisions beneath seeming unity, Padawan. They can be revealing.

I hear you, Master, Obi-Wan thought.

Sirdaé said, smoothly, "It has come to our attention"—she was speaking for the Five, then, Obi-Wan noted—"that an attempt has been made on the life of a Jedi on the palace grounds, as well as of the head of your security. Naturally, the first concern of the Five was to express our consternation, and our hopes that both Captain Panaka and the Jedi in question—" her eyes flicked, she couldn't help it, to where Obi-Wan stood at the side of the throne, "—are in fact, unharmed."

Some people thought the Jedi could sense falsehood. This was not quite the case: some Jedi were better at sensing distress, for the lack of a better word. They could tell when another being was dissembling. But this often took a stronger connection to the Living Force than Obi-Wan had.

Qui-Gon, he thought. His Master was skilled at this use of the Force.

His instincts did not tell him anything. And in any case, if he'd wanted to play the intimidation card, he'd lost the opportunity by going about things the wrong way. Instead, he'd decided on taking the other strategy: having them write him off as being a callow, inexperienced Knight.

Ren Yvar said, still with that casual arrogance, "We have, of course, not been involved in such terrible acts. Our relation with the Monarchy of Naboo remains strong, and, we hope, deep and fruitful."

Queen Amidala gazed at the assembled group. "So I may hope," she said, a statement that said very little. "The incident is being investigated, at present."

"It is our hope that the perpetrators will be brought to swift justice," Sirdaé said, "For all that no harm was done to your person."

"I assure you," Queen Amidala said, and now the coolness in her voice was noticeable, "I take all attempts—whether on my life or those on the lives of my people—with all due seriousness."

"We came, as well, to offer our assistance," Iben Derriva spoke up. He was adjusting his cravat—a nervous gesture? Obi-Wan wondered, and filed it away for further thought. "If the Monarchy has any needs in this affair, we will render all possible aid to ensure that justice is served. We do not approve—" and his displeasure did in fact tinge his words with the cold, sharp quality of durasteel, "—of such acts."

"Your offers have been noted," Queen Amidala said. "And indeed, I would at the very least expect full cooperation with the Monarchy in this matter as we open investigations."

"But of course," Iben replied.

Jurité said, "I represent, as well, the concerns of the Velarra, who suffered the most difficulty under Trade Federation occupation. And indeed, before that."
"Explain," Queen Amidala said.

"The Trade Federation have been plundering the mines in the northlands," Jurité explained, "Particularly near the cities of Haleen and Sarino. Recently, deposits of ionite have been discovered in the Third Deep mines in the region." Obi-Wan hid his frown. He remembered the value—and the properties—of ionite all too well, from a mission to Bandomeer. "Ionite," she was explaining to the Queen, "Is very rare and valuable, so it was a surprise to all of us when it was discovered on Naboo. Quantities of the mineral are used in weapons that can simply eat through shielding without any possible defence against it."

Queen Amidala frowned and leaned forward. "You are saying," she said, "That the Trade Federation has come in possession of large quantities of an expensive mineral used to make weapons that ignore personal or capital ship shielding?"

"Size doesn't matter, your Highness," Jurité said, unaware that she'd just repeated a common Jedi saying. "Given sufficient quantities of ionite, any electrical or plasma shield can be eaten through. Ionite disrupts both positive and negative charges. That's the problem."

The Queen's lips firmed. "Thank you for bringing the matter to our attention."

Jurité said, "The Velarra family has suffered considerable amounts of losses due to the Trade Federation plundering of our mines. We request that suitable compensation be factored into the negotiations, and that the Monarchy recognise our ownership of the mines."

Queen Amidala said, "What of the ownership papers?"

"Destroyed during the invasion," Jurité replied. For all her calm, Obi-Wan saw the anger in her eyes, heard it in her voice. "The Trade Federation decided that our ownership papers were worth nothing and tore them up and then contracted out the mines to various subcontractors in the cities of Haleen and Sarino, who now insist they have rights to continue mining and to the mines itself."

"This," Amidala informed her, "Is a dispute which needs to be heard in a court. Not before me."

Obi-Wan caught the heated glance that passed between Jurité Velarra and Iben Derriva. A rivalry there? Or perhaps it was something else.

"Your Highness," Jurité said, the words clipped. "The Velarra family hears your ruling. But we are disappointed with the decision."

"Your disappointment is noted," Amidala replied.

The meeting continued; disputes over land and wealth brought up before the Queen, who deftly sidestepped each of these, protesting that the necessary papers were required, that the disputes had to be brought up before the appropriate courts, with the minor concession that if their grievances would also be lodged against the Trade Federation in the galactic courts.

Finally, the hour wore to a conclusion, and Queen Amidala announced that the audience was over. They exchanged polite farewells, and the representatives of the Five made their way out of the throne room. In the Force, Obi-Wan had the sense that most of them were—dissatisfied was the best word he could put to it. But was that enough to hire a bounty hunter?

Stop assuming, he told himself. The fact remained that Resnik had not tried to kill Queen Amidala. He'd tried to kill Obi-Wan and Captain Panaka. He was missing something.

The Queen glanced over at him. "Well?" she asked, with a raised eyebrow.
Almost unconsciously, Obi-Wan adjusted his tunic, straightened his utility belt, and shrugged out of Qui-Gon's robes, folding them over an arm with relief. His Master, he thought ruefully, had been a notable human tree. He thought about his response, and then opted for honesty. "Much does not make sense, your Highness."

"Any reason why, Jedi Kenobi?"

"If the Five have as appreciable an amount of influence as Master Windu's briefing claims," Obi-Wan said evenly, "They should not have had as unsuccessful an audience as they did. But in fact, they spent most of the time bringing up complaints that they should know they had little reason to see granted."

"I admit," the Queen said, after a short pause, "Some of it is due to me. As a young Queen who has only recently assumed the Monarchy, many of them seek to try their luck, as one might put it—to see what they can get out of me." Her smile was not particularly warm. "That does allow me to get away with what an older Monarch would not. They tell themselves I'm young and reckless but don't lean as heavily as they can. And you may have noticed: it's easy to pit them against each other. If the Five came together on an issue, I would find it very difficult not to accede. But when it's the Derrivas against the Velarras against the Yvar…" she waved a hand in a dismissive gesture.

"So I surmised," Obi-Wan replied. He offered her a nod. "That was impressive, your Highness." He thought he could understand how she felt: he'd done as much, playing on their perceptions and biases in that audience, allowing them to dismiss him at once.

He thought she might've coloured, faintly. "Thank you for your kindness, Jedi Kenobi," she said, at last. She stood up from the throne, wincing slightly. "Sitting there too long gives me aches," she said, an admission that startled him in its frankness. "But I suspect that perhaps that was the intention of King Tariyal the Liberal, all those centuries ago. No one, I believe, should sit too comfortably on a throne."

"You believe deeply in democracy, do you not?"

The Queen looked at him. "Yes," she said. "Yes, I do. I believe that the only way a Monarchy can work is if it is—as this one is—encircled with so many constraints that an elected representative of the people's will can never abuse that power."

"Many beings do," Obi-Wan said. It was something he had come to understand, across over a decade of missions with Qui-Gon. Some of them had taken him to the darkest places in the galaxy; others to perfectly ordinary places. And in all of them, he had seen how lust and greed could corrupt people, could make them do the unthinkable. How oppression could arise from those.

"I know," Queen Amidala replied. "But the day we stop believing in democracy is the day it truly dies. I would not see that day come in my lifetime."

There was nothing Obi-Wan could say to that. Instead, he bowed to her. And then he turned to leave.

"Wait."

That request caught him. He drew up, waiting.

"The funeral will be held tomorrow evening," Queen Amidala said. "I'd have arranged it for tonight, but with Anakin's kidnapping and the assassin…" she sighed. "In any case, the new Supreme Chancellor will be arriving late tomorrow afternoon, and has expressed his wish to attend the funeral.
For now… his body lies with all appropriate honours in the Tariyalean Room. I will have someone show you there, if you wish."

He pressed his lips together. "Thank you, your Highness," Obi-Wan managed, at last. "I very much…" he had to try again. "I would very much appreciate that."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all for their support in one way or another, whether through comments or kudos. Indeed, RL struck back for a while (what with a whole administration mess, the joys of being a graduating student), and I've been stalling on this, but I've gotten a decent amount written out and do intend to push through to finish things, eventually. I hope you've enjoyed this installment!
Chapter Eight: Test of the Heart

The Tariyalean room was a small, austere room of marble; bright mosaics decorated every wall and Obi-Wan was certain his boots echoed on the flooring. There was little else, here. One of the walls had a small window of stained glass. The lights had been respectfully set to a dim level, but he could see the stone bier laid out in the centre of the chamber.

And the fallen man who lay atop it.

He took one step, and then another. Found himself on his knees by his Master's cold body, Jedi serenity reft at once like a piece of thin gauzy cloth. How had he been keeping it together?

It was as if the weight of his loss came crashing down on Obi-Wan, all at once, and he didn't know how he was going to keep bearing up underneath it. His Master had been his rock, his anchor. He'd relied on Qui-Gon to know what the correct action in a situation was; Qui-Gon's focus seemed unflappable and his Master always had a plan.

Now, he was all on his own.

Qui-Gon had insisted Anakin be trained. He'd sensed something in the boy, that was for sure. Obi-Wan did not share Qui-Gon's certainties; for all he'd had some contact with Anakin, for all he knew of Anakin's prodigious strength in the Force, he felt nothing but uncertainty about Anakin's future. He was, perhaps, not strong enough in the Living Force to be able to read the boy.

He admitted this as well, as he kept silent vigil by his Master's side. Qui-Gon was sure; that was the one thing that had characterised his Master. He knew what he was going to do, and then he did it. That had earned him a not-undeserved reputation as a rebel and a maverick, but Qui-Gon's unorthodox decisions were often made in reverence of the Living Force. Everyone knew this. It was why despite his numerous differences with the Council, they had often allowed Qui-Gon enough slack to follow his instincts and the promptings of where the Living Force had led him.

Qui-Gon could train Anakin, Obi-Wan thought. He felt…lost. Overwhelmed. He rubbed at his eyes with his hands.

It was like trying to fill a robe a few sizes too big for him to fit. Qui-Gon had trained him but he wasn't Qui-Gon.

The first hour of his vigil brought doubts and fears. The second brought regrets: they'd begun to clash, of late. Their arguments over Anakin were simply the most recent and by far the worst, but by no means the first or last. Their disagreements had increased in frequency in the last two years of his apprenticeship, but they'd always resolved them soon after. He'd apologised to his Master, as was his place, but all the same, some of his doubts had lingered.

How did you get over knowing that a day or so after your most heated dispute, your Master was dead?
He should've run faster. Should've opened himself more to the Force. Should not have exhausted himself with flashy attacks; should've taken less chances. Should've stayed by his Master's side. If he hadn't been separated from Qui-Gon, the Sith could not have so exhausted him and struck him down. He knew this. It was why the Sith had chosen his ground so carefully.

Do not mourn for those who are transformed into the Force, Yoda had once said. Luminous beings we are, not this crude matter! He punctuated the point with a sharp rap of his gimer stick on Obi-Wan's shin. There is no death, there is the Force.

He knew that, and still he knelt, and still he felt the pain—a physical thing, clawing at his chest and throat as he breathed. His vision blurred, but there was, after all, no one here with him. He was allowed a private space, alone with his Master and his grief.

Qui-Gon had that, he remembered. He had wondered what his Master had done, on that long, uneasy flight back to the Temple. Qui-Gon had sat in the part of the consular ship where Tahl's body was, accompanied by flowers native to New Apsolon.

He had not said a single word. Obi-Wan hadn't known what to do.

"Give him space," Bant had said.

Now, he was on the other end; across the gap of years, he wondered. Wondered what Qui-Gon had done then, wondered what Qui-Gon had felt. Wondered if that was what it meant to be grieving: to feel as though his heart had been clawed out of his chest, to feel as though he was hollow and it was an emptiness that was never, ever going to go away.

To feel that it was the hardest thing in the world to simply breathe and he didn't know when this was going to ever end.

From his tunic pocket, he pulled out the assassin's knife. It didn't seem entirely appropriate, but Obi-Wan recognised folded Shivaani steel when he saw it. A knife made of Shivaani steel following the traditional methods was easily worth a handful of Corusca gems. And he wasn't about to pilfer a bread knife from the kitchen for this purpose.

It was hard to do this without a mirror, without Qui-Gon's large and gentle hands performing the action, but Obi-Wan brought the Shivaani knife up to his Padawan's nerf-tail.

The knife was sharp. It took barely a touch, before the remains of his nerf-tail were collapsing forlornly on the marble. He scooped it up, painstakingly, included the blue cloth tie that he'd used. Gently, he prised open Qui-Gon's stiff fingers, left the severed hair in them.

"You did it, Master," he murmured. "I didn't turn to the Dark Side. I'm a Jedi Knight, now." He swallowed past the lump in his throat. "We did it," he amended. "I just wish…"

He couldn't speak.

How long had it been? An hour? Two hours? A day?

He knelt. It was impossible to count the passage of the hours in the sensory-deprivation chamber. The darkness was pervasive. He could not so much as make out where his hands were. He could not feel himself; he could not feel the texture of the chamber floor. The silence, after a while, wore on him. It seemed an easy task, when Qui-Gon had first briefed him. He had, after all, been making progress in his meditation sessions.
But now, the silence ground against his very soul. He tried remembering when he last heard someone speak. He almost broke his silence, said, "I am Obi-Wan Kenobi. I am the Padawan Learner to Master Qui-Gon Jinn."

But the silence in the chamber was absolute, and he could not even hear himself speak. Could not even hear the beating of his heart, could not hear the sound of his breathing. He was neither warm nor cold; either would have been a sensation, would've been a welcome deviation from the emptiness. And after another unendurable duration of time, he wondered if his Master had forgotten about him.

In some of the rumours younglings whispered to each other after lights-out in the dormitories, it was said that Padawans had undertaken the Telva'shel'annar, the Test of Shadows for as long as five days. It was one of the strictest of tests, offered only to Senior Padawans. Obi-Wan had felt honoured when his Master had deemed him ready for it, but only after many misgivings and discussions with the Temple Mind-Healers.

He had wondered—as all Padawans did—what was so secret, so important about the Telva'shel'annar. Even the Trials were discussed; Padawans often talked about what their yearmates or seniors had done for their Trials. But no one; absolutely no one discussed their Telva'shel'annar. Even Qui-Gon had, after a long pause, informed Obi-Wan that he could not speak of it. "You'll understand," he said.

After so long in the sensory-deprivation chamber, Obi-Wan thought he did.

Maybe I'm dead.

The thought came, all of a sudden. Maybe he'd died on a mission somewhere and he was a ghost haunting both the Temple and his Master. Was this what it felt like to be dead?

He tried to pinch himself, to take away the sudden, dizzying sense of dislocation.

Nothing.

But you have the Force. He wasn't sure if he had spoken up, if he had remembered the first lesson, taught—so long ago, it seemed—in his days in the crèche. The Force is your ally; the Force is always with you.

He reached out to the Force, drank it in, greedily. It was clouded by his own anxieties and fears, but it still flowed into him, sluggishly. He wondered if he could get a sense of his Master's presence and reached out in the Force, trying to touch Qui-Gon.

Nothing.

He could sometimes sense where Qui-Gon was; could tell what his Master was thinking, what he was feeling. Their bond was unusually close for a Jedi team and Obi-Wan had come to rely on it.

But now, he wasn't sure anymore. It was as if a bedrock certainty had been yanked out from under his feet, and he was falling in the dark.

I don't want to take the Telva'shel'annar anymore, he thought. It was something he knew: you didn't pass or fail the Telva'shel'annar. Apprentices could refuse to take it. Some of them did. Others pulled out in the middle of the Telva'shel'annar, either for their own safety, or because the supervising Masters were concerned about their safety.

They had not yet made any effort to withdraw him.
A second thought entered his mind: Qui-Gon had taken the Telva'shel'annar. His Master, too, had endured the sensory-deprivation chamber, and he had not broken. Obi-Wan could do no less.

This resolve lasted the next few minutes. Or perhaps, the next few hours.

He thought he saw things in the darkness: a garnant, scuttling across the floor. The bright blaze of a lightsaber blade in his vision. All of them revealed swiftly as hallucinations. It was one of the things covered in his classes, about solitary confinement. It broke prisoners swiftly, said the Master taking the class. She watched them gravely. It is cruel, she said, but it is a reality of the galaxy you will have to face.

Maybe he wasn't dead, Obi-Wan thought. A Jedi Master by the name of Na-Shel Talin had written about a dream in which he was a flittermoth, and he had awoken to uncertainty. Am I a flittermoth dreaming he is a man, or a man dreaming he is a flittermoth?

Was there anything more to the Jedi Padawan Obi-Wan Kenobi than a dream?

Only the void seemed real. Perhaps, Obi-Wan thought, I am something else, being dreamed. I am the fragments of someone else's story. Perhaps, wrote Na-Shel Talin, we are nothing more than dreams of the Force. All else is fleeting shadows.

Obi-Wan wasn't sure when the voice spoke up. After all, he wasn't sure how long he'd been in there. Surely the supervising Masters will sense that it's been too long, he thought.

"What do you feel?" Qui-Gon asked.

He considered the question. Qui-Gon's voice, he thought, was deep and calm. He marvelled at its tone; the way he would've considered a work of art. "Nothing," Obi-Wan said. He still could not hear himself speak. And then: "Relief."

"Why do you feel relief?"

"I was afraid," Obi-Wan said. "I was afraid that I had been forgotten. I was afraid that I no longer existed."

"Why did you fear?"

"There was nothing," Obi-Wan replied. "I began to feel that I, too, was nothingness."

"Why fear emptiness?"

Obi-Wan said, "Because the self is the last, most certain, truth, for all beings, in the face of all uncertainty."

Qui-Gon continued. "Why cling to the self?" It was an old Jedi technique: this pattern of interrogative questions and responses, designed to lead pupils to truths they needed to comprehend for themselves.

"Because the assumption of self is the first assumption," Obi-Wan replied. Drawing on Jedi teachings was permitted; the only demand was absolute honesty on the part of the Padawan.

He felt it, now. The void had entered him, in a deep and profound way. He was shaken. This was the Telva'shel'annar, the Dissolution of the Self.

"Why then assume it?"
Obi-Wan considered that question. "Do not assume a falsehood," he offered, instead. He might've been kneeling. If this exchange had come as part of their daily meditation sessions, he would've spoken; hands resting lightly on his knees. He did not know what position he had assumed. "Reject assumptions known to be false."

"What then remains?"

This answer, at least, was easy. "The Force."

"Recite the Jedi Code," Qui-Gon instructed.

"There is no emotion, there is peace."

"Explain."


"Does impermanence not imply momentary existence?"

Obi-Wan shook his head, or thought he did. "No," he said. "That statement presumes the coherence of existence. But that is illusion."

"Why presume?"

Shrouded in emptiness, Obi-Wan imagined the infuriatingly calm expression on Qui-Gon's face. "It is the world we are born into," he said, at last, knowing that he would not be considered to be expressing himself in a proper way. "The assumption of existence is a condition for our being in the world. The Code asks us to question this; to transcend this and to realise that we are all reflections of the Force. There is no self." He drew a deep breath, tried to bring himself back to Qui-Gon's original question. "There is no emotion because emotion is transitory; generated by the fixation of the mind on the ephemeral. Emotion, therefore, emerges from unreality. The Jedi does not cling to emotion. The Jedi transcends it, and seeks peace."

"Is seeking not craving?" Qui-Gon responded.

A mis-step; he'd been imprecise previously and his Master had picked up on it. "We are not saints but seekers," Obi-Wan responded, drawing upon another Jedi saying. "To seek does not necessitate being steered by craving."

"State the next line of the Code, apprentice."

"There is no ignorance, there is knowledge." He recalled Master Yoda, guiding them in their very first recitation of the Code, back when he was a youngling in the crèche, not yet an Initiate.

"Explain."

"Ignorance is a no-thing," Obi-Wan said, remembering sessions on the Code with Master Fasren. "An absence cannot be regarded as an entity; cannot be a thing in itself. Ignorance, therefore, is merely the veil drawn over the unenlightened mind. To discard ignorance is to draw back this veil, to allow the Force to enlighten and to clarify."

"You say that ignorance is not a thing," Qui-Gon replied. "And then you say ignorance is a veil obscuring enlightenment. You contradict yourself."

"The language of metaphor is imprecise," Obi-Wan retorted. "Contradictions are a necessary step on
the path to truth. They invite the seeker to question; to test claims.”

"Continue with the Code, apprentice." Qui-Gon was definitely not amused by that last response.

"There is no passion, there is serenity."

"Explain."

"Passions are an attachment," said Obi-Wan. "To be moved by pleasure and desire is to suffer pain in their absence, for passions are merely transient. In this way, those who are driven by passion are fettered by the chains of their own suffering. The Jedi recognises this and seeks to move beyond passion."

"Without passion," Qui-Gon countered, "The world should never be transformed."

"The Code demands that we question our limited conceptions," Obi-Wan said. "Passions fetter the Jedi when they bind the Jedi, when the Jedi is driven and pushed by them. Passions are a momentary flame; they burn, and then they are doused. Instead, the Jedi seeks to cultivate compassion for all beings."

"Is compassion not one of the passions?"

"This displays unclarity of thought," Obi-Wan replied. "To read the Code, we must understand that the words used by Master Urr are not the same as the words we use. When he speaks of 'passion', he refers to all kinds of cravings: physical cravings, sensual cravings, and even more abstract cravings. But compassion is a love purified of craving; it does not crave or desire, it merely is. In compassion, the Jedi comes fully to the end of the self."

"And what of love?" Qui-Gon challenged.

Obi-Wan tensed. Here it was, then. The point of divergence. "Love is dangerous," he replied.

"And what do you mean when you speak of 'love'?"

"Desire is dangerous," Obi-Wan replied, "Because desire is a passion."

"Loving-kindness," said Qui-Gon. "Sympathetic joy. Equanamity. These lie alongside love and it is important, my very young apprentice, that we do not shed the good with the bad. Beware attachment. Passion is often mixed up with these states. But it does not imply that a Jedi should scorn these."

It was what Qui-Gon was, Obi-Wan knew. His Master's attitude towards the Force and how a Jedi should comport himself meant they often had their differences. But he was learning, all the same, from Qui-Gon. "I am instructed," he replied, the traditional response of an apprentice to a Master in a trial like the Telva'shel'annar.

A pause. "What is the final line of the Code?"

"There is no death, there is the Force."

"Explain."

"Death is the final illusion," Obi-Wan replied. "If there is no self, then all things are of the Force. All things are one Force, undivided. The Force has no beginning and no end; there is, then, no ending, only transformation and unity with the Force."
"What is the Code?"

"The Code is a guide," Obi-Wan stated, more confidently. "It encourages us to realise that all things are unreal, except the Force. It encourages the Jedi to strive for enlightenment, for an end to suffering."

"It encourages us," said his Master, quietly. "To cultivate a deep, abiding, compassionate love, for all beings, selflessly." But there was no imperative note in his voice this time; the Telva'shel'annar must have run its course, for instead, Qui-Gon spoke the ritual words that concluded an exchange between teacher and Jedi student. "May this exchange increase our understanding."

"I am instructed," Obi-Wan replied, once again.  

He did not know how long he waited before light, bright burning light spilled into the chamber, and the next thing he realised; he'd collapsed, limp, into the strong arms of his Master.

"It is done," Qui-Gon said, more quietly. "You were brave, to endure for so long."

"How...how long?" Obi-Wan croaked. The sound of his own voice was strange. Outside of the sensory-deprivation chamber, he hadn't realised how noisy the Temple had been, until all ambient sound had returned.

"Two days," Qui-Gon said. "Longer than some."

Two days. His Telva'shel'annar had lasted two days. Perhaps Qui-Gon had sensed something of the direction his thoughts had taken, for his Master added, lightly, "My own Master had me take my Telva'shel'annar at the age of eighteen. It went on for five days; we could not stop arguing. I was later told that Master Yoda himself had intervened when it seemed I would not be released anytime soon."

His large hand rested on Obi-Wan's shoulder, a brief touch.

Obi-Wan drank in the sensation; the barrage of sensory information. He wondered how they ordinarily dealt with it all: in his immediate retrieval from the sensory-deprivation chamber, there was so much information that he seemed, at times, overwhelmed.

His gait was unsteady. He'd been still for two days.

"Lean on me," his Master said, and he led him off for food and more importantly, rest.

Let go.

Obi-Wan could not. It had been years, he thought, dimly, as he knelt there, but the Telva'shel'annar left a definite impression on an apprentice. He clung to the memory of the stillness, the emptiness, but it slipped away from him like water droplets off a transparisteel windscreen.

He remembered it. Just not what it felt like.

It was attachment, he knew; raw and simple—a desire for reciprocal affection from the man who'd been the closest thing to a father-figure in his life for over a decade.

There is no death. There is the Force.

But maybe that was the point, Obi-Wan thought. Attachment was difficult. One of the hardest mistakes to make, Qui-Gon had said, one day, casually, over a cup of tea, was that Jedi students
always thought there was an end-point. A Jedi chose, and walked the Jedi path every day. That was all. There was no mastery, no perfect Jedi. Mastery was not the destination; it was, in itself, a journey.

As the dawn light fell across the stained glass windows, casting fragments of coloured light across the marble floor, Obi-Wan breathed. He felt a little—just a little—of the pain ease. Perhaps one day, he would not feel the attachment to his old Master stirring in him. For now, he acknowledged the pain, recognised it for what it was, and with the carefulness of Jedi discipline, stepped back from it.

He remembered, abruptly, how Qui-Gon had been like, weeks after the death of Tahl. Dealing with grief, Obi-Wan realised, was a long, slow process. He could accept that. Perhaps one day, he'd even be able to talk about his Master without feeling the sharp pang in his chest.

Without regret.

Without attachment.

He almost—almost—laughed. Or cried. "Is this your final lesson to me, Master?" he asked, aloud. "I am instructed."

He didn't know how to go on. But he had to try. Bit by bit, step by step, until he could breathe again. He bowed his head.

"Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan straightened up. "Anakin. How did you get here?"

Anakin shrugged, but looked as though he was very much trying to hide a triumphant smirk. "I overheard what the Masters were saying. Mister Qui-Gon's comlink was already set on a Jedi frequency so I just had to look up the ID he'd most frequently commed and ran a specific tight-beam trace from there."

Obi-Wan blinked. Clearly, he thought, Anakin wasn't going to be having difficulty with the technical and mechanical classes at the Jedi Temple.

"And you weren't in your room," Anakin added. "I was watching, last night. After Gallia went off to get some sleep."

"Master Gallia, Anakin," Obi-Wan corrected. "She's a member of the Jedi Council and deserves respect."

"Well, she was watching me like a kutaka hound," Anakin said, "And we went and looked at the library and she got me a data-reader. But anyway. I guess you didn't even eat last night, huh? So I went and found someone who took me to the kitchens and got you this." He held out a large platter of buttered pastries, fresh fruit, preserves, and cheeses. "Couldn't carry the drink though. Sorry."

He was touched by the gesture. It had been a large platter, and he thought of Anakin struggling to carry it here. "Thank you, Anakin, but…" he thought of saying that he wasn't feeling very hungry, but the boy was right. He hadn't eaten last night. And he saw it already: the first hints of disappointment in Anakin's eyes. "…But I don't think this is the right place, do you?"

Anakin chewed on his lip. "Right. Because Mister Qui-Gon is here." He deflated, visibly. "Well, what about I say goodbye to him and then we go and find somewhere else to eat?"
"We can do that," Obi-Wan agreed. He took the platter from Anakin and waited as Anakin approached the body.

"Hi, Mister Qui-Gon," Anakin said, quietly. "I just wanted to thank you for freeing me, even though you couldn't free Mum. I'll come back and free her—all of them—someday. Thank you for letting me be a Jedi. If they let me in, I promise I'll never disappoint you. I'll be the best Jedi they've had in years. I'll never forget you and what you've done for me."

He bent down, pressed Qui-Gon's still hand lightly, and then let go. He looked up at Obi-Wan, his eyes shining in the light. "Can we go?" he asked, hurriedly. He scrubbed at his eyes, furiously, with his tunic sleeve.

Obi-Wan nodded. If either of them noticed the dampness on the other's tunic sleeves, neither of them mentioned it.

It seemed only polite.

Anakin had stared a little too longingly at the food, there was way too much for Obi-Wan himself to finish, even if he had much of an appetite, and he remembered, as if it were yesterday, how he'd spent most of his Padawan years, it seemed, eating.

It had been somewhat a relief to leave the relentless hunger of his teenage years behind him.

So he invited Anakin to share the breakfast, and Anakin had cheered and immediately begun stuffing jam-smeared pastries into his mouth.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan chided, "The food isn't going to run away from you."

"'Course it might," Anakin said, cheekily, through a mouth of flaky pastry, spilling crumbs onto the floor of the small side-chamber. "I don't know what food on other worlds does."

Obi-Wan looked at him.

"Well, maybe," Anakin said. "Or you might eat it." He stared pointedly at the mostly-untouched slice of toast Obi-Wan was holding.

Obi-Wan sighed and took an unenthusiastic bite out of it.

"Right," Anakin said. "Maybe that wasn't going to happen."

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said, "If you would please not talk with your mouth full…"

Anakin looked mildly disgruntled and interested at the same time, if that was even possible. "Now you're sounding like Mum," he informed Obi-Wan. He picked up an orange and began to peel it.

"I should hope that your mother was very much for your adopting sound table manners," Obi-Wan retorted.

Anakin grinned through a mouthful of orange pulp, juices trickling. "She tried," he said.

All of a sudden, it struck Obi-Wan. He was fairly certain that Anakin had never behaved like this for Qui-Gon and he couldn't even recall an incident in which Anakin had a scuffle with Padmé Amidala over basic table manners. Which only meant… "You're doing this deliberately, aren't you?" he asked. He stared at Anakin. The boy stared back at him.
"Would I be?" Anakin asked. He was a study in innocence, Obi-Wan thought, grimly. He knew better now. You've got your work cut out for you, Kenobi, Even Piell had said.

Now, Obi-Wan was beginning to fear that Even Piell was very, very right.

"Can I go with you?" Anakin asked, and winced. He wasn't intending on sounding like an overly-attached kutaka pup. He quickly added, "I know Gallia tries—"

"Master Gallia," Obi-Wan corrected, absently.

"—but she's sort of really boring. And scary."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. His eyes glinted with amusement. "No one's ever said that before," he informed Anakin. "Although I have heard someone use rather, ah, interesting words to describe her." Almost at once though, his expression darkened. It wasn't quite the look that passed Obi-Wan's face when he talked about Qui-Gon but it was similar. Anakin wondered what that was about.

"Well, like I told you, she took me to the library. Someone'd caused a big mess in it yesterday. That was the interesting part. Other than that…"

Obi-Wan said, "Where?"

Anakin frowned. "The library," he repeated, confused. "There was a stack of really old books. Someone'd made a mess of the whole thing. The librarian was really upset about it. Said they were a bunch of books on Naboo history. I couldn't read most of them but one of them was on this thing called the Council of Five." He made a face. "Boring stuff."

Obi-Wan froze. "Anakin," he said, his voice gone very calm. "I need you to try to recall for me what you read about the Council of Five. Can you do that?"

Anakin tried very hard to remember. He thought back; he knew he had an extraordinarily strong memory, but he hadn't understood most of the details, and he'd found the book a little dry. "Something about the Council of Five electing the next Queen or King of Naboo," he mumbled. "I can't remember anything else."

He looked at Obi-Wan, wondering what the man would do.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Do you remember where the library is?"

Anakin nodded, confidently. "Yes."

"Then we're going together," Obi-Wan instructed. "Lead the way, Anakin."

"What's so important about the Council?" Anakin wanted to know.

Obi-Wan was frowning, now.

"S'okay," Anakin mumbled. That kind of look had gotten him into trouble, back when it was Watto. Even though he wanted to know why Obi-Wan was acting as though someone'd put fire ants in his soup.

Obi-Wan said, carefully, "It's somewhat restricted information, Anakin, and I'm thinking of the best way to put it. We think, though we aren't sure, that there is a connection between the Five and the attack on myself and Captain Panaka. If the Council of Five bears any relation to the Five…" he shrugged. "It may be relevant. It may not be. But it's significant enough to find out, don't you think?"
Anakin nodded. "Sure is," he agreed, somewhat more cheerfully now. Even if he wasn't a Jedi, he thought, obstinately, he'd have done this much: he'd have saved a whole planet, and Obi-Wan was letting him help investigate. Surely that was something! "C'mon then. It's right this way."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Hi guys! Thanks to all who reviewed, or even favved and alerted this story. Here's the next chapter! As a quick update: life's been a bit stressful of late, so I might not quite be on time with installments of this story. I had initially planned on weekly updates, but that's clearly not very possible. Still, I have plans for all four parts of this story, each with their separate arcs, so I can promise this fic will not be abandoned. Just be patient and have faith ;)

As it stands, we are quite a few more chapters away from the conclusion of Part I but the end is in sight!

This chapter, I think, is strange in that it has neither action nor too much Anakin&Obi-Wan interaction. In fact, the majority of the chapter is a discourse between Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan during a trial Obi-Wan undertakes as a senior Padawan. As a student of philosophy, I've attempted to do justice to what I see as Jedi philosophy, but as a comment, this is how I think these things work. If there's anything philosophy has taught us, it's that for all 'consensus positions' that exist, there's going to be a bunch of people who don't hold that position, there's going to be people who hold weird variations of that consensus position, there's going to be people who just don't care, and there's going to be people who hold extremely weird positions that you'd think weren't possible.

At this point, Obi-Wan occupies the orthodox position, with a bit more depth and rigour than your average Jedi. (I see people like Garen going, "Okay, anger is bad, I don't really care why, the philosophical underpinnings are for boring people.") Qui-Gon, as you might expect, is a radical, or at least he holds a different position. The Potentium people are not actually radicals; they differ subtly from the orthodox view, but the Sith is in the details, as they say...

Here are the main differences between what I am presenting as the orthodox view and the Potentium view:

1. The Force is not inherently 'good', as the Potentium view would have it. Instead, the Dark Side is a deviation from/corruption of the Force. Why the Dark Side is bad requires more explication and a moral theory, but it generally goes back to the Dark Side being generated by attitudes which promote suffering.

2. Goodness and badness do reside in the Force-user; in addition, it is the badness in the Force-user which taints the Force, corrupting it to yield the Dark Side. The Dark Side is not an independent entity. But unlike the Potentium view, this does not license Jedi to explore 'dark aspects' of the Force. The ontology of the Dark Side comes apart from what the Jedi ought to do with the Force. (See: the moral badness of the Dark Side is a separate issue from the ontology/metaphysics of the Dark Side.)

I'm exploring more of the orthodox view in later chapters, particularly in Anakin's first lesson. (Well 'first-first' since he's technically already had one.) The intellectual history I
have envisioned for this (it is in the background and may become more prominent later) has the current orthodox view being what was initially a radical view. If you remember, in KOTOR, the Jedi Code is different. The preference of the Jedi for training young children doesn't as well become entrenched until around the time of Bane. As I see it, Odan-Urr codified what was essentially considered a radical position. This position did not gain too much currency until the Jedi were facing a major threat during the war with the Sith, and at the end of the Battle of Ruusan, that position gradually became the consensus position. Future Jedi thinkers merely built upon and added layers to this position. So, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon are not necessarily correct: they're just presenting their views on a particular issue. It's important to keep in mind that this view has been conditioned by sociohistorical forces.

Whew. Long A/N. See you around, guys, and I hope you've enjoyed this chapter.

-Ammar
Chapter Nine: Promises Made

Anakin, Obi-Wan couldn't help noticing, had a clear sense for the spaces within the palace. That, he thought, would go on to serve him well as a Jedi. He traced the corridors with a certain degree of confidence, although they made a few wrong turnings here and there and had, eventually, to ask for help from a passing member of the palace staff.

Eventually though, they located the palace library, and Obi-Wan requested to speak to the librarian. She was, he noticed, an aging woman who reminded him of none other than Jocasta Nu, the fearsome guardian of the Temple Archives. "A pleasure to help the Jedi," she said, looking at him, though much of that pleasure wasn't readily apparent. "What is it?"

"My young friend here," Obi-Wan said, gesturing to a restive Anakin, "Mentioned the library was in a state of disorder yesterday."

The librarian pursed her lips and frowned. "Well, yes," she finally admitted, grudgingly. "One particular section had been raided. Historical manuscripts—most of them very old, and pertaining only to Naboo. We're still assessing the damage, but given that no one had ever fully catalogued our historical collection in the first place due to time constraints…” she shrugged, bleakly. "It may be impossible to trace what has been lost," she finished. Her shoulders slumped. "I am hopeful that working from incomplete records might help us extrapolate to the extent of the damage, but…” she shook her head. "My predecessor was lazy and a fool."

"Did the security cams—"

She shook her head, again. "We don't have security cams here, Master Jedi," she said. "Security budget doesn't extend to it. Tharé knows, I've been trying to talk Captain Panaka into it for ages but he says there are more relevant parts of the palace to upgrade, though with all the concern he shows irreplaceable historical manuscripts…” she murmured a few choice words under her breath.

"Anakin also mentioned seeing a book on the Council of Five. Would you be able to tell me anything about them?"

"Book or Council?" she asked, shrewdly.

"Preferably the Council," Obi-Wan said. He had, after all, a shortage of time. He was fairly certain that Mace Windu expected a report soon. "Do they have any connection to the Five?"

The librarian nodded. "The Five are the modern descendents of the loose coalition whose representatives always sat on the Council of Five. In the past, the Council of Five were theoretically, mind, supposed to represent the different strands that were important interests on Naboo."

"Mineral wealth," Obi-Wan said. "The legislature and judiciary. The homefarms. The upland vineyards. And banking." He looked at the librarian to see if he'd gotten them all correct, and she nodded approvingly.
"Just so," she said. "Over time, the Five developed a stranglehold over the interests they were to represent. The position became a hereditary one. And then Queen Maré eventually abolished both the Council and the need for the Council to vote for the Monarch out of a pool of people-nominated candidates." She smiled faintly. "The Maréan reforms did much for democracy on Naboo."

"So I see," Obi-Wan said. He bowed his head to her in thanks. "Come, Anakin."

He hesitated before leaving and returned to the library counter. "Could you comm me when you develop a clearer idea of what is missing, or what the perpetrators are looking for?" he asked, and she bemusedly allowed him to scribble down his comlink ID on a fresh durasheet.

"I'll do that."

"Thank you."

"Can you show me the ransacked area?" Obi-Wan asked Anakin quietly.

The boy frowned, but then nodded. "Here," he said, leading Obi-Wan to a group of shelves near the right side of the library. "This one," he added, showing where a shelf had been almost hidden by a tall shelf on Naboo law.

Obi-Wan nodded absently and looked through the shelves. Most of the books, he noticed, had already been replaced on the shelves. The scripts were unfamiliar, but he thought he knew what they were. "Naboo script," he muttered aloud. "No wonder you couldn't read it."

"They have their own alphabet?" Anakin wanted to know.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "Aurek-Besh is standard but some planets developed their own form of script from times prior to galactic contact. Naboo is one of those planets with a rich history."

"Wow," Anakin said. "Can you read it?"

Obi-Wan glanced at him. "No," he said, simply. "There are Jedi who know many old languages and writing systems, but I can't read Naboo script. Perhaps the Queen can."

"Padmé?" Anakin asked. "I'd bet."

Obi-Wan browsed the books, frowning. Most of them were in Naboo script but some were in Basic. As the librarian had said, they all appeared to be old manuscripts, dating from some point or other in Naboo history. It was hard to tell what whoever it was had been looking for, if they had, Obi-Wan thought, indeed at all been looking.

"You think there's something big about this?"

Obi-Wan pursed his lips. "Perhaps," he said, noncommittally. "My instincts tell me that something matters about what happened here." He shrugged. "It may be a dead end. But it's worth looking into."

"Why?"

Obi-Wan hesitated, and sighed. He had to start, he told himself, sooner or later, and the more Anakin was introduced to how a Jedi team on a mission had to think, the more used to it he would become. He was doing Anakin no favours by shutting him out right now. "Anakin," he said. "Think about it. This is what we know. We know someone hired the assassin. We know the assassin did not go after the Queen, so presumably he wasn't hired to kill her."
"What if he hired someone else who never showed up?" Anakin wanted to know.

"Possible," Obi-Wan conceded. "But we've seen no sign of that. In addition, Resnik is—was a professional. It would be very strange for him to have lapsed with regard to who he hired. Understand this, Anakin—the simple explanation is often the best."

"Okay," Anakin said.

"So," Obi-Wan said, drawing back together the strands of his thought. "We know the library was ransacked. Likely by someone on palace grounds. To postulate two breaches of palace security is not impossible, but somewhat extravagant at the moment. The best time I can think of, for someone to enter the library without being seen, was very early in the morning when the security systems had been activated and palace security was having collective hysterics about how to protect the Queen. Do you see?"

Anakin nodded, slowly. "Now I do," he said, frowning. "So they're connected. Someone attacks you and Captain Panaka as a distraction…"

"We don't know for sure if it's a distraction," Obi-Wan corrected, gently. "It could just as easily be two people working together."

Anakin said, shrewdly, "But isn't that no longer a simple explanation?"

"Experience tells you what is within the range of possibility," Obi-Wan replied. He studied the shelf for any clues, but he did not notice anything left behind—no scrap of cloth, no hint as to who had come by. "Don't forget to keep an eye on other possible explanations. It doesn't do to get blindsided later on."

He sighed. "However, you are right. It would require someone else working with whoever hired Resnik. And then we need to explain more things: why they're working together, why whoever it was hired Resnik—which still remains unexplained—and why they were trying to kill myself and Captain Panaka as it were."

"So you think it's two people after all?"

"I think," Obi-Wan said, "That I shall have to keep an open mind on the situation."

Anakin groaned.

Mace Windu was nowhere to be found, and when Obi-Wan commed him, he got a terse response ordering him to meet him in the hangar. Anakin's eyes lit up at once when he heard it.

The hangar was busy; mechanics repaired damaged starfighters, still, and pilots were taking off in shifts to fly patrols across the planet surface and to ensure that the Trade Federation hadn't left any forces on the ground.

The destruction of the Droid Control Ship should've sent all the Federation's battle droids into immobility, but as always, no one wanted to risk finding out weeks later about some nasty surprise.

Obi-Wan considered keeping Anakin with him as he reported to Mace Windu, but in the end, he allowed the boy to wander off and talk to one of the mechanics working on the battered wing of a starfighter. He extracted a promise from the boy to not disturb the man, and the mechanic had assured him that Anakin's curiosity was welcome.
The door to the power core slid open and Mace Windu strode out. "Good," he said. "You're here." He folded his arms across his chest and added, "I had to make sure."

"That he was dead?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

"Among other things," Mace Windu said, and sighed. "Tell me the most striking thing about the Sith, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan thought about it. That they used the Dark Side wasn't enough; so did fallen Jedi. So did angry Initiates. But further thought netted him the answer; memory swimming to the surface of his mind like the silver gleaming fish in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. "The Rule of Two," he said. "At any given time, there is at most two Sith: a Master to embody power and an apprentice to crave it."

Mace nodded, his hooded eyes never leaving Obi-Wan's. "Which was killed?" he asked softly. "Master or apprentice?"

Abruptly, Obi-Wan shivered. He hoped it was the Master. He knew there was no good answer; either way you looked at it, there was at least one Sith Lord out there and it did not do to underestimate them.

Mace said, crisply, "You understand my concern, then. We also needed to know if there was any way to retrieve the body to obtain hints on his origins, to allow us to track down the remaining Sith."

He shook his head. "Nothing. Nute Gunray and Rune Haako claim they know nothing."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said. But he found that difficult to believe.

Mace agreed with that. "How did they come into the acquaintance of the Sith Lord in the first place? There are too many questions that remain unanswered for their claim of ignorance to be satisfactory. In any case, this is not the question at hand. What of the Five, then?"

Obi-Wan briefly outlined the meeting with the Five for him. Mace nodded, slowly taking it in. "Your opinion?" he asked.

"They have people inside the palace. They knew about the assassination attempt, even when the palace had been put under a security lockdown," Obi-Wan said, simply. "That alone neither exonerates nor implicates them. If they had people inside the palace, why did Resnik need to slip into the palace? But that has a simple answer: perhaps he wasn't supposed to be traceable back to them."

He shook his head slightly. "Even so, Resnik had to get his information from somewhere. He knew about palace routines. He knew about the layout of the palace. He fled into the secret passages. He knew to get a slicer to break into the palace security systems and to trap us. That alone means the Five remain a viable option."

Mace nodded shortly and motioned for Obi-Wan to go on.

He shifted to the next issues that had occurred to him, as he'd thought about the events of the meeting. "They spent most of the meeting pleading all sorts of grievances," he said. "And they could not realistically expect the Queen to rule in their favour; even if they did, this did not urgently require an audience. I think they were keen to assert their loyalty by reminding the Queen that they approach her as supplicants, and that they dislike the Trade Federation." He thought, in particular, of the Velerra complaint. "It was more about the assassination than anything," he concluded. "They're nervous."

That was his primary impression: they were all nervous and they were all hiding something. Just
what it was, Obi-Wan was less certain of.

"And your impressions of those present?"

"Sirdaé Erksen speaks for the Five," Obi-Wan said, simply. "Or at least, she would like to appear as if she does. For that reason, if we investigate the Five, then we should speak to her. With power often comes knowledge, after all. And control. Ren Yvar is arrogant. Whether that extends to hiring a bounty hunter is difficult to say. Jurité Velarra appears to be blunt and fairly honest. But that could easily be a cultivated impression. In a coalition as powerful as the Five, no representative ought to lack diplomatic savvy. Iben Derriva is swift to advocate investigation and punishment. Perhaps too swift. And Nurié Helukala wants to disassociate herself from Erksen."

Mace Windu nodded, once again. "It is difficult to know what hides behind all of these," he agreed, gravely. He sighed. "Keep the boy close," he said, at last. "I do not feel any danger at present, but it is better to not let him run wild."

"Yes, Master Windu," Obi-Wan murmured, acknowledging the comment.

"I think it is worth speaking to the Five," Mace Windu added. "I will countenance an investigation into them. They seem to know more than they are letting on."

"I had that impression," Obi-Wan agreed.

"Good," Mace said. "Speak to the Five. Determine if they may be involved."

"In the conspiracy?"

Mace shook his head. "I don't know," he admitted bluntly. "There may be one. There may not be. Experience tells me that the Queen is right: some of her people will have collaborated with the Trade Federation. But collaboration is a different beast from a conspiracy to assume much of the power in Naboo, or a conspiracy to have the Queen killed. So you need to speak with the Five."

"I will, Master."

"And I will continue to investigate," Mace Windu concluded. "May the Force be with you, then." It was a dismissal—and a slightly curt one. Perhaps, Obi-Wan thought, he is preoccupied.

"May it be with both of us."

He turned to leave when Mace's voice stopped him.

"Obi-Wan?"

"Master Windu?" he replied.

"Be careful."

For some reason, Obi-Wan had the strangest feeling that Mace wasn't quite referring to the Five, or the conversations he would be having with them.

Anakin tried not to fidget. Obi-Wan stood close beside him, dressed in freshly-laundered robes. Next to him, Anakin felt positively shabby in the loose, stained tunic and leggings that had accompanied him from Tatooine.

The palace guards had all lined up on the grounds to welcome the Supreme Chancellor. Anakin
wondered if they got bored or hot or tired, just standing there like that. He couldn't see himself doing it, without scratching, itching, or even just shifting from one foot to another. It'd have driven him sand-crazy.

"How long is it going to be?" Anakin whispered.

Obi-Wan glanced at him, barely turning his head. "As long as necessary," he said, firmly. "They need to run all sorts of security checks before the Chancellor is allowed on the palace grounds. A single assassination attempt now would cause all sorts of trouble."

"I know," Anakin muttered, even though he hadn't thought of that. He wasn't going to tell Obi-Wan that, though. And the Jedi certainly didn't seem inclined to call him on it.

According to Obi-Wan, Padmé had said that the Supreme Chancellor had told her he wanted to personally greet and thank the two heroes who had saved his home planet. Another of the things I'll have done, he told himself, even if the Jedi think I'm not good enough for them. He'd have met and been thanked personally by the Supreme Chancellor.

He tried not to twitch.

He felt a tentative hand touch his shoulder. "Patience, Anakin," Obi-Wan said.

"I know," Anakin grumbled. All this standing around was starting to get to him.

Finally, a group of guards in blue, flowing robes and who wore full-cheeked helmets of gleaming plasteel exited the hangar and marched across the palace grounds. Surrounded by his guards, the Supreme Chancellor approached them.

"His name is Palpatine," Obi-Wan had told him, earlier. "And you refer to him as 'your Excellency'. Never with his first name."

Palpatine seemed like a kind man, Anakin thought. He was smiling; his eyes gleamed with a warm sort of amusement, and he was balding, his hair receding from his forehead. It wasn't what he'd expected the man to look like. He'd thought of someone stricter; someone who wasn't going to take no for an answer, and who ran the galaxy.

"Jedi Kenobi," Palpatine greeted, with a fond smile. "And young Anakin." He briefly shook Obi-Wan's hand, and then Anakin's. "I'm given to understand that I should congratulate you—it's Knight Kenobi now, isn't it? You have my condolences on the death of Qui-Gon Jinn. He was a Jedi I greatly respected, and the galaxy is all the more diminished by his passing."

Obi-Wan nodded. "You are too kind, your Excellency," he murmured. But Anakin could see that Look in his eyes again.

"Nonsense," Palpatine said, waving that off. "You saved my home planet, both of you. I will always be grateful for what you've done at a time when the gaze of the galaxy turned aside from Naboo." He looked directly at Anakin. "You're very gifted for one so young."

"I race Pods," Anakin said. "A starfighter is nothing." It was a bit of a lie; he hadn't known what he was doing, but Palpatine beamed.

"Why, my boy!" he said. "That was most impressive. Fully-grown and trained pilots were unable to take down that ship, or so I hear. It wasn't 'nothing'; it was one of the most amazing displays of flying they'd ever seen. I'll be following your career with much interest, I can promise you that."
"Thank you, your Excellency," Anakin said, resisting the urge to crow. The Supreme Chancellor of the Republic thought what he'd done was impressive and amazing and had said he would be watching Anakin. Did it get any better than this?

"The Force is strong with Anakin," Obi-Wan said. For some reason, he'd shifted, just slightly, so it seemed as though he was trying to angle himself to put himself between Anakin and the Chancellor.

"So I hear," Palpatine said. "I'm sure he'll make a fine Jedi."

"It's not decided yet," Anakin said.

Palpatine looked positively offended. "Now," he said to Obi-Wan, "This is preposterous. You've said he's strong in the Force, and he's proven himself a hero and saved Naboo from one of the greatest threats she has ever faced. Surely he deserves to be a member of the Order?"

Obi-Wan said, carefully, "The matter is not mine to decide, your Excellency. And Anakin's fate is a strict matter of Jedi policy."

Palpatine shook his head. "I know, I know," he said. "You're politely trying to tell me to mind my own business. I can accept that. I am, after all, getting on a little in years, and no doubt you think I'm being rather nosy. Particularly when the Jedi have always enjoyed independence in their own affairs." He smiled, faintly. "But at least hear me out. Will you do that?"

Obi-Wan inclined his head, after a few moments.

"This boy is special," Palpatine said. "And if the Jedi chooses to waste his potential by rejecting him, then well, I'd be happy to take him on. I owe both of you a debt I can never repay."

Obi-Wan was shaking his head. "I am responsible for Anakin," he said.

"It was an offer, nothing more," Palpatine said. "After all, I can only plead and cajole. Still, I do hope you will take the appeal of an aging man under consideration. A special boy like Anakin," he smiled indulgently at Anakin, "I imagine he'd need a great deal of care and warmth. It is not something one immediately associates with the Jedi Order."

"I will consider that," Obi-Wan said. His expression had returned to being unreadable, Anakin decided, looking up to study the man's features.

"Well, then," Palpatine said. He turned back to Anakin. "If you ever find yourself needing help," he said, "Or even a friendly face, know that my door is always open to you. Naturally, I make you the same offer as well, Knight Kenobi."

"Thank you, your Excellency," Obi-Wan murmured. Anakin repeated his words.

The Chancellor smiled at Obi-Wan—winked at Anakin!—and then walked on, his entourage forming up sharply around him.

"Did you hear that?" Anakin managed, fairly bursting with excitement.

Obi-Wan shot him a quelling glance. If anything, Anakin thought, the Jedi did not seem to be as thrilled as he felt. "Yes," Obi-Wan said, at last. "I did." He let out a short sigh. "Politicians."

"What do you mean?" Anakin wanted to know.

"He's a politician," Obi-Wan said, in a hushed voice, folding his arms across his chest. "Their job is
to appear sincere and approachable, Anakin."

"Are you saying he's not?" Anakin demanded.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Anakin, I really don't know."

"Mum always said not to judge people you didn't know," Anakin found himself retorting, hotly.

Obi-Wan said, "She's right." He sighed. "Maste—Qui-Gon would always remind me not to do that. Nevertheless. I grant there are genuine and kind politicians, but you do not know anything of the Supreme Chancellor, let alone his motivations."

"Neither do you," Anakin pointed out.

Obi-Wan nodded, accepting the point. "I'm not saying he's a bad man, Anakin," he said, firmly. "I'm just asking you to be wary. Can you do that?"

Anakin thought about it. Mum had always said, he thought, that one of the greatest problems with people was that they were too suspicious to help other people. "We have to be there for each other, Ani," she told him, one night as she carefully cleaned out his scraped knuckles and said nothing about the bruises on his back. "And if we don't help each other, who will?"

"I guess," he said, finally. It came out a little grudgingly.

"You're not home anymore," the quiet voice in his head reminded him. Not for the first time, he wondered what he'd lost.

Night was falling; enveloping the palace as though someone had gently let fall a curtain. Everyone was gathering in the ceremonial chamber on the tallest spire of the royal palace to mourn the passing of Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn.

Not Obi-Wan. Not yet.

He was alone, for now. He was sharply aware that this privacy was a mere illusion, afforded him by simple courtesy; that the other bearers awaited him in the antechamber adjoining this one.

He had sat out his vigil, as was proper. With Anakin, he'd said farewell to his Master. But how did one ever properly say goodbye? How did someone step away from their grief, from the haunting ache of loss?

It was the weight of all the words left unsaid; all the questions left unasked, all the things left undone that nearly staggered him, and he bore it all on his shoulders. That was what saying goodbye meant; it meant acknowledging that weight, acknowledging what it meant for a life to be cut off, acknowledging there would never be another 'tomorrow', another 'next time'; that Qui-Gon would never cut off his braid (Master Yoda had done so), that he would never tell Obi-Wan that he was proud of him, never offer him that fond smile with warmth in his eyes, never press his hand lightly to Obi-Wan's shoulder in that familiar way he did when he was acknowledging his apprentice…

All of these things seemed to dwell in the silence, here and now, resonating in the hollow space between his ribs, made acute by the awareness that the others waited. It was time to let go; time to commit his Master to the flames.

From a pouch on his utility belt, Obi-Wan produced the severed braid, the hair crisped and blackened on the end where Master Yoda had severed it by the glowing blade of his lightsaber. His vision
wavered and blurred; he felt a painful tightness in his throat and chest as he bent forward and blindly wove among his Master's cold and unresponsive fingers.

Qui-Gon would take the braid with him to the fires. It seemed only right.

He refused to crack; forced himself to keep breathing, until the tight band that had worked its way around his chest had loosened and he felt as though he could speak to those waiting outside with as much of an approximation to Jedi serenity as he could manage.

He pressed his hand to Qui-Gon's one last time, as if to take with him whatever trace of his Master's life and spirit that lingered—if it did at all—and then stood up and made his way to the antechamber.

Three others waited there.

A Jedi's pallbearers were normally selected from those who had known the Jedi well in life. As Qui-Gon's surviving apprentice, Obi-Wan would always have been one of the four. Perhaps, he found himself thinking, Tahl would have been as well, had she lived. It was only natural. His Master had loved Tahl, with a fierce simplicity that Obi-Wan still found himself surprised by.

With only members of the Jedi Council on Naboo, the pool of potential bearers had been narrowed down, and yet Obi-Wan knew his Master had not been cheated by this. Mace Windu was one of them; he knelt now in meditation, no sign of impatience on his face. Beside him, Adi Gallia sat cross-legged instead. Unlike Qui-Gon, she favoured that pose for meditation instead of the kneeling stance that some other Masters taught. Of the entire Council, she had worked the most with Qui-Gon. For that reason, she was here now, to bear him to the flames at the end.

The last, in a move that Obi-Wan would later admit he was surprised by, was Padmé Amidala, dressed as the simple handmaiden he'd known her briefly as, unadorned by any of the regalia or facial paint he had begun to associate with her regal persona.

It should've been Master Yoda, they all knew. Yoda had trained Dooku, who had trained Qui-Gon, and Qui-Gon and the diminutive Grandmaster of the Jedi Order had a close relationship. Perhaps seeing the startlement on his features, Padmé raised her chin and said, simply, "I asked. He offered to yield his place to me. He saved my planet."

There wasn't anything he could say to that. It wasn't about friendship, Obi-Wan thought, in that moment. It was a flash of insight that startled him. They were gathering to honour Qui-Gon's life, and from that perspective, Padmé Amidala had just as much right—if not more—to stand with the other bearers. Perhaps Master Yoda had known that, even as he ceded his place to the young Queen of Naboo.

He inclined his head to her; in acceptance as much as in greeting.

Mace Windu stood. Gravely, deliberately, he drew the tan hood of his Jedi robe over his face, shadowing it. There were no words from him, not now. Obi-Wan echoed the gesture, drawing the hood of his mended robe over his head. Even Padmé wore a simple hooded cloak of a deep forest green; a few shades less brilliant than the hue of Qui-Gon's lightsaber.

Adi Gallia nodded to him. "Are you ready?" she asked quietly.

"I am." His voice was more assured than he had expected.

"Let us begin, then," Mace Windu said. They assumed their positions and then entered the chamber where Qui-Gon Jinn lay in repose to bear the Jedi Master on his final journey to the waiting fires.
Anakin had seen death, many times before on Tatooine. There, death came in many forms; the desert loomed all around them, and people who were careless, who neglected to take the proper precautions or who simply couldn't afford to do so died.

Shmi had told him stories of junkmen: scavengers who braved the heat to wander the desert, searching for salvage they could take back to Anchorhead or Mos Espa or Mos Eisley to sell for a price. For all they were vagrants, junkmen were more trusted than the Jawas, and most moisture farmers preferred to conduct their business with junkmen.

He remembered one of them: a stocky woman, with dark eyes and a leathery face. Her hair was tied back behind her, and her hand was quick to fall to her blaster. They called her Finder, he remembered, because she seemed to have a sixth-sense for where the best salvage was. Watto'd even bought a few rare converters off her before.

One day, a tall man with fair hair came to the store.

"What's your business?" Watto asked, in his cracked voice.

The man showed him something—what it was, Anakin couldn't make out. He was busy cleaning the sand that had gotten into an old and mostly defunct astromech droid. And then, he said, aloud, "Finder's dead. I was to bring this to you."

"Well, well," Watto said, folding his arms across his chest. "Say, Finder was supposed to bring me five of the E-419s and I only see three of them here. My deal's with her, not with you."

The man said, coolly, "Well, then I suppose I could take them to another dealer."

"Wait."

Posturing, Anakin thought. That was what they were doing.

Watto's voice shifted, turning more cajoling. "Well, now, I suppose I could offer you a deal..." he named a number of truguts that made Anakin's eyes widen. He stared down at his hands, pausing in his cleaning. With that amount of money, he thought, he could buy the parts they needed to fix the ventilator at home. He knew he could hear his mum coughing at night, from the fine sand, and he wished fervently that his skills were better—he'd scavenged and salvaged what he could, but sometimes clever engineering was no replacement for the needed parts.

So Finder was dead. Anakin found he couldn't bring himself to care. She had ignored him—he was, after all, just a slave—and without that interaction, he had no reason to miss her. Or if he did, it was only in the way he missed a regular fixture of his life suddenly gone missing—it was not so much who they were as the stability they had represented. Gone.

Slaves died, all the time.

Fahran's owners hadn't been understanding. They'd sent her into the desert to collect an owed sum from a family of moisture farmers. The landspeeder had broken or something like that—Anakin couldn't remember what it was—and she'd died of exposure to the heat, engine oil pooling thick in her throat. She'd died desperate.

Finder had found her and brought her back. The owners had cursed. They wanted the money. Slaves were easily replaceable and weren't worth the junkman's fee.

Imirn and Deshli, killed in a Tusken raid. They shouldn't have been stranded in the desert but they had been. He remembered the loose way Turahn's skin hung off his back after he'd been flogged.
repeatedly by his owner for breaking an expensive droid, the exact shattering quality of his mother's sobs as she took down the broken, limp body of her son at dusk.

Turahn had been ten. Anakin had been six, then. He remembered Shmi clutching him to her, saying, "Don't look, Ani."

He said, "I have to, Mum." Knew, even then, with a deep, aching part of him that he had to look, that it had to matter, that someone's pain had to be acknowledged and made real because the greatest injustice was to pretend none of them cared. That Turahn didn't matter; that a bright, laughing boy with nimble fingers who was always quick to share his water deserved to be forgotten.

She understood, even though he was six and hadn't the words to express it.

She just said, "Oh, Ani," and clutched him all the more fiercely. And then she went over and spoke to Turahn's mother, comforting her, and Anakin distantly remembered her later at the dinner table.

She'd died two years later, and he couldn't remember what it was for.

Life on Tatooine was hard and cruel and slaves died in so many ways, and for all you witnessed, for all it broke your heart and filled it with anger that ground up your chest like shards of broken glass, you grew numb, after a while. Stopped remembering with sharp, clear acuity.

It hurt less, that way.

He wasn't proud of it.

He watched as the four Jedi came in, all of them hooded, bearing Qui-Gon's body among them. He wasn't going to cry, Anakin told himself. He'd already said goodbye, hadn't he? But still, his vision blurred as the four figures brought the body to the pyre where Master Yoda waited, leaning heavily on his stick.

He thought he recognised Obi-Wan among them. He couldn't say why. Perhaps it was something of the set of his shoulders; the way he always held himself ramrod-straight, and yet stood as though he bore the weight of a planet on them.

The body was laid to rest on the cremation pyre and then Master Yoda strode forward. He received a burning torch from the Queen, and approached the body. For a moment, Anakin thought he would be the one to touch the flame to wood, but instead, the Jedi Master beckoned with a clawed hand.

One of the figures turned to him. Obi-Wan, Anakin thought fiercely. It had to be. The figure bent down. Yoda's mouth moved; he was saying something. What it was, Anakin couldn't make out. Perhaps Obi-Wan was saying something in return, but his back was to Anakin as he faced the senior Jedi. Eventually, Yoda nodded. Such a simple gesture.

And then he bent down and carefully touched the tip of the burning torch to the fire.

Flames didn't spring up immediately; they spread slowly, from the glowing tip of the torch, enveloping the pyre and Qui-Gon's body.

At last, the four figures withdrew. Obi-Wan had explained it to him earlier; this would be the main part of the cremation, where they stood in silence, the Jedi contemplating the life of service that Qui-Gon had led and the Naboo among them offering their respects to the deceased.

He glanced around him. It surprised him, how many of them there were. He recognised many of Padmé's guards in the room. The Chancellor stood with them, next to Padmé herself in her
ceremonial regalia.

She looked at him. She didn't smile or acknowledge him.

It stung, a little. Maybe, Anakin reasoned, she was busy paying her respects, too.

The hooded figure, whom Anakin now recognised as Obi-Wan, stepped into place beside him. He recognised the distance in those blue-grey eyes; clouded, now, as they gazed at the pyre. If they glittered with unshed tears, Anakin said nothing. After all, Obi-Wan must've seen his own eyes watering, and he'd said nothing about them either.

They could both pretend, couldn't they?

Eventually, the flames spread, consuming Qui-Gon's body. Anakin struggled between two conflicting emotions: a restless sort of boredom and the gaping feeling of loss, of uncertainty, of losing the only Jedi who had treated him kindly, whom he'd thought of, in a small way, as a father. Beyond the flames, in the gathered dusk, he saw the nagging uncertainty of his future. Was he to be a Jedi? Was he to be sent back to Tatooine and made a slave again? What was to become of him?

He must have let out some small cry—some sound of distress—because Obi-Wan's hand fell to his shoulder.

Almost, Anakin moved away. But though he stopped, Obi-Wan noticed the abortive gesture, and he withdrew. "You must let go, Anakin," he murmured. "He is with the Force now." A almost-smile appeared on his lips, but it was more a painful grimace; there was no joy in the gesture. "Luminous beings we are," he said, with the air of a quote. "Not this crude matter."

Anakin did not know what to say in response to that. Pointing out that Obi-Wan was having as much difficulty letting go seemed to be spitting in the face of the Jedi who was trying to make an effort to reach out to him. Instead, he asked, quietly, "What's going to happen to me?"

Obi-Wan knelt, and looked at him right in the eye. He said, "Anakin. The Council has granted me permission to train you. You will be a Jedi. I promise."

Chapter End Notes

Urgh. This installment came out later than I would like. Hopefully, if I build enough of a chapter-buffer, the next updates can be more timely. Thanks to all who have been reading and enjoying In All The World: Don't give up on it yet! I haven't. After the funeral, it gets more plotty because Obi-Wan and Anakin begin full investigations.

-Ammar
Chapter Ten: Early Lessons

Somewhere in the middle of the night, Anakin had fallen asleep on his feet. Obi-Wan had caught the boy as he swayed, and gently laid him down in a quiet corner of the chamber. He hesitated for a moment, and then he pulled off his robe, draping it over the boy like a blanket.

Padmé came over. "Shall I ask for an escort to take him to his room?" she asked, quietly. "He must be exhausted."

Obi-Wan thought about it. "It's fine, m'lady," he said, keeping his voice down. "I think Anakin would not forgive us if we made the decision for him."

Padmé nodded, ruefully. "I used to insist I could stay up to watch the fireworks on Edrin's Day. They prepare all year, and then set them off late at night all at once in a beautiful display. Once, I snuck out of bed and climbed the roof. I fell asleep there before the fireworks even began." She gave a soft laugh. "My parents were cross with me. But not as cross as I was with myself for falling asleep!" Her gaze softened as she glanced at Anakin. "He certainly looks like he could use his rest."

"It has been a trying week, m'lady," Obi-Wan agreed, neutrally.

They spoke no further.

'Luminous beings we are, not this crude matter.' He'd quoted Master Yoda at Anakin—thoughtlessly. It was a truth all Jedi knew; that they were beings of the Force, rather than of matter. There was a seirta, a Jedi teaching tale that Qui-Gon had told him, once. There were three Jedi, watching a robe hanging on the washing-line, billowing out with the wind. The first Jedi, an apprentice, said, "Look—the robe is moving!" He was admonished by his Master, a Knight, who said, "It is not the robe that is moving. It is the wind that moves, and the robe with it." A Jedi Master passing by shook her head and admonished both of them. "It is not the robe," she said, "Or the wind that moves. It is the Force that moves, and your mind within it."

The mind, the self, Obi-Wan thought, was an illusion. Or so orthodox Jedi doctrine went. Immersed in the Force, the boundaries between the Jedi Master and the Force dissolved. This was the wisdom encapsulated in Yoda's words: to look beyond the crude matter that made up the living, breathing Qui-Gon Jinn he had known—matter that, or so they'd been taught in their astrophysics classes—had once come from a star, and was, in a sense, returning to the fires.

For all of that, he did not feel any better as the flames consumed his Master's body.

He had to move on, Obi-Wan thought. Life demanded it. There were missions and duties and responsibilities—stretching ahead into the far future. His Master had placed a young life in his hands. That was not the sort of thing to be taken lightly. He gazed over at where Anakin slept. In sleep, he looked even younger than he was. Even Piell's words echoed in his head, again. "...He's a handful and a half; exuberant as anything, but whatever the case, he's not going to be like those disciplined little hellions you find at the Temple. He's wild, through and through, he won't laugh at some things, and in some ways, you'll find that being a slave and having only his mother for company's going to
make him more grown-up than you'd expect. You're going to have to deal with all of that, with nothing else to lean on. In some ways, he'll be very different from you as a Padawan, and you're going to have to accept that."

Could he accept that?

He had to, Obi-Wan thought, because he'd promised Qui-Gon; because it was the last thing his dying Master had heard before he'd passed from this world and into the Force. That meant letting go; that meant stepping out from under the weight of his pain, although it came back again and again, dragging at him like the undertow on a stark coast, and threatened to overwhelm him. Anakin deserved better. He'd led a hard life, for one so young. He deserved a Master who could do even half as well by him as Qui-Gon had done with Obi-Wan.

Watching the dancing flames of Qui-Gon's pyre was final and irrevocable; it was the reminder that his Master was never coming back. Ever.

He knew that. He was no stranger to death, not as a Jedi. He remembered the way Tahl's arm dangled loosely around Qui-Gon's shoulder, the way his Master broke down and sobbed as a child. He remembered the men and women and children he had seen, killed, on so many worlds, so many missions.

It always came back to Qui-Gon. How different the finality of death seemed, when it came to those you loved. He had loved and respected his Master. That was why he struggled with his grief, now. He thought back to the moment of pellucid clarity, in the middle of the vigil he'd sat by his Master's body in the Tariyalean Room. Grief didn't end by an act of will; you soldiered past it, and eased out from under it, day by day. You had to keep choosing to go on, to keep accepting it, until one day the pain diminished and left you, if not completely.

He bowed his head.

The flames flickered and danced and eloganted; perhaps from the tears in his eyes.

Anakin stirred, still sleepy. The weight of something foreign startled him—it was thick and rough and heavy, and shifted with his movements. There was something uncomfortable in it, too, poking at him.

He felt around muzzily, trying to open his eyes.

Light was pouring in through the access door of the balcony; golden and bright. He figured it was probably the afternoon. He'd slept for a while, then.

The foreign weight on him was a large Jedi robe that someone had left behind. He managed to find the hard, plastic thing that was jabbing him in one of the robe's inner pockets. It was a data-stick, Anakin discovered. He glanced at it curiously, wondering what was on it. He supposed he could check, if he could find his datapad. But it didn't seem right. He knew whose this was: it was Obi-Wan's robe, and therefore Obi-Wan's data-stick. It seemed, almost, as though he had known that all along, just as he'd realised he was back in his room, listening to the comfortable murmur of the water, but hadn't registered it until now, with the music of the water a soothing sound in the background that he'd unconsciously ignored.

Obi-Wan himself was sprawled—surprisingly inelegantly—in one of the chairs, booted feet resting on the floor. His eyes were shut; he'd fallen asleep, Anakin realised. He wondered if Obi-Wan was cold. Certainly, although he'd tried to adjust the temperature regulator in his room, he'd been
disappointed to find they weren't quite working.

He slipped off the bed, picked up the robe, and padded quietly over to where Obi-Wan slept. Carefully, he threw the robe over the slumbering Jedi, and tugged it just-so, the way Shmi had always done for him at night.

Obi-Wan must've been a light sleeper. He startled awake even as Anakin was turning on his heel. "What—oh. Anakin," he said, slipping easily from surprise to a greeting. "Good morning." He glanced out the balcony door and amended the greeting. "Good afternoon, rather."

"How do you do that?" Anakin wanted to know.

"Do what?"

"Wake up so fast," he said. "Mum always used to say it'd take a bucket of sand to get me up on a good day."

Obi-Wan drew himself up, shook out his robe in a neat, elegant motion, and began to shrug into it. He checked his chrono. "Late afternoon," he said, shaking his head. "I suppose at least it isn't evening yet. Shall we get something to eat?"

He wanted to ask about what he'd missed—he remembered Obi-Wan telling him he would be a Jedi, he'd make sure of it, and a long evening watching the flames of Qui-Gon's funeral pyre but little else. Before he could find the words though, Anakin's stomach betrayed him with a loud growl.

Obi-Wan smiled. The gesture seemed to take some of the severity out of his expression. "It sounds like that should be our first step, then."

"Wizard!" Anakin enthused. The thought of food cheered him up, even as he wrestled with how to ask Obi-Wan about what was going on. The man had been somewhat friendly, yes, but Anakin couldn't help but feel that a gap existed between them, all the same, and he wasn't sure how to bridge it, much less how to ask Obi-Wan if he was sure when he said he'd train Anakin.

He hadn't seen any sign of it, after all, and Obi-Wan hadn't mentioned his training since—he's just woken up, he reminded himself. Maybe Obi-Wan had other things on his mind.

Watto was good at promising things, Anakin thought. He wasn't so good at delivering what he'd sometimes promised in a moment when he got carried away.

He looked down at his hands. It was cruel, he thought, to accuse Obi-Wan of doing the same thing. But first, Qui-Gon had taken him away from Tatooine, promising to train him as a Jedi; then he had been denied, and brought to Naboo, still following Qui-Gon, who was now dead, and he still didn't know what the Jedi wanted of him.

"Anakin?"

He looked up at Obi-Wan.

"What is it?" Obi-Wan asked.

There it was, Anakin thought. All he had to do was to ask. What was the worst Obi-Wan could do? He could decide he didn't want to train Anakin after all, he reminded himself. He could discard Anakin, leave him floundering in this galaxy with no means of returning to Tatooine and freeing Shmi, with no way of making something of himself. But Chancellor Palpatine had offered him help, a small voice in his head reminded him. And he seemed all right, even nice for a man of his age and
stature…

Obi-Wan was regarding him, expectantly.

Anakin said, haltingly, "Did you mean what you said, last night?" He didn't want that, he realised, didn't want Obi-Wan to say that he hadn't meant it, that he didn't want Anakin. He wanted the man's regard, he realised, and he didn't even know why.

Obi-Wan blinked. "Meant what?" he said, and then, as Anakin's heart was about to sink, understanding flashed in his gaze. "Oh. That. Yes, of course I meant it, Anakin."

He hadn't known how tense he was—how he'd drawn himself all taut like one of the bantha-hide ropes they used to fetch water from wells—until he felt something in him, all clenched and tight like a fist, relax. "Then how come we aren't training me yet?" he demanded, and winced in the next moment at how whiny he sounded.

Obi-Wan shook his head lightly. "If you are going to be a Jedi," he informed Anakin, "Which you are, of course, you're going to have to learn to be patient." He sighed. "That being said, the Council had only very recently given me permission to train you—and of course, you are correct: I owe you an apology for not having informed you sooner. I have been remiss there."

"S'alright," Anakin mumbled. He felt a prick of guilt as Obi-Wan bowed his head in a brief apologetic gesture.

"In any case," Obi-Wan said, "I imagine we have priorities. Food first, and then we'll have to ease you into training. The victory celebrations are scheduled for two days after the funeral—" his mouth twitched into a slight expression of distaste—at what, Anakin could not tell—"We'll have to make sure you have something appropriate to your new status as my apprentice to wear. And then there is the matter of protecting the Queen."

"What's wrong?" Anakin wanted to know. It was clear Obi-Wan was unhappy about something, and it struck him that perhaps Obi-Wan was unhappy about being saddled with an apprentice. Was that what was bothering him?

Obi-Wan said, "Ordinarily, you would have been trained at the Temple." Anakin ducked his head, feeling a flush of heat in his cheeks. It wasn't his fault that he hadn't been, he thought, stubbornly. Being a slave wasn't something he was going to apologise for. Obi-Wan took one look at him and said, "I don't mean this is a bad thing, Anakin. I just mean that I am uneasy about not being able to immediately bring you to the Temple to begin your training. We still have to remain here for the victory celebrations, and all this while, I'm tasked with protecting Queen Amidala and investigating the assassination attempt on her. It is not the most ideal of conditions under which to have to teach an untrained apprentice."

"You think it's too dangerous?"

Obi-Wan nodded, without hesitation. "Anakin, you almost died. And so did I," he said, simply. "A Jedi faces danger every day, out there in the galaxy. I knew this. So did Qui-Gon. But the Temple does not simply throw young Jedi out on dangerous missions unless it has some level of basic confidence in their abilities. You will be a good Jedi, I'm sure of it. But right now, you aren't ready for danger, and as the person charged with your safety, I'm worried for you."

"I'm not afraid," Anakin replied, raising his chin defiantly.

Obi-Wan ran a hand through his hair. "I know you aren't," he said. "But that's not the point. I'm not
doubting your courage, Anakin. I'm trying to see how we should handle this matter."

"Are you going to send me away?"

Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. "Do you think I should?"

Anakin bit his lip. "I don't want to go," he muttered. He didn't like the idea of being packed off onto a ship with Gallia or the other Jedi and then taken to the Temple while Obi-Wan remained on Naboo with Padmé. Would Obi-Wan even remember to come back for him? How long would Obi-Wan remain on Naboo? "I want to stay with you."

"All right, then," Obi-Wan said, crisply. "That settles the matter. I will, however, expect you to stay close by me, or by a palace guard. If another attempt is made on the Queen's life and I am occupied, please find safety elsewhere." He reached out, and hesitated; instead, he drew his hand sharply back. "We'll go get something to eat, and then I'll see if the palace tailors can't produce something for you that resembles what Jedi wear. And then I'm going to talk to some of our suspects. I would prefer it if you stayed within sight."

"But say nothing?"

Obi-Wan's mouth twitched in a half-smile. "Oh, no," he murmured. "I rather imagine that you might put them off their guard, or discover things I cannot."

Anakin was puzzled. Watto had often instructed him to remain silent. Slaves were neither seen nor heard, he knew. A good slave simply faded into the background, like an astromech droid. He'd been disciplined on occasion for his curiosity when a customer brought in some exotic circuit he'd never before seen.

"How?"

"People tend to underestimate children," Obi-Wan replied. "They won't be as on their guard around you. They will, in fact, make allowances for you where they would not for an adult."

"Like if I got bored and poked around their house a bit?" Anakin asked, shrewdly.

"Possibly," Obi-Wan said.

The palace tailor was a short man, aided by a battered droid that he insisted had served the kings and queens of Naboo for over a century, and that there was no sense in replacing it as it had developed a feel for the job by now.

Obi-Wan was not so sure about that, but he deferred to the man's expertise as he eyed Obi-Wan's clothing and laid swatches of fabric against it, trying to find something that would approximately match what the Jedi wore in spirit, if not in feel.

Finally, the tailor grunted as he found something that might match. The material was somewhat finer than what the Jedi usually wore, but they had to make allowances, Obi-Wan thought.

"That boy need a cloak as well?"

Obi-Wan studied his charge. Anakin was standing as still as he could, though he was gazing in rapt attention at the droid that was taking his measurements. Of course Anakin would be fascinated by the droid, Obi-Wan thought. It was a model he'd never encountered before, and he remembered the boy's fascination with mechanical things.
"No," he replied. "He'll get one when we return to the Temple."

The tailor nodded. "Boy hasn't hit the growing age yet," he said, "But I can put a bit of allowance into his clothing, to let him grow into it, anyway."

Obi-Wan considered it. On one hand, it made little sense when Anakin could easily receive standard-issue clothing from the Temple. On the other hand, it seemed wasteful to have the tailor make Jedi clothes for Anakin that he would only wear for several days.

"All right," he said. "Do it, please."

The tailor began folding up the other swatches of fabric and returning them to their proper places on his shelves. "Anyhow, his current clothing is filthy," he said, matter-of-factly. "It should really be turned into rags at this point, but—"

"No!"

That was Anakin, who must have overheard the tailor's comment.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said, warning in his voice.

"S'all I have," Anakin muttered. He glanced pleadingly at Obi-Wan. "Can't I, you know…?"

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "Do you know what an 'attachment' is?"

Anakin frowned. "What does that have to do with anything?"

Obi-Wan glanced at the tailor, who nodded and prudently withdrew, muttering that he had to see to putting in work on Anakin's clothes and that they were lucky he was doing them a favour and delaying his other orders in order to make sure Anakin had something suitable to wear.

He beckoned. Reluctantly, Anakin came over. Obi-Wan sat, folding his legs beneath him, and gestured for Anakin to sit down on the floor of the shop as well.

"Anakin," he said. "Perhaps I should have explained this to you earlier. The Jedi frown on attachment."

"What is an attachment?"

How did he explain the core and the foundation of Jedi philosophy to a nine year old boy? Obi-Wan cast his mind back to the classes he'd had in the Temple and the lessons he'd had with Qui-Gon.

"Let us begin from the beginning, then," he said, at last. "Although this is a poor place for your first lesson."

Anakin grinned. "Could've fooled me," he said. It struck Obi-Wan, then, that Anakin was mercurial: he angered swiftly, but the anger gave way just as quickly to bouts of cheer, good humour, and even generosity.

_You must remember this_, he told himself. It was his task to know his Padawan.

"The Jedi say that there is just one thing," Obi-Wan told him. "And that is the Force."

"You talked about it a lot."

Obi-Wan nodded. "We do. What was it Qui-Gon told you about the Force?"
Anakin frowned, but came up with the answer a moment later. "That it was the Force that gave a Jedi his power."

"That is true," Obi-Wan said, cautiously. "Or at least, that is one aspect of it. To the Jedi, the Force is a substance—an energy field, if you will—that is created by all living things. It surrounds us, it penetrates us, and it binds the galaxy together."

"What about droids?" Anakin wanted to know. "They're not living things. Are they part of the Force as well?"

Obi-Wan said, "The Force is created by all living things; in the same way, all living things subsist within the Force." He tapped at Anakin's arm. "We often say, 'We are luminous beings, not this crude matter.' The saying is meant to remind you that separateness, that self is an illusion."

Anakin's expression grew thoroughly confused. "All right," he said, even though Obi-Wan knew he wasn't following.

"Don't worry too much about the details," Obi-Wan said. "Your instructors at the Temple will go over the issues with you in greater depth over the coming years. Just know that it is a problem: if all life participates in and is nothing more than a part of the Force, then what is physical matter? What about droids, which are, after all, made of physical matter? Do these participate in the Force?" He looked at Anakin. "I am sorry to have to tell you that we do not have satisfactory answers to this question. But if you like, I can give you some readings on the matter when we're back at the Temple."

"All…right…" Anakin said, with more uncertainty.

Obi-Wan returned to the matter at hand. "You encountered the Sith Lord on Tatooine. How did he make you feel?"

Anakin screwed up his face in concentration, trying to remember. "Afraid," he said at last. "It felt like…like I was walking on fire, and the fire was coming after me. Like he hated me, but at the same time, I was nothing more than a bug he was gonna squash."

Obi-Wan nodded. "The Sith are users of what we call the Dark Side of the Force."

"So do the Jedi use the Light Side, then?"

Obi-Wan frowned. "We don't refer to it as the 'Light Side', per se," he replied, cautiously. "To the Jedi, there is only one Force, indivisible. As Master Kvaseth often puts it, 'The Force does not take sides, so how can it have sides?' Nonetheless, we speak of aspects of the Force—which are not something you need to worry about right now."

"Details?"

Obi-Wan matched his smile. "Yes. Quite. Do you remember the fountain in the courtyard?"

"You said the Force was like a stream," Anakin said. "That if we were angry, or afraid, or if we…if we hated, then the stream would become dirty."

Obi-Wan nodded. "'Clouded', rather. But essentially correct. The Dark Side, Anakin, doesn't exist independently. There is only the Force." He tapped his chest. "The darkness comes from here. When you are angry, when you are afraid, or when you hate, you taint the Force in you—and the part of the Force that you are. You taint the bits of the Force you come in contact with. In a way, you corrupt it. That is what the Dark Side is. It's a corruption of the Force."
Anakin frowned. "So the Dark Side is bad?"

"Very," Obi-Wan confirmed. "That's why we don't say we use the 'Light Side'. Words have power, Anakin, and words guide our concepts."

"Okay," Anakin said, dubiously.

"We use the Force. And because a Jedi's strength emerges from the Force, when he is guided by the Force, when he is at peace and one with the Force, rather than when he is contaminating the Force with his own desires, anger is toxic to a Jedi."

"And... what does that have to do with attachments?"

"Everything is impermanent, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "That is the truth the Jedi embrace. Was there a toy you loved when you were younger?"

"Mr Scruffy," Anakin said, eventually. He looked at Obi-Wan, his eyes challenging the older man to laugh. Obi-Wan did not. "He was a bantha. Mum made him for me, from scrap. He was beautiful—the other kids didn't have anything like him."

"What happened to him?"

"Forzy took him away," Anakin said. "I should've been stronger—I'd have stopped him. He beat me up, too. I could've gotten away but I didn't want to get away without Mr Scruffy."

Obi-Wan sighed. "It's not about becoming stronger and beating up the people who might do so to us, Anakin. These things are attachments. They're the desire to grasp, to claim for our own. To possess. To want. To control. To the Jedi, our answer to these is non-attachment. It doesn't mean not loving the things in our life. But it means we need to learn to love them without having to cling to them."

He looked at Anakin. "Anakin, your mother did a terribly, terribly selfless thing. She let Qui-Gon take you to give you a better life, while she remained behind—"

"But she had to!" Anakin yelled, stricken. "Watto wouldn't let her go, and I hate him!"

His outburst lingered. Obi-Wan said nothing.

"I'm not sorry," Anakin added.

Obi-Wan let out a frustrated breath. "Anakin," he said, eventually. "Your mother could have refused to let you go. She could have prevailed upon Qui-Gon to let you remain with her, and Qui-Gon would never have called in the debt. Watto would have been delighted. Instead, she loved you—but she chose to let you go. And that is love without attachment, Anakin. That is what the Jedi strive for. Because attachment breeds anger. It breeds resentment. It breeds unhappiness."

"And anger is bad, I get it," Anakin mumbled.

"No," Obi-Wan said. "You don't. At least, not yet. And possession is a form of attachment. A Jedi must be willing to let belongings pass out of his life."

"Then why do you use his lightsaber?" Anakin challenged.

Obi-Wan met his gaze. "I should not," he admitted. "And Jedi philosophy often prevaricates where it should not. We consider our lightsabers extensions of ourselves and permit ourselves these. But we still attempt to live as simply as possible, without personal possessions. More importantly, Anakin, possession isn't about material things."
He pinched the material of Anakin's clothing and tugged lightly at it.

"Possession is a state of mind. And it is especially this state which Jedi attempt to avoid."

Anakin sighed and was silent for a time. Obi-Wan let him be.

"Why is being a Jedi so hard?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said, honestly. "But I think that if the Jedi path were easy, it would not be worth walking."

"There are many things that aren't easy," Anakin said. "But I'd bet they aren't worth it." He looked at Obi-Wan, almost defiantly. "Like being a slave."

"No," Obi-Wan agreed. "They aren't." He added, a heartbeat later, "These never are."

Captain Panaka looked at him warily when Obi-Wan requested the contact details of the Five. "The palace doesn't keep this kind of information," he said at last. "The Queen won't have it."

"I know," Obi-Wan said. He cast a glance back; there would be time later to instruct Anakin in Jedi propriety, he thought. As it was, the boy wore a borrowed tunic and trousers, having grudgingly relinquished the clothing he'd brought with him from Tatooine to the palace tailor. He was fidgeting and doing a poor job of hiding his restlessness. "But I figured you would know where I could obtain such information."

Captain Panaka narrowed his eyes. "You investigating them, then?" he asked, bluntly.

Obi-Wan nodded. "I have been instructed to open an investigation into the Five," he said.

Captain Panaka's eyes glinted with interest. "I see," he replied. "Good. They've had it coming, Jedi Kenobi."

"Do you really consider them to be capable of such a deed?"

Captain Panaka shrugged. "I'm a security officer, Kenobi. My job is to think about every possible way someone could kill my Queen and to make it as impossible for them to do so as I can. I don't ask why: kings and queens of Naboo have been killed before, and even if I succeed in keeping her alive, she won't be the last to have such attempts made on her. Maybe she's wrong about the Five being involved. But even if she is, it's not my job to investigate and find out who did it and why. I just need to keep her alive. Every day she's still breathing is a success for me, as far as I'm concerned."

"In your personal opinion, then."

Captain Panaka went still as he considered the question. "Perhaps," he admitted, grudgingly. "The Five have always been wealthy and powerful, and with that comes the desire to have more power. King Arjuna had tried to put a stop to that. And they killed him."

"And your Queen is a danger to them?"

The captain of palace security said, "They could've foreseen a threat to them. The Queen has never been particularly friendly towards the Five in her political speeches." He shrugged, helplessly. "I can't really say."

"I understand," Obi-Wan said. "Thank you for your time, Captain. Would you know how I could obtain information on the Five?"
Captain Panaka nodded crisply. "Go into the city," he said. "The central administrative office is along Karthana Boulevard, and they track the residence addresses of all the citizens of Naboo from the local registration offices."

Obi-Wan nodded appreciatively. "Thank you, Captain."

"Thank me by finding the womprat that did it," Captain Panaka instructed him. "I want to string his worthless hide from the highest tower of the palace."

Anakin trudged along behind Obi-Wan. The Jedi walked with an easy grace, and on occasion, he would walk quickly enough, almost leaving Anakin behind, until Anakin had to jog to keep up with him. He'd noticed and apologised the first two times it'd happened.

Staying on Naboo with Obi-Wan had seemed a wizard idea at first. He didn't like the idea of being shipped off conveniently to the Temple and forgotten about, but he hadn't thought that following Obi-Wan around as his apprentice would involve so much talking and waiting either.

He itched to do something. He wasn't really the sort of person who could sit around and just wait, the way Obi-Wan seemed to be able to do so. And his new clothes were uncomfortable, Anakin decided. They were too soft, with none of the rough textures he'd familiarised himself with from home.

(Shmi deserved a fine life with good food and soft clothes, part of him admonished.)

He busied himself gawking at Theed. Coruscant had easily been the biggest city he'd ever seen, but he'd stayed in the Jedi Temple most of the time and hadn't been able to explore it. Theed, on the other hand, he imagined, was smaller than Coruscant, and yet…

There were so many people. They thronged the streets pockmarked with scorch blasts and concave impact marks from the plasma cannons of the Gungans and the artillery of the Trade Federation, laughing, talking, and generally being busy. A good amount of the rubble had been cleared away, but still, Anakin had never seen so many people in one place in his entire life.

Many of them seemed to be chiefly focused on their own business: men and women dressed in the colourful Naboo clothing who strode quickly towards their destinations. Others stopped and gawked at the many things on sale in the marketplace. Stallholders called out, advertising their wares. It reminded him of Mos Espa, but Mos Espa was where you went because of the profitable trade with the moisture farmers and the smugglers and the freighter pilots, and none of them carried things like bolts of brightly coloured cloth, which would have turned grey with dust very quickly on Tatooine.

And the fruit: he thought he'd caught sight of a fruit-seller, peddling all sorts of garish fruit, oranges included. He might've stopped to take a closer look, but he almost lost Obi-Wan, until a hand closed firmly around his upper arm and led him on.

"Don't get lost," Obi-Wan said, firmly, into his ear. "If you do, I'll have a great deal of difficulty finding you."

"All right," Anakin said, a little put out. He'd wanted to see more of the Theed marketplace, but he understood what Obi-Wan meant: they were busy doing Jedi things and investigating who it was who might've tried to kill Padmé. He could get behind that.

Even if it was awfully, awfully boring.
Locating the central administrative office proved to be far easier than Obi-Wan had feared. They had chosen to walk down from the palace rather than commissioning a landspeeder from the palace garage. It would be good for Anakin, Obi-Wan thought. He could tell that the boy was fairly bursting with repressed energy, and perhaps a long, leisurely walk might do both of them good.

Anakin, at least, seemed to be reacting quite well to the change of scenery, after having been cooped up in the palace for the past few days.

In addition, most of the Naboo were especially helpful when stopped and gave clear directions. Obi-Wan estimated that it had only taken them about fifteen minutes of walking to locate the unremarkable building among the rows of residences and shophouses.

A sign above the wooden doors proclaimed that the building was the CENTRAL ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF NABOO in both Basic and Naboo script, and Obi-Wan took that to be confirmation enough. He pushed open the heavy door and gestured for Anakin to precede him.

The office itself was an air-conditioned space with a reception and a waiting area of many empty seats. A few of the Naboo were themselves waiting. Another sign instructed visitors to report to the reception counter first while a large screen hanging from the ceiling indicated which queue number was currently being handled.

Obi-Wan crossed over to the reception desk. "Good afternoon," he said. "I'd like to speak to someone regarding the contact details of the—"

"You'll have to take a queue number first, sir," said the protocol droid at the counter.

Obi-Wan said, "It is a matter of some—"

"No queue number, no queries," the protocol droid said. "The regulations are quite firm in that regard, citizen."

Obi-Wan nodded gracefully. "I'd like to take a queue number, then."

"Over there," the protocol droid said, in that same, far-too-cheery voice. It gestured to a terminal leaning against the far wall. Without further ado, Obi-Wan turned and headed for the terminal.

"I hate droids," he muttered. "They typically lack imagination."

"You could've told him you were a Jedi," Anakin whispered.

"I could've," Obi-Wan confirmed, accessing the terminal and scrolling down the list of options he was presented with. "But would it have changed the droid's mind?"

Anakin frowned. "Well," he said. "I s'pose I could reprogram it for you. If you want me to."

"Thank you, but no." Obi-Wan selected the option of an appointment with a bureau official and the machine spat out his queue ticket. He compared the printed number with the one currently on the screen and blanched. "Let this be a lesson to you, Anakin. The wheels of bureaucracy grind exceedingly slow, and even we Jedi have to respect them."

Anakin groaned as they found a pair of empty seats and settled in to wait. "What's the point of being Jedi if no one cares?" he asked. "I mean, you've got those lightsabers, and the Force, but you can't do anything."
"The Jedi do not like to speak in terms of power," Obi-Wan said. "Because power implies control, and dominion, and a Jedi seeks to neither control nor dominate—"

"Power is power," Anakin pointed out. "You have it even if you don't want to say it." Watto had never needed to talk about the power he had over Anakin and Shmi. The fact he had it was obvious and implicit in how he'd always asserted it.

"Your focus determines your reality," Obi-Wan continued, unfazed. "For the Jedi, to think in terms of power is to entertain a dangerous thought—"

"Why do you spend so much time being afraid, then?"

There was silence, even amidst the cheerful, relaxing music being played in the waiting room. Most of the Naboo pretended to be engaged in their holomagazines or broadsheets.

He reminded himself that he was feeling frustration, that it was normal. He breathed it out, feeling the tight feeling in his muscles ease itself; moving out of his being with his exhalation. "We are not afraid," Obi-Wan said, firmly. "You confuse fear with wariness, Anakin. You can be cautious of fire because you know fire will hurt you. But fear does not always accompany caution."

"All right," Anakin said. "But I still think you have power. You're just not acknowledging it."

"What would acknowledging it constitute?" Obi-Wan asked.

Now that he was put on the spot, Anakin hedged. "Well, I guess you could walk up to that droid and threaten to cut it down with your lightsaber if it didn't get you an appointment with a bureau official right now."

Obi-Wan stood up and strode over to the protocol droid.

"Sir," the droid said, "I must insist you wait your turn—"

The snap-hiss of Qui-Gon's lightsaber cut the droid off, and the Naboo in the administrative office gave up all pretence of feigning disinterest. The bright green glow of Qui-Gon's lightsaber—now Obi-Wan's—was eye-catching.

"My apprentice," Obi-Wan said, "Thinks I should cut you down with my lightsaber if you do not get me an appointment with a bureau official who can deal with my queries in an appropriate manner this instant."

The protocol droid said, "Sir, regulations are regulations. I am afraid I cannot help but insist that you wait your turn. An official will attend to you shortly."

"Did you hear that, Anakin?" Obi-Wan asked, making sure his voice carried to the boy in the corner. "What do you suggest I do now? Cut down the droid as I have said I would?"

Anakin was silent.

"Assume," Obi-Wan said, feinting and moving the lightsaber from high-guard to a deliberately-slow cut that circled far above the droid's head. "Assume that I follow through with my threat and I cut this droid down. Do you think an official would see me then? What about—" he mimed a stab, now. "If I broke the terminal at their reception?"

Anakin said, "I guess they'd have to talk to you then."
Obi-Wan flicked the lightsaber off, abruptly. "Thank you for your patience," he told the protocol droid, as he sheathed the weapon. "That is the problem with power and threats, Anakin. I'll allow you to think in terms of power for the time being. Let us say, then, that a person with power is in a position to issue threats. But threats unbacked by force and the willingness to use them are empty. The protocol droid knows I would not in fact cut it down. Hence, it has no reason to fear my threat. The use of threats and force is a commitment, Padawan. It puts you on a course of action from which you can no longer deflect yourself, for fear of appearing weak or rendering your threats useless."

"So you never threaten, then?"

"People react to force in different ways," Obi-Wan assented. "On occasion, they may react in the manner you want. On occasion, this may only further encourage them to act against you. Knowing when to apply force and when not to is an important part of being a Jedi. If I had struck down that droid, I would most likely have had to continue demolishing the reception desk and the waiting room, on pain of appearing weak and foolish when no official came out. I would, in fact, have almost certainly destroyed the good name of the Jedi Order and damaged any good relations our work on Naboo might have established between the Naboo and the Order." He patted the lightsaber that hung at his side. "Understand this, Anakin. A lightsaber is not a weapon. It is a responsibility. The first and most important lesson of the lightsaber you will ever have to master is when to use it and when not to use it."

He looked around at the silent waiting room. "My apologies," he said aloud. "My apprentice and I were just having a philosophical discussion."

They looked torn between shock, bemusement, confusion, and fear. Some of them had begun inching in the direction of the door or of the intercom.

"Master Jedi?"

Obi-Wan turned. An official dressed in a formal suit stood at the entrance of the corridor leading from the waiting room. Her dark hair was tightly tied up in a bun and her eyes gleamed with amusement. "Your pedagogy leaves much to be desired, but your point has been taken into consideration," she said. "If you will follow me, the Office will attend to your request now."

Smiling and gesturing for a gaping Anakin to follow him, Obi-Wan inclined his head in thanks, and moved after the official.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to all for the time taken for the next installment. Thesis continues to suck away my life. Also, one comment is that while I know fanon (and I suppose, to some extent, everything after the OT) tends to talk about the 'Light Side' as the necessary opposite to the Dark Side, the OT doesn't actually use that term. It's the Force, and the Dark Side of the Force. So in this fic, I've chosen to offer a drastically different take: there is no Light Side, and the Jedi don't like to use the concept of the 'Light Side'. The presence of Darkness does not imply Light; neither does it immediately entail that the Force is a binary. The point of failure is in fact regarding the Force to be two opposing binaries: 'the Light Side' versus 'the Dark Side', 'us versus them'. It sheds a new light on Obi-Wan's self-referentially paradoxical claim that "Only a Sith Lord deals in absolutes." Because to the Sith, the Force must be so fragmented and divided. To a Jedi, it is not.
Some might feel that I've already been too charitable to the Jedi by allowing Obi-Wan to concede that love without attachment is acceptable, especially if Episode 1 Obi-Wan is a beacon of orthodoxy. I concede the point. In this fic, I'm generally depicting Obi-Wan as having a strongly orthodox streak, but as Qui-Gon's student (who we all know is the ultimate maverick.) I'm drawing on the quasi-canon of Qui-Gon being a proponent of the Living Force, a doctrine which emphasises (as I see it) compassion (a kind of love, in Anakin's eyes, but he's not quite wrong about that), and benevolence, and a strong dose of mettā. His influence on Obi-Wan has nudge Obi-Wan to have a healthy amount of respect for other living beings (despite Obi-Wan's current fastidiousness); in either case, he's at least aware that love without attachment is a theoretical possibility, even if he's not thinking about the kind of love Anakin will later fall in!

Last, Anakin. In some areas of philosophy and in international relations, there's a huge clash between two rough positions (this is me leaving out lots of details). One position is approximately Hobbesian (realism, in IR); it thinks in terms of power, and it regards all beings as: A. fundamentally self-interested, B. always unsatiably interested in accumulating power. (Actually, there's a third assumption in IR realism which involves one of anarchy. But this isn't entirely germane so I'll leave it out.) For Hobbes, the only solution is for everyone to surrender power and to put it in the hands of a sovereign. (Sounds familiar? See: Episode 2 Anakin.) On the other hand, some positions think that it isn't only about power. Sure, from a third-person perspective (and sometimes not even that!), it looks like people crave power and that's all there is to it, but we're people too. And from our own experience, we know people are governed by norms. What are norms? They're rules that guide behaviour. "Don't beat people. Don't kill. Don't steal." Etcetera. Anakin's experience hasn't predisposed him towards the idea of norms. Sure, Shmi's instilled a strong sense of values in him. ("I'm proud of you, you've brought hope to those who have none." Think about his offering of shelter, and his telling Shmi that she's always said that the worst thing is that people don't help other people.) But the world he's looking at is a world in which: A. he does not have power, B. other people have power and do whatever they please, most often at the expense of the powerless, which, very importantly, includes himself, his mum, and the other slaves-in short, he's looking at a world which by and large doesn't seem to follow any sorts of behaviour-guiding norms.

So Anakin is starting as a boy who is rather mature, and in some ways, rather cynical, and yet rather naive, with a wide exuberant streak. He largely thinks about power, and yet he wants things to be different: like how Shmi taught him, and like how he's expected the Jedi to be. A lot of his development will be on the conflict between how he thinks the world is like and how everyone else tells him the world is like.

Cheers,

-Ammaren
Chapter Eleven: Dreams and Desires

The central administrative office itself was a maze. Obi-Wan followed the official down further winding corridors, past cubicles full of staff working at terminals, and up a flight of stairs.

"I don't understand," Anakin said, at last. "Our number wasn't up."

"It wasn't?" Obi-Wan kept his voice bland. "I wonder why."

Anakin peered suspiciously at him. "You did something, didn't you?"

"What makes you think I did?"

"Otherwise, we'd have had to wait and wait," Anakin said. "But then suddenly she came out and told us she'd talk to us now."

"Hmm," Obi-Wan said, non-committally.

"So you must have done something, to make them move faster."

"What makes you think so?" Obi-Wan asked. "Perhaps they were always going to expedite our request; you simply did not think they would do so."

Anakin fell silent in thought.

After three flights of stairs, they emerged onto a landing and from there into another set of cubicles. The official guided them into the one on the left. "I am Kiraé Uhfara," she said, introducing herself.

"I am Obi-Wan Kenobi," Obi-Wan responded. "And this is my student, Anakin Skywalker." He motioned to Anakin, gently.

"Hi," Anakin said, cheerfully.

"Hi," Kiraé said, although her serious demeanour did not change. She looked at Obi-Wan. "I must inform you that your display gave office security hysterics."

Obi-Wan bowed his head. "Please convey my sincere apologies to them."

"I don't get it," Anakin said, aloud.

"Fortunately," Kiraé said, "The reputation of your Order convinced them you were merely making a point, but we nevertheless decided to expedite your request. So, what can I do for you, Jedi Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan said, "Perhaps you could first explain to my student what happened." He hid his amusement as best as he could. "He seems highly confused by the situation."
Kiraé looked at Anakin. "What happened," she informed him, "Is that your teacher was very clever."

Anakin blinked. "All right?" he said, a note of confusion in his voice.

"The waiting room has closed-circuit surveillance cameras installed," Kiraé explained, "As do most government buildings, for purposes of security. Naturally, your teacher attracted a great deal of attention the moment he switched on his lightsaber and began swinging it around. Office security got somewhat upset, but this convinced them to refer your case to a senior official rather than waiting for the queue system to process your request."

"So the threat worked," Anakin said.

"Actually," Obi-Wan cut in, "It didn't."

"But she said they started looking once you switched on your lightsaber."

Kiraé interjected, "I said that he caught their attention by switching on his lightsaber. While they did not believe he would use it on a member of the public or on our reception droid, they were still highly uncomfortable with the idea of a live weapon in the waiting room. But in any case, the moment they were aware that a member of the Jedi Order was present in the waiting room, they referred it to a senior official as they determined it was out of their hands to decide whether to grant priority to a Jedi."

"And that was you?"

Kiraé nodded. "And I agreed. Captain Panaka called ahead from the palace. He mentioned that you were investigating on a matter of state security."

"I shall have to convey him my regards," Obi-Wan murmured. To Anakin, "Do you see now?"

"You knew all along?" Anakin wondered, aloud. "That's why you went about waving your lightsaber?"

Obi-Wan said, "Most government buildings have surveillance cameras. I knew this one was likely to have one. I also knew it was likely our case would be expedited if they recognised we were Jedi, and that droid was unlikely to accept our credentials." He looked pointedly at Anakin. "There are solutions, Anakin, that don't involve violence or the threat of violence. For all the Jedi are known as warriors, we are known for many other things; as diplomats, as peacekeepers, as enforcers. That was the point I was trying to make."

Anakin fidgeted and glanced around. The cubicle was a neat one, he noticed, with lots of folders stacked onto an overhanging shelf. There was a painting on the wall, depicting a sparkling patch of blue that took several long moments for him to identify as a lake. There was lots of green too, and flowers blooming on the shore.

"All right," he muttered, just a touch sullenly. "I get it now."

"You'll learn," Obi-Wan said, firmly. Anakin wasn't sure if it was meant to be reassuring. He leaned over to glance at the painting. "It's beautiful. A Valenti, isn't it?"

Kiraé nodded, smiling. "You know your painters well, Master Jedi."

"Please," Obi-Wan said, the folds of his sleeves slipping over his clasped hands. "It's just Jedi Kenobi."
"Jedi Kenobi, then," Kiraé assented. "Dasca Valenti was a Naboo painter," she explained, "And considered one of the greatest in our history. For this reason, many government offices and private citizens favour his works. This one is of the Lake Country; one of the retreats popular with schoolchildren and citizens alike."

"Wizard," Anakin breathed. He almost reached out to touch it, and then checked himself. *Don't touch other people's things without permission,* Shmi would have said, no matter how mesmerising the painting was. It was still hard to think of that much water, or that much soft grass and flowers and sunlight. The suns on Tatooine were harsh and burning. He turned to Obi-Wan. "Will we go there?"

"I doubt it," Obi-Wan said. "We won't be terribly long on Naboo, Anakin. And the Lake Country, I understand, is a distance from Theed."

"That it is," Kiraé agreed. "Although it's a pity. The Lake Country is one of Naboo's greatest treasures, and it was far-sighted of King Tariyal to enact legislation declaring the Lake Country a protected site important to our national heritage." She shook her head lightly. "Still, I'm sure you didn't come here for information on the sights of Naboo, much less to learn about our history. What can I do for you, Jedi Kenobi?"

"Captain Panaka did not inform you?"

"Not as such," Kiraé replied. "He only mentioned that you were coming and requested that we give your request priority as it involves a matter of state security."

Obi-Wan weighed how much he ought to say. Judging from how fast word travelled, that there was an assassination attempt in the palace would surely be a matter of public knowledge by now. Even so, he could hear Adi Gallia's voice, admonishing that he never need unsay what had never been said in the first place. It was best to play his cards close to his hand for now. "We would like to call on certain members of the Five," he said, and listed off the names of the representatives who had been present for the audience.

To her credit, Kiraé was mostly successful in concealing her surprise. "You're looking for the addresses of their private residences, then," she said. "But I'll try to look up their offices as well; they might be with one or two of their ventures rather than at home."

Obi-Wan gave a nod of assent. She sat down at the terminal and began running a search of the Office's database with a few quick keystrokes.

Anakin found his gaze drifting once again to the painting of the lake. It was beautiful, he thought. It was the kind of beauty that was so transparent, like glass, that you could look through it and lose yourself. "I wish we could go there," he murmured.

Quietly, Obi-Wan said, "I know."

Obi-Wan studied the printout that Kiraé had handed them and abruptly, he began to chuckle. "What?" Anakin wanted to know. He was back to struggling to keep up as Obi-Wan strode on ahead of him.

Alerted, Obi-Wan once again slowed his pace. "Well," he said, "It's getting late, and we're not likely to be able to meet with more than two members of the Five today. I'm aiming to speak with Theré Helukala and Iben Derriva today, since both of them have residences and office branches within Theed."

"So?" Anakin asked. He wasn't getting it.
"See for yourself, then," Obi-Wan said. He handed Anakin the flimsi printout. Anakin took the crinkling sheet and glanced at it. He was a bit slow at reading some of the words, but even when he'd finished, he still didn't understand.

"I don't get it," he said, aloud. He held out the flimsi. Obi-Wan retrieved it, folded it, and deftly tucked it into one of the many tool-pouches on his utility belt.

"Two of the people we have to meet are Ren Yvar and Sirdaé Ersken. The Yvar family deals primarily in the homefarms and exotic spices and fruit, while the Ersken family obtain their wealth from the vineyards in the highlands. Their places of residence are near the Lake Country."

Anakin blinked. And then it registered.

"Whoopee!" he cheered, hopping about madly in his excitement. "We're going there after all, aren't we? Aren't we?"

Laughing, Obi-Wan held out a hand to forestall him. "Yes, it seems we're going to the Lake Country after all," he said. "You've got your wish. However, the Lake Country is a distance away from Theed and we're going to need to travel by landspeeder or by hover-train. As such, we're not going there until the day after tomorrow."

Anakin groaned. "Why can't we go tomorrow?"

"The victory celebrations," Obi-Wan said simply.

"What celebrations?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "I forgot—no one told you," he murmured. "The parade celebrating victory over the Trade Federation and meant to usher in a new era of Naboo-Gungan peace and cooperation. As the heroes of Naboo," he made a face, "We both are, of course, expected to be present."

"Do you think it'll last?" Anakin wanted to know.

Obi-Wan considered the question. "They have a shared history," he said, at last. "Even if it's one of animosity. But Queen Amidala is open-minded, and I think she'll be fair to them. And I think that peace and cooperation between the two peoples would be a good thing for Naboo."

"But you don't know if it'll last," Anakin noted, shrewdly.

"Well," Obi-Wan said, acknowledging Anakin's point with a sigh, "It's always very difficult to say. Certainly, the seeds for a lasting partnership are there. But there are always hotheads willing to stir trouble, and more importantly, there are limits to Queen Amidala's term. Whether the peace will outlast her reign is a question of concern. In short, Anakin, I don't know." He smiled, faintly. "Even Jedi have difficulty seeing the future."

Anakin shook his head. "I've had dreams," he said, stubbornly. "Dreams that the Jedi would come and take me away from Tatooine one day." He shot Obi-Wan a sideways glance; both fierce and raw at the same time. "And that I'd one day come back to Tatooine and free all the slaves." He added, a few moments later, "I've had other dreams. Some of them come true." Like when he'd dreamed of himself, desperate and excited, sitting in what he would later recognise to be the cockpit of his Podracer, racing Sebulba in the final lap of the Boonta Eve Classic.

Had he built the pod because of his dream? Or had he dreamed of something in the future? The thought crept up on him with an instinctive urgency he could not quite understand.
Obi-Wan hesitated, mid-stride. "Perhaps," he said. For some reason, he sounded terribly troubled. "Anakin," he said, at last, after a long silence. "Relying on dreams is a terribly dangerous thing to do."

"Why?" Anakin challenged.

Obi-Wan ran a distracted hand through his short hair. "Dreams pass in time," he said, almost as though he was speaking more to himself than he was to Anakin. "It's easy to become lost in them; to think of them as telling us of what might be rather than what is." He looked at Anakin—actually knelt down, so he was looking directly into Anakin's eyes; his own were frantic, urgent even. Both hands gripped Anakin's shoulders firmly. "Anakin, you must remember this. The danger in dreams doesn't lie in the fact that they're false. If they were lies, it'd be easy to ignore them. Dreams are dangerous because some dreams contain a kernel of truth, lodged in the very heart of them. But most dreams are merely reflections of our deepest hopes and fears and desires."

"It's true," Anakin said, stubbornly. "I know it is." He met Obi-Wan's gaze, unflinching. "I'm here, aren't I? And you're training me to be a Jedi, aren't you?"

Obi-Wan sighed. "You want to see the slaves freed, don't you?"

Anakin nodded. It was the kind of thing, he thought, that shouldn't have needed saying. And yet, it seemed it did. "No one deserves to be a slave," he said, simply. "Once you've been one…you know it's wrong."

Obi-Wan said, sternly, "'Wrong' is a loaded term, Padawan."

Anakin said, hotly, surprising even himself with the sudden anger that welled up deep in him, "Turahn was ten. I was six. They beat him until the skin came off his back and hung him in the open until he died. Tell me it wasn't wrong for someone to own him, to have the right to do that to him. Go on."

Obi-Wan rubbed at his eyes wearily and looked away. "I owe you an apology, Anakin," he said, eventually. "You are quite right—there are many wrongs associated with slavery. My point, however, was just that you rightly desire slavery on Tatooine to end."

"And?" Anakin felt slightly mollified, but he didn't think he was quite ready to let Obi-Wan off, just yet. "What about that?"

"That's what I mean by desires and hopes," Obi-Wan said. "You want it to end. You hope it will end. Is it a dream with some element of truth? Or is it a reflection of what you most dearly want?"

Anakin chewed on his lip. "Does it matter?"

Obi-Wan said, "If you think your dream is a guide to what happens, then it does matter. If the dream is merely a reflection of your desires—or your deepest fears—then allowing yourself to be guided by it is dangerous. It neglects reality."

"I don't understand."

"I'll tell you what Qui-Gon told me," Obi-Wan said. "There is a traditional children's story from the planet of Akrasia, which is in the Telos system. There, they believe that all dreams must pass through either of two gates. The first is a gate of polished horn; the second a gate of wrought ivory."

Anakin frowned, trying to imagine those looming gates.
"Dreams that pass through the gate of ivory are false dreams," Obi-Wan continued. "They can deceive us, being nothing more than mere shadows. But the dreams that pass through the gate of horn—these are the true dreams, the ones that come to pass. But who can say which gate through which a dream passed? A long time ago, when the galaxy was at war, and sibling was slaying sibling, there was a man whose only daughter had gone off to fight in the distant stars."

Anakin frowned. "There were wars?"

"Countless ones," Obi-Wan confirmed. "One night, he had a dream that his daughter had perished in battle. He woke up and said to himself, 'Surely this dream comes from the gate of ivory,' for he was old, and his daughter was the most precious thing to him in all the world, and he did not want to think of her death. He went about his business, and at the same time, kept listening for word of how the war was progressing. A week later, the dream returned. The old man said to himself, 'What has happened once may happen again.' But the dream sat uneasily with him. The third time the dream came, the old man hanged himself. The next day, the war ended, and the deployed troops returned home, among them the man's daughter."

Anakin shuddered. "That's horrible," he murmured, thinking of the nameless daughter returning to an empty house. (And Shmi, would she still be there when he came back for her?)

Obi-Wan nodded. "It is. But that's why dwelling on dreams, Anakin, is like playing with fire. They are better forgotten. Come. We have two people to visit." He straightened up, and relinquished his hold on Anakin.

Anakin nodded obediently. But he could not help the gut-deep conviction that for all Obi-Wan talked about false dreams, that there were true ones too, and that his were one of them.

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Among the Five, the Derriva family's power lay in its connections with the judiciary and the legislators. According to the briefing material Obi-Wan had read prior to the audience, 'Derriva & Partners' was the most prominent legal firm on Naboo, with a long history.

Perhaps because of that, the main office of their Theed branch could be found in one of the oldest sectors of the city: among a neat row of stone apartments. An elegant wrought-iron fence surrounded the property; the sign 'DERRIVA & PARTNERS' was chiselled into the pale yellow stone of the arched wooden door.

Motioning to Anakin to keep close, Obi-Wan reached over and worked the gate open. It slid noiselessly on oiled hinges; they proceeded through a small flowering garden, which Anakin goggled at, and then Obi-Wan located the buzzer by the door and pressed it.

A moment later, he pushed open the heavy door and beckoned Anakin in first before closing the door lightly behind them.

The interior of the apartment building had been converted into a spacious reception room; the building itself had looked to be about five storeys high from the outside. Obi-Wan suspected that the entire block itself was owned by the Derriva family. Certainly, while a few clients waited in the reception room, lounging about on plush chairs in the temperature-controlled room, most of the activity was not to be found here.

He approached the reception desk and leaned on the counter. The receptionist was swift to respond; he glanced up at Obi-Wan and was instantly the picture of solicitousness. "Good day, Master Jedi. Welcome to Derriva & Partners. How may I be of assistance to you?"
"Good day," Obi-Wan replied. "I'd like a meeting with Iben Derriva."

The smile on the receptionist's face barely flickered or dimmed. "I'm afraid that won't be possible," he said. "Iben Derriva is in high demand and his schedule is full of clients—"

"I only ask for a few moments of his time," Obi-Wan said. "If not today, then at the closest possible convenient time—"

"Mr Derriva will not be able to attend to you until at least a month from now," the receptionist said. "I'll put you in his schedule for an appointment on Tuesday in the morning."

Obi-Wan leaned over the counter. "No," he said, firmly. "That will not do."

The receptionist looked at him. "There is no other available time," he repeated.

Obi-Wan pressed his lips in a firm line. "Ask him to make time," he said, unyielding. "I am investigating a matter of state security, and Iben Derriva assured Queen Amidala that he would be willing to render all available assistance in the matter."

The receptionist blanched. "I'll have to talk to him first, Master Jedi," he allowed. He punched in a few numbers on the desk-mounted comlink and had a quick, furtive conversation. It was clear from his sour expression that he didn't like the instructions he had received, and by the time he shut off the comlink, he looked thoroughly disapproving. It was something living beings had in common with droids when set to the same task of sitting at a reception desk, Obi-Wan thought, bemused.

"Mr Derriva says to go on up, Master Jedi," the receptionist said, stiffly. "He occupies the penthouse suite."

Obi-Wan jerked his head in a polite nod of acknowledgement to the receptionist and thanked him. He turned to Anakin. "Come," he said.

"You didn't even need your lightsaber this time," Anakin said. There was a mischievous glint in his eyes.

The receptionist looked even more scandalised, and Obi-Wan hastily chivvied his very young apprentice out of the receiving room and up the stairs.

"That was uncalled for," he said, quietly. "The receptionist had already acceded to our request. In that respect, he is far more flexible than the droid was."

Anakin blinked innocently at him. "It wasn't a threat," he pointed out.

"Then why did you say it?"

Anakin looked at his feet and bit at his cheek. "Well…" he hedged.

Obi-Wan drew up short and folded his arms across his chest. "Go on," he prompted.

"I didn't like the way he was treating you," Anakin blurted out. "Like you were a waste of his time, or like he was doing you the biggest favour in the world by letting you talk to Mister Derriva when you were doing him the favour, really." He scowled down at his shoe like it was offending him, somehow. "It wasn't right. And it wasn't nice."

Obi-Wan sighed. He was beginning to have the sinking feeling that their time as Master and apprentice would be more or less composed of such exchanges. He sank down to the marble flooring
of the staircase and drew his knees up to his chest. "Did telling him that make things any better?"

"It made me feel better," Anakin argued.

Obi-Wan just looked at him. He said nothing.

Anakin twitched. "He should've apologised."

"Many beings, Anakin, do not do what they should do," Obi-Wan said, calmly. "Should we stoop to
their level?"

Now, it was Anakin's turn to sigh. "I get it," he said, sullenly. "I'm sorry, all right? I should've just
kept quiet and let him treat you like...like dirt."

"Does it matter, how someone else treats me?" Obi-Wan countered. "It only reflects the shallowness
of his own character, that he does not know any better. You are who you are, Anakin." He tapped
Anakin's chest lightly with his hand. "Anakin is here. What people do to you cannot take that away
from you. Their opinions and actions should not matter to you."

Anakin shook his head. It mattered, he wanted to say. It mattered because people could do this to
you: they could dehumanise you, they could treat you as if you were property, as if you weren't a
living being, as if you weren't human. They could take away your voice, flog you, and grind your
face further into the dust. Even words mattered. With Watto, it was always, 'Boy'. With Gardulla the
Hutt's controllers, it had always only ever been 'Slave', and then a number.

My name is Anakin, he had said. That was important; he understood that instinctively, bone-deep. If
the Hutts and the controllers and even Watto wanted to take that away from him, then it was
important he hang on to it.

Obi-Wan didn't understand: he lived in this clean world of towering spires, high above the bustle of
Coruscant. He lived in a world of water and of grass; of polished glass and clean metal, of non-
attachment, whatever that was, and where he always had enough to eat, and where the man he called
Master treated him with love.

You didn't carry who you were in your heart, or in the hollow spaces of your chest: you carried it
there only because the world let you. Obi-Wan didn't realise that. He didn't know that.

But there was no way to give voice to this complex welter of emotion that rose and threatened to
choke him, so instead, Anakin said nothing, just muttered an apology and promised not to do it
again.

For a moment, he thought Obi-Wan wasn't convinced—the older Jedi was still looking at him
suspiciously, but eventually, Obi-Wan shook his head and stood up. "Very well then," he said,
crisply. "Iben Derriva is undoubtedly wondering if his stairway has swallowed us both by now."

In the years he had spent as Qui-Gon's apprentice, Obi-Wan had seen flamboyant displays of
unimaginable wealth, and abject poverty. The penthouse suite of 'Derriva & Partners' proved to fall
somewhere between the two poles; it was certainly luxurious enough and spacious. His boots made a
sharp sound off the patterned marble floor and paintings from various artists hung on the walls,
framed with gold-leaf.

"Come in," called a voice. Obi-Wan recognised it as Iben Derriva and followed it, heading past the
palatial space and pushing open the red-streaked wooden door and entering a comfortable study.
The marble floor here was covered with woven rugs in tasteful colours, while another painting hung on the wall, depicting what was most likely a landscape of Naboo. Huge bookshelves containing volumes of law and what was likely old-fashioned client-folders lined the walls: the scents of old paper and wood-polish hung in the air.

On the far side of the room, Obi-Wan noticed a traditional fireplace, where a fire crackled merrily over stacked wooden logs. A poker leaned against it the ornamental metal grate, the latter designed with abstract patterns like curling vines. The centre of the room, however, was taken up by a large, cramped desk and a reclining black armchair of what might even have been natural leather, which squeaked as Iben Derriva shifted position to regard them as they entered.

There were two similar seats before the table, and Iben Derriva rose as he greeted them smoothly and invited them to take a seat. Obi-Wan noticed that he was not wearing a cravat today, but then discovered it a moment later, draped almost-carelessly over a table-lamp.

"Jedi Kenobi," Iben Derriva said. "And I presume this is your apprentice?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Anakin Skywalker, meet Iben Derriva."

"Hi," Anakin said, and then he fell silent.

Iben Derriva nodded firmly. "I'm pleased to meet you, Anakin," he said, before turning to Obi-Wan. "Well, then. May I offer you a drink, Jedi Kenobi? What of your apprentice? I have all sorts of spirits and fruit juice; our office fridge is rather well-stocked. Of course, I also have stimcaf and tea, if you'd prefer that."

"Tea will be fine, thank you," Obi-Wan said, relaxing into his offered seat. He turned to Anakin. "Juice?"

Anakin blinked. "I…guess?" he said, uncertain. With his mum, it'd always been blue milk or water put through their filtration system—no fruit juice, because fruit juice had to be imported at ruinous expense, and was you drank if you were a wealthy slave owner, not a slave.

"Do you have orange juice?" Obi-Wan asked. "I believe my student would appreciate that."

When Iben Derriva smiled, however faintly, the corners of those stern eyes crinkled. "Yes," he said. "Give me a moment." He picked out a drink-bulb of orange juice from the fridge; Obi-Wan quietly showed Anakin how to work it open, as Derriva found two capsules of tea and added hot water from a dispenser.

"Milk or sugar, Jedi Kenobi?"

"Neither will be just fine, thank you," Obi-Wan said. He sipped, just a little, despite the heat of the liquid and was surprised to feel the sting of memory, even now. The tea was undrinkably bitter, just as he had expected. Just as Qui-Gon had always drunk his; had always insisted that Obi-Wan was ruining his tea with a dash of milk and sweetener.

"Wizard," Anakin breathed, as he tried the juice.

"Well, then," Iben Derriva said, seated once more at his desk, his fingers steepled before him. "Now that we're more or less finished with the obligatory pleasantries, I suppose we could continue to fence, Jedi Kenobi, but you must excuse me if I comment that it's been a rather wearying day, and I'd prefer we get straight down to business."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said, politely.
"First, I'm going to presume that since you're investigating a 'matter of state security', that this matter pertains to the recent assassination attempt on our Queen."

Obi-Wan inclined his head, acknowledging the point.

"Second," said Iben Derriva, "Since you have come here, of all places, I shall presume that you are investigating the possibility that the Five are somehow involved in the assassination attempt."

"Are you, then?" Obi-Wan asked, bluntly.

Iben gave a thin smile. "Hardly," he said. "Do you know how long this—" he gestured to the office surrounding them. "—has endured?"

"No."

"Five centuries," Iben said. "It's been five centuries, give or take a couple of decades, since the Derriva family have bound themselves to the legislature and the judiciary. To us, the law is paramount: making it, interpreting it—it is the source of our power. We therefore respect it. Assassinating the Queen might've given us a way to remove a Monarch bent on hamstringing the power of the Five, but only at the cost of breaking what the Derriva stand for. The law."

"So you're telling me you're an idealist."

"Hardly," Iben replied. He sipped from his tea. "If I'm an idealist, Jedi Kenobi, it's a rather hardened sort of idealist. Years of working with the judiciary breeds cynicism like you'd never believe. I simply believe that as bad as things are right now, they'll get far worse if we're allowed to break the law so flagrantly in pursuit of our own goals. There's far more power and rewards to shaping law and interpreting the vagaries of a particular subsection or article than there is to killing a Queen. And the truth?" he shrugged elegantly. "It'll pass in time. She's young and still thinks she can change the world. Give her several more years of uphill struggle and things'll be different. Not to mention that the term limit means that she'll be gone—but the Derriva will remain. And expand."

"I know the feeling," Obi-Wan said, dryly. "Sending the man who killed the King of Lithun to kill the Queen of Naboo hardly counts as a 'flagrant' violation by any definition, however. Such a man would ideally be discreet and deadly, and therefore a covert violation."

Iben's mouth twitched in a grudging smile. "Very well, then," he said. "Covert violations of the law are also bad. Will that suffice?"

"Does that mean you never break the law?" This was Anakin, peering curiously at Iben, drink-bulb in hand.

Iben considered it. Gravely, he said, "We all have our lapses. But the Derriva would not break the law in such a way."

"Would I be correct in saying that you have no love for those who have in fact sent an assassin after the Queen?" Obi-Wan asked. This was crucial, he thought, even though he knew what the answer would be.

Iben nodded. "Of course," he said, crisply.

"Who, then," pressed Obi-Wan, "Do you suspect could be behind such a deed?"

"It's not my place to say," Iben said, curtly. "If I had evidence, I'd have gone straight to palace security with it." He looked at Obi-Wan. "I have nothing but raw suspicion, do you understand?"
"I do," Obi-Wan said. "That's exactly what I'm asking for."


"Who are they?"

"Republicans," said Iben Derriva, with the barest hint of distaste, before it was swiftly concealed. "Dissidents. All middle-class, you understand."

Obi-Wan did. He understood very much.

"And you believe the Perdaé would have the funds necessary to hire such an assassin?"

Iben Derriva shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "The Perdaé is the name adopted by that particular faction of the middle class, and it's a growing political entity, though it's yet to gain much traction within the legislature. But why do you think the Trade Federation attacked Naboo? And why do you think it held Naboo?"

"I'd very much like to hear your thoughts on the matter," Obi-Wan said.

"Collaborators," Iben Derriva said, disgustedly. He set his cup back down on the desk. "The Perdaé invited the Trade Federation in. They helped them hold the planet and disarm the citizen militia. A significant number of the Perdaé serve in the militia and most of them stood down and backed up the droid army. We're not all that helpless, Jedi Kenobi. But noen of us expected our own to lie down and allow us to be invaded, much less held by a foreign commercial power."

"And you had nothing to gain from the Trade Federation's occupation?"

Iben shook his head. "What do you think? The judiciary remains constant, but the Trade Federation were bad for business. They weren't running the country; they were simply waiting. What for, I don't know. Perhaps to see what the galaxy would do. In the meanwhile, the Perdaé were seizing property and wrecking businesses and generally thumbing their noses at the laws and proper ways of doing things."

"What you expected to gain and what you gain are two very different things," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"True," Iben acknowledged. "But unlike the other families of the Five, the Derriva profit from a robust legal system. More commerce would have allowed us to expand our dealings with commercial law, but at the end of the day, without looking at consequences or moral objections, it's all the same to us whether Queen Amidala is in power or whether the Trade Federation is in power. We had no reason to invite them in."

Obi-Wan nodded and gestured for Iben Derriva to continue.

"So," Iben said. "I don't think the Perdaé had the funds or the connections. But I think they were proxies. And I think the Trade Federation did."

"Hmm," Obi-Wan said, noncommittally. And then, "I must confess that I'm a little confused about the political situation on Naboo. Perhaps you would care to enlighten me?"

"Naboo, as you know," Iben Derriva explained, "is a constitutional monarchy." He seemed, Obi-Wan noted, unsurprised, if a little delighted at the thought of having to explain the situation to the Jedi. "While the Five exert a considerable amount of power and influence, the next main player is the Monarch; currently, Queen Amidala. Most of the people of Naboo support the Monarchy. And then, there are the Perdaé and the isolationists."
"Who are the isolationists?"

"They've been derisively referred to as sheep-herders," Iben said, "Because essentially, that's what their position boils down to: minimal central government, with the legislature being forced to go to the population with a referendum for every single decision, and a ceremonial Monarch, though some of them tend to be Republicans in sympathy with the Perdaé. For obvious reasons, the isolationists aren't very well-organised—unlike the Perdaé."

"How strong are the Perdaé?"

Iben hesitated. "They're a minority," he said, at last. "But a vocal one, and with a growing amount of power and influence."

"Do they have a leader?"

"Not as such," Iben answered. He drummed his fingers against the surface of the desk for a moment, thinking. "Pallié Talein," he said, finally. "Or Androl Oden. Androl's the one who makes all the fiery speeches in the legislature about how their time has come and how they're going to change things. Pallié, though; she's the one to worry about."

"Why?" Obi-Wan queried.

Iben gave him a thin smile. "Because," he said, "She writes the manifestos."

"What do you think?" Obi-Wan asked, as they walked out of 'Derriva & Partners.' Anakin was silent for a while, staring at the passers-by as they strode towards their next destination: the university in Theed.

"I dunno," he said, at last. "He played a lot with words, I guess."

"He is a lawyer," Obi-Wan pointed out. "It is his task to be careful with what he says."

"I guess," Anakin muttered. "Still, he seemed…slippery. Slimy, even. Like a Hutt." He found himself thinking of his vague memories of Gardulla the Hutt, who seemed nothing more than an oversized slug. You didn't trust Hutts, the other slaves in the pens had said. They always had plans, always treated you like a piece in a game of stones, and it occurred to him that there was something of that sort to Iben's manner.

"Possibly," Obi-Wan acknowledged. "Remember to keep your impressions flexible, though." His boot slipped on a loose cobblestone and he staggered, but then righted himself in the next moment.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," Obi-Wan said, "That you may be correct. Iben Derriva may be slimy, and he's most likely holding something back. But you might also be wrong. There's nothing wrong with having an impression. But you shouldn't be clinging to it, in the face of new evidence."

"Then why don't we go back and get it out of him!" Anakin demanded, skidding to a stop and turning about to go marching back towards the apartment building. But Obi-Wan had a firm hold on his elbow.

"Anakin," he said, tiredly. "Think. How do you plan to get that information out of him?"

Anakin scowled. "I bet we might find something out if you leaned real hard on him."
"Or we might not find out anything at all," Obi-Wan countered. He let go of Anakin. "And if he's innocent, we may have alienated a valuable ally within the Five. Many beings have secrets, Anakin. I don't doubt that Iben Derriva might not be as innocent as he paints himself to be. But at this point, there seems to be little to gain from continuing to press him. Instead, by talking to the Perdaé, we gain more pieces to the puzzle. We gain a way of evaluating the Five—and Iben—through someone else's eyes."

"And if they tell us Iben is lying?"

"Then," Obi-Wan said dryly, "We pay him another visit. And I lean on him, 'real hard'."

Anakin grinned. "I like the sound of that." He sobered, in the span of a few moments, as a thought occurred to him. "There's something I don't get through."

"What is it?"

"You kept saying the assassin was going after the Queen," Anakin said, and Obi-Wan motioned for him to keep his voice down. Much softer, he continued. "So did Captain Panaka. But earlier, you told me you didn't think the assassin was going after the Queen. So why did you tell him that?"

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "What do you think?" he challenged.

Anakin frowned. "I don't know," he muttered, his hands shoved into his tunic pockets. He wondered what it was with the Jedi and those questions. There was Gallia, who seemed to positively enjoy asking him all sorts of stupid questions, and then there was Obi-Wan. He felt just a touch of resentment: wasn't it obvious he had no idea what was going on? Why was Obi-Wan pressing him?

"I didn't ask for what you know," Obi-Wan said, mildly, as if he'd sensed the sullen direction of Anakin's thoughts. "I'm asking you for what you think."

"Why does it matter?" The words were out of Anakin's mouth before he could decide if it was or wasn't wise. He'd felt just a bit left out the whole time Obi-Wan was talking to Iben Derriva, and even now, he felt like...like baggage. Baggage that Obi-Wan was dragging around.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Anakin," he began. "You're going to be a Jedi. My job is to teach you. Not just to use this," he tapped the lightsaber clipped to his belt. "Or this." Anakin felt it then, a swirling, in-rushing, gathering around Obi-Wan, clear like the fountain water, like a deep desert well. "The most important thing I can give you, Anakin, is the ability to use this." He tapped his own temple. "Your mind. To think. And that means I need to encourage you to think for yourself, to voice your own opinions, and to accept challenges."

He thought about it.

The spacers played sabaac a lot, in some of the cantinas in Mos Espa. He'd listened to them a lot, when he had a spare moment. There, he'd heard all sorts of stories from spacers—the one about angels on the moons of Iego, or gigantic dust-worms, nestled in the heart of asteroid fields, or the Lost Ship. But sabaac—sometimes dejarik. Anakin's mind went back to that, drawn by some sort of instinct.

And then he knew.

"You're keeping it up your sleeve, aren't you?" he said, aloud. "You're trying some kind of bluff—you want to see what they have to say, what they'll show if they think the assassin went after the Queen, rather than anyone else."
Obi-Wan nodded; he was smiling, Anakin thought, and for some reason, he felt a slight tickle of warmth, beating beneath his breast-bone. It was hard to put a word to it. "Almost essentially correct," Obi-Wan acknowledged with a nod. "Except for a few details. First, it's always good to see what the Five have to say. I suspect the assassin wasn't after the Queen at all, but Captain Panaka is working from the presumption that an attempt on the Queen is somehow involved, because that is his only way to make sense of why an assassin would attack us in the palace. I cannot quite disagree."

"Why not?" Anakin asked, frowning.

"Because I am the Queen's security," Obi-Wan pointed out, gently. "And Captain Panaka leads the royal guard. With both of us removed from the picture, any assassination attempt on the Queen could proceed."

It didn't make sense, though. Anakin said as much, and Obi-Wan once again offered him that nod. "You're right," Obi-Wan said, with a sigh. "But it offers as good a starting point as any, even if we may hold reservations about how true that might be. Which is why it's good to feel the Five out. And as you said, it's good not to play every single card we have in our hand. That way, we can pay attention to those who seem to know more than they're supposed to."

He continued walking on, and Anakin trudged after him. "And lean on them 'real hard'," Obi-Wan added, dryly, after a few moments' pause.

"Wizard," Anakin said, delighted.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: So, thanks once again to those who have given kudos or commented, or otherwise, read and (hopefully) enjoyed this story! :) I know it's been a while: once again, I have to unfortunately plead RL. I've finally managed to graduate and will now have job market woes. Once again though, I repeat: I'm committed to seeing this story through. It'll just take longer than I expected... (In particular, I had an issue with my hard drive a while back and I lost pretty much everything on it. My back-up hard drives went too, in what must be a spate of absurd luck. I proceeded to buy lottery tickets (no benefit there, alas), and to carefully piece together everything I'd lost.)

So the good and the bad news: the good news is that I took really substantive handwritten notes on this story and where I plan for it to go. As such, it's just a matter of rewriting the missing chapters and then moving on. The bad news is that recovering this story is not my first priority, but I've more or less recovered my lost work stuff, and life stuff, and so I can move on to resurfacing this fic. More bad news: the crash took down all my buffer, so I'm gonna have to put in some work to recover that chapter buffer before I can see to a more regular posting schedule.

Here's hoping it won't be months again before y'all hear from me. My current commitment is to getting out the next chapter within two weeks.

-Ammar.
Chapter Twelve: Shots Fired

The Arjuna University of Free Theed was housed in a series of lofty buildings; no taller than the other stone buildings in the vicinity, and wrought of the same yellow stone from the nearby quarries. Yet its architecture spoke of an elegance that was lacking in most of the surrounding buildings, and students sat on the stone rim of the fountain and laughed and chattered as the breeze in the open courtyards scattered the fountain spray.

The trees were thick and lush, and as Obi-Wan strode through the campus quietly, he noticed that the occupation of the Trade Federation, too, had touched the university. He noticed char marks on stone buildings—most likely blaster burns—and the occasional patch of scorched earth. He observed, as well, the way eyes turned to them and conversation faltered as he made his way towards the administrative centre of the university, Anakin in tow.

The Force was strong here; it vibrated among the trees, among the youth and students gathered. But there was something else as well: an undercurrent of warning. Without thinking, Obi-Wan tugged at Anakin, dragged him over to his left side.

"What's happening?" Anakin asked, softly. At least the boy was perceptive enough, Obi-Wan reflected. He'd picked up on Obi-Wan's unease.


Anakin rolled his eyes. "Run off, find somewhere safe, stay there, don't move."

"That was for the palace," Obi-Wan corrected. "Where there are plenty of well-trained guards. Here, you stay close by me so I can protect you. Unless I tell you to stay somewhere else, for your own safety."

"All right," Anakin said. "But why your left?"

Obi-Wan's lips twitched in a half-smile. "Because I'm right-handed," he said, absently. "The Jedi don't like students to have a dominant hand, so in theory, we're trained to be able to handle a lightsaber 'passably well' with either hand, but I still favour my right."

Anakin craned his neck, and sure enough, Qui-Gon's lightsaber hung at Obi-Wan's left side. "Then shouldn't I be on your right?" he reasoned.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Good thinking, but no." He mimed the most basic guard stance of Ataru, lightsaber held upright in a two-handed grip on his right side, and then shifted, angling the imaginary lightsaber diagonally downwards. "This is a basic deflection position. If you're on my right, I'd have to expose myself to protect you. When you stand here, I protect both you and myself in a single movement."

"Oh," Anakin said, enlightened. He'd never thought about that before.
"Oh indeed," Obi-Wan said. And then absently, "It's why the Padawan always stands on the opposite of the Master's dominant side."

Anakin stiffened, forced himself to relax. He couldn't help it; he thought of Watto, who'd been free enough with his fists when Anakin made a mistake. He thought of people on Tatooine who were more than happy to remind him he wasn't a person, just property. Easily replaceable. Fit to be bought and sold and traded.

Gallia's words echoed in his head. "Anakin, you're going to learn that in a lot of places, people do things differently. And if being different is enough for you to consider them stupid, then you're going to have a lot of difficulty in life."

Was this worth it? he wanted to ask. Maybe sometimes, different was wrong.

Obi-Wan had stopped walking. "Anakin? Are you all right?"

Anakin bit his lip. No, he wanted to say, but he felt stupid, having stopped without having even realised he'd done so. Except that he couldn't make himself say that he was okay; he just wasn't sure what he even wanted to say. Obi-Wan had been sort of nice to him, but he didn't seem to know a lot of things, and Anakin wasn't sure he wanted to have to find the words for them.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said, very slowly, very cautiously, as if Anakin was some sort of rampaging bantha, "If I'm going to be your teacher, I need to know that you can approach me if you have any difficulty at all. Please talk to me."

"Don't talk to me," Anakin ground out. He hated that, most of all. Being treated as if he was fragile, made of glass. *Then how do you want to be treated?* part of his head which sounded suspiciously like Gallia asked him. *Do you want to be their Chosen One, set aside and special? Do you want to be the ex-slave, to be handled with care and protected from all pain? What do you want to be, then?*

Obi-Wan's features smoothened out, but for a moment, just a moment, Anakin thought he saw a flash of hurt in the man's eyes. He hated that too; the way Obi-Wan just took it all without complaint and said nothing, only, "Very well. Let us continue."

He knew he shouldn't have snapped, wished that Obi-Wan would've done something—anything—to show he cared. Pressed him, made those conflicting desires make sense, or at least show that Anakin's words had affected him somehow.

Instead, Obi-Wan continued walking, without looking back over his shoulder, and finally, with the sinking feeling that he'd screwed up somehow, Anakin jogged to keep up with him.

Obi-Wan's first impression was that Pallié Talein worked at the university. Certainly, in a number of other worlds he'd visited while on missions with Qui-Gon, universities had been a major locus of political activity, but lecturers, or so he had discovered, were often just as active in politics as their students.

Anakin was a brooding presence, trudging sullenly to his left.

He'd misspoken, somewhere. That much was clear. And for all he'd thought he'd begun to form a kind of bond with Anakin, it had been made painfully clear to him that the boy didn't quite trust him. One step forwards, three steps back, thought Obi-Wan with a quiet sigh. There were many things he'd wanted to say. He didn't think it was the time to be saying them, right now.

*You never need unsay what has never been said,* was one of Adi Gallia's famous admonitions.
Before she ascended to the Council, she'd served as a diplomat to numerous worlds. She'd even been instrumental in securing the Boshkhan-Adhar treaties, which effectively secured an end to the ongoing violence between the twin worlds of Boshkhan and Adhar in the Vekthan system. Many, or so Obi-Wan had read, back during his planetary diplomacy tutorials, had considered the situation to be unresolvable: years of wars and intermittent feuding had divided the two planets. While a two-planet treaty seemed to be the best way forward, most diplomats and commentators had argued there was little political will for such a settlement: a sizeable number of Adhirans insisted that Boshkhan had once been theirs and so the only settlement would be one where Boshkhan became Adhiran territory.

But Adi Gallia secured the peace treaty, somehow. Obi-Wan'd read her reports of the diplomatic negotiations and still could not begin to understand how. It was a master-stroke, a work that had elevated her to the rank of Jedi Master, even without having successfully trained an apprentice.

So he assented to her wisdom with a quiet sigh; one that Anakin did not seem to pick up on. It had been going so well until then, thought Obi-Wan, with resigned frustration. He let that emotion go, and tried to focus on the task at hand.

He was nearly at the doorway of the administrative building when he sensed it: the moment when the restless undercurrent within the Force transmuted to sharp, urgent warning.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan cried out, "Down!"

The boy responded with admirable alacrity, the sullenness dissipated and replaced by both shock and recognition of the threat. The Force was strong with Anakin indeed, Obi-Wan found himself thinking wryly, even as he whirled about, transitioning fluidly from drawing his lightsaber into a standard block.

The blaster bolt came from behind, and Obi-Wan almost staggered off-balance as the shot deflected off the blade of his lightsaber. (There was that moment of shock there, again, as the blade in his hands was a bright green, not familiar blue.)

"Obi-Wan?" Anakin asked, softly.

"Stay down," Obi-Wan ordered, twirling his lightsaber about in his hands, in preparation for the next strike. At the same time, he cast about for the shooter. Already, the students on the campus were reacting: he'd heard a few screams, while others seemed to be familiar with the situation and were diving for cover. That made his task easier, he mused. He had to stop the shooter without accidentally deflecting the blaster bolt into somebody. He raised his voice, "All of you, find somewhere safe and stay there!" He scooped up Anakin and kept moving, smacking away the next blaster bolt. It was coming from up high, Obi-Wan thought, estimating trajectory and angle, and the bolt he'd deflected slammed into the walls of a neighbouring building instead.

He found a durasteel bin—probably for rubbish—and shoved Anakin behind it. "Stay here and keep quiet," he ordered Anakin, and without waiting for a response, strode out again.

There was no pattern to it: the next bolt whined out from a completely different location—somewhat to the left of the previous, Obi-Wan estimated. But the Force was with him, guiding him, and he deflected that into a patch of empty grass, disintegrating it.

Military-grade high-energy weapon, Obi-Wan mused. Deflection was supposed to absorb a little of the force and energy of the blaster bolt.

He dashed towards the direction the first shot had come from. There was a cluster of buildings there,
Obi-Wan realised: not particularly high, but a potential spotting point for a shooter. At the same time, he reached for his utility belt and removed the cable launcher from his toolpouch. With one hand, Obi-Wan batted away the next shot—to the right, this time—and with the other, he activated the cable launcher, engaging the grapnel, and firing it at the roof of the building.

"Test your rope," the Jedi instructor in charge of climbing classes had always said. Obi-Wan yanked it once, decided that was good enough, feeling the firm resistance as the grapnel held in place, and leaped upwards, reeling in the cable.

He gained the roof of the building—fingers of his free hand scrabbling on the edge for purchase—and grunted as a shot came in, still from the right. Only the Force warned him, as Obi-Wan rolled on his shoulder, somehow managing to avoid the blast, and still clinging desperately to the roofing, although he felt a flash of heat and knew he’d managed to graze himself with his ignited lightsaber.

He hauled himself up with his free hand and a little boost from the Force, landed neatly, as if it had been a training exercise in the Temple and crouched instantly, lightsaber raised in a defensive position once again. The shooter was to his right—a human in an obscuring helmet, likely male, with what Obi-Wan identified as a Phokas Mark VI sniper rifle employed by a number of planetary militaries.

Obi-Wan disengaged the grapnel and charged, lightsaber up and at the ready. As he ran towards the makeshift sniper's nest; the shooter fled, abandoning the rifle.

Obi-Wan leapt over the distance between the two buildings, trusting in his momentum and the Force to carry him. He hit the edge of the building—cursed softly—and had to haul himself over the edge, a move made awkward by the fact that he was holding on to Qui-Gon's lightsaber.

The shooter was already ahead, yet Obi-Wan didn't see how he was going to escape: the other way was a dead end, leading to the last of the class blocks. But the shooter was clearly skilled in urban navigation as he leaped, grabbed at a projecting outcrop on the next building, and used that momentum to swing on and drop down to a ledge slightly below the outcrop.

Obi-Wan whirled about to give the area a quick glance (you must be aware of your surroundings, Padawan, he heard Qui-Gon's voice, a reminder, and never assume there's only one of them.)

For this reason, he deflected the next incoming blaster bolt with ease.

Two, Obi-Wan thought, and knew then that he could not afford to give chase—not when there was one more armed shooter on the campus. Twisting about, he called out, "You are under arrest, in the name of the Republic!"

The only reply he received was a shouted profanity, in Basic.

Inwardly, Obi-Wan shrugged and moved.

This time, he made the jump by a good distance, clearing the edge of the building, and allowing the surge of energy to carry him forward into another great leap. This shooter, Obi-Wan realised, was not as much of a professional: there was a flurry of bolts now, but most of them were nowhere close to hitting him. Whoever it was, they were panicking.

"I don't want to hurt you," Obi-Wan shouted, as he closed in. "Whoever you are, stand down and you will be taken to the nearest security station."

It was a woman, he now saw: her hair tied back, armed with a repeating blaster rifle and surprisingly young. Possibly a student, Obi-Wan surmised, although however she'd gotten her hands on the
blaster rifle was a question for a later time. "It's too late for that, Jedi!" she yelled back. "We all know what you are. The corrupt systems of power and oppression that you protect!"

"We are agents of the Republic!" Obi-Wan replied, advancing through the storm of scattered blaster fire. "Whoever you are, the Jedi do not oppress: we guard peace and we ensure justice."

The only response he received was a spray of blaster fire. Ironically enough, it was harder to deflect the closely-packed, random bolts than the clinical potshots they'd taken earlier. Obi-Wan felt a flash of heat along his saber arm as some of the bolts came far closer than he was comfortable with.

She backed away as he advanced, right up to the very lip of the building and stopped with her back to the edge.

Obi-Wan leaned out, into his sweeping cut, which burned through the rifle barrel, slicing the weapon apart. She cried out and dropped the weapon, the metal still glowing red-hot from the swift cut of Obi-Wan's lightsaber.

Obi-Wan said, "It's over now."

She stared at him, frustrated, hating, trapped. One hand reached into her jacket pocket—perhaps for a knife, perhaps for a blaster.

With a mental shrug and a silent apology, he slammed the pommel of Qui-Gon's lightsaber into her temple. As she crumpled, Obi-Wan carefully caught her and lowered her to the ground, and then sheathed the weapon.

The Force was still now, quiet. He had no doubt that the other shooter had gotten away.

Letting a quiet sigh escape his lips, Obi-Wan flipped on his comlink. "Anakin, do you copy?"

It was a few long moments before he heard the high, child's voice on the other end. "Obi-Wan?"

He'd have to talk to Anakin about Jedi decorum sometime soon, Obi-Wan reflected, setting it on the list of the many, many things he absolutely needed to do. For now, he settled for a terse, "Are you hurt?"


"Yes, I am," Obi-Wan said, firmly. "But I need you to do something for me. I need you to contact campus or planetary security—actually, someone should've called them, so I expect you'll see them any moment now. Let them know that one of the shooters got away, but the other's in custody. I'm on the roof of the—" he looked around and winced. There was no easy way to tell which of the campus buildings they were on; not from the roof itself. "I'm on the roof of one of the buildings. Can you do that for me?"

"Yeah, okay," Anakin said. "Do I get to come up?"

Obi-Wan said, "No. Not yet. Not until the area is secure."

"This is boring," Anakin muttered, petulantly. Obi-Wan ignored him, and said, "Stay where you are, Anakin. I'll come down and get you once everything's clear."

"All right," Anakin grumbled, and Obi-Wan flicked off the comlink. He bent down and briskly searched the unconscious woman. It turned out that the object was in fact, a pocket-knife, so Obi-Wan took it, and then bound her hands with fibrecord. It wasn't ideal, but a Jedi improvised. He felt
the instinctive flash of pain; those thoughts had made themselves known with Qui-Gon's voice, laced with the older Jedi's good humour.

The woman wasn't carrying a comlink, but she did have a datapad. It was, however, password-protected, and Obi-Wan confiscated it as well, making a mental note to see Plo Koon about cracking the datapad.

Hands were not significantly callused, Obi-Wan noticed, as he settled in to wait for security officers to arrive. If anything, the fact she'd panicked as he closed in showed, among other things, that she wasn't a professional. The other shooter, though. That had been a military-grade sniper rifle and Obi-Wan badly wanted to know how the shooter'd gotten their hands on it. The one he'd taken apart was similarly noteworthy. He prodded it with his boot, trying to nudge the pieces together to get a better look at it. A Baktoid series E-5, Obi-Wan confirmed, used commonly by the B1 battle droids recently deployed by the Trade Federation. Likely some looters'd scavenged and sold those weapons after the defeat and subsequent disarmament of the Trade Federation's droid army—perhaps some'd even been stolen during their short-lived occupation of Naboo. Still, though, the E-5 had been modified: Obi-Wan recalled that the originals had issues with heating after sustained blasts, due to the fact that they were short barreled. What the extra module did, Obi-Wan wasn't entirely certain.

He was certain about one thing, at least.

Whatever it was, the latest attack had been directed at them, specifically; no doubt in response to Obi-Wan's recent inquiries. Which meant, Obi-Wan knew, that there was likely more to what Arvol Resnik had been doing in the palace than was immediately apparent. Hed suspected that, before. But now, it was more than a suspicion: it was a certainty.

He drew a long, slow breath. He knew what Qui-Gon's response would have been, had his Master been here. Really, Obi-Wan thought, if someone wanted to discourage further investigation, then the only possible response was to keep digging, and see what came out of it.

Anakin trudged up onto the roof behind the security officers, as they grumbled about how the Jedi couldn't possibly be more specific about where he was. Well sure, Anakin thought indignantly, ignore how he'd pointed them towards the right cluster of buildings; he was still a kid, and apparently his contribution counted for nothing.

Obi-Wan'd told him to stay put, but Anakin'd enough of crouching behind a durasteel bin and waiting and waiting, and besides, the bin stank and he thought the fruit flies'd figured Tatooine kid was a great a meal as some of…well, whatever rotting food'd crawled in and died there.

Besides, Anakin thought smugly, it was hard to argue with the logic that with lots of security officers and Obi-Wan, the roof was probably the safest place on the campus at the moment.

By the time security'd run up the full flight of stairs and climbed out onto the roof, it was apparent they were on the wrong roof; Anakin could make out the watchful figure a few buildings over. "Kriffing Jedi," the security officer in the lead muttered, and then belatedly glanced over at Anakin, as if remembering he was tagging along. "It's the wrong fragging building."

As they turned about to head down the stairs, something caught Anakin's eye. He bent down, curious, and touched a patch of reddish-orange dirt in the shape of a footprint—

"Hey, kid, what're you doing?"

The officer bringing up the rear of the group frowned, and instinctively, Anakin drew himself up,
rubbing at his fingers—strange, it felt like powdery sand—but then the older woman glanced down at the ground and whistled sharply. "Barana," she called out. "The Jedi's kid found something here. I'll check it out."

"Alright," the lead officer called back. "Meet at the Jedi's location."

"What is that?" Anakin wanted to know. "It looks like dirt."

"But that's why it's interesting," the woman said, absently, drawing out a datapad with a logo Anakin couldn't get a good look at and snapping a few photos of the print. "Next time, don't disturb it."

"Why not?"

"It's evidence," the officer said. "See? You've smudged the bottom bit of the print. If we had a clear shot of this, we could try to match it to the shooter."

"Wouldn't he have gotten rid of his boots by now?"

The woman laughed. "Most of 'em aren't that canny," she said, simply. "You'd be surprised about the different ways we catch people. Last time, this guy who robbed a hovercab went to the security station to report his datapad missing—he'd left it in the hovercab. Made my job easy that day, for sure."

"Oh," Anakin said, surprised. He frowned down at the print. "So you're going to go around trying to find someone with the same boots?"

"Better than that," the officer said, straightening up. "Our shooter likely tracked that dirt in—it's reddish-orange, which doesn't match with anything you'll see around Theed. Off the top of my head, I can't think of where this might've come from, except maybe a quarry, but the database'll know, for sure."

"Huh," Anakin said, enlightened. He hadn't even known that; dirt was dirt, he'd figured, just like sand was sand, and it hadn't occurred to him that this didn't match the brown dirt he'd seen in flowerbeds around the palace and Theed until the woman'd pointed it out.

"Anyway," she said. "I'll bet these're all over the roof, which means our shooter tracked that dirt in. Want to see if I'm right?"

"Okay," Anakin agreed. He felt a trickle of excitement. Okay, so maybe Obi-Wan would throw a fit if Anakin'd wandered off, but at least he was doing something helpful. Surely Obi-Wan'd want to know about the prints and the special dirt, and all. Maybe it'd help Obi-Wan figure out what was going on.

Besides, he thought, stubbornly, he was with security—even if it was just that woman looking at all the bootprints. Surely that still counted as 'safe.' Even Obi-Wan, Anakin figured, couldn't argue with that.

Except that Obi-Wan could and did argue.

"Anakin," said Obi-Wan, frowning down at him, after he'd apparently given custody of the second shooter over to security and just leapt the gap between buildings to locate Anakin. "I specifically told you to stay put."

Anakin said, "I was safe—"
"You didn't know that," Obi-Wan said, sternly. "You didn't know that the shooter wasn't lurking around somewhere in the area. You didn't know that there wasn't a third accomplice, or—Force forbid—a planted bomb."

Obstinate, Anakin repeated, "I was safe."

"No," Obi-Wan said, gently but firmly, and Anakin hated that tone, as if Anakin'd done something so terribly wrong, "You might have been. But you might not have been. You had absolutely no way of knowing that, which was my point. You went against my orders for dubious reasons at best, and the wrong ones at worst." He ran a hand through his hair, looking extremely tired. "Anakin, I allowed you to remain with me because I was under the impression that you would listen to me when I told you to do things for your safety. It turns out I was mistaken."

Anakin wasn't sure which was worse: the embarrassment, or the rage, or the way Obi-Wan was looking at him, with disappointment sharp like the edge of a utility knife. Or maybe it was the way that Obi-Wan wasn't listening to him, because surely being with security meant he was safer than anywhere else. He said as much.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Being with security doesn't make you safe," he said. "If you were at a security station, perhaps. But following the first responders at a site of an attack isn't safe, Anakin. There have been occasions on which first responders too, whether security or medics, have been attacked."

"But you kept me safe when they tried shooting at us," Anakin protested. "How's being with security any less safe?" and Obi-Wan held up a hand.

"Enough," he said. "We'll talk about this later, I assure you."

"Are you sending me away, then?" Anakin wanted to know. It was the question that weighed down on him, even as he didn't understand Obi-Wan's reason. It was infuriating, but the thought of being shipped off, back to the Temple, completely alone, tail between his legs, was thoroughly intolerable.

Obi-Wan pressed his lips together and did not reply immediately. Eventually he said, "I'm tempted to, mind you, but I'll think about it. Not just because you've shown that you have terrible risk-assessment, or that you aren't opposed to treating orders flippantly, but because this assignment's turning out a little more hot than I'd expected. Now," and his demeanour changed, turning business-like. "What's this about prints?"

Anakin showed him, feeling the resentment burn deep down inside. He shoved it, stamping down on it until it was smouldering embers rather than a small, banked fire. "The officer said he'd left prints," Anakin muttered. "And she said the dirt's special—different from the dirt in Theed."

Obi-Wan hunkered down, inspecting the prints. "She's right," he said. "And the bootprint's different enough as well."

"What d'you mean?"

"See this?" Obi-Wan indicated the way the print was divided into blocky, segmented chunks. "City boots have regular soles. You only need this kind of chunky, segmented sole if you do a lot of hiking. Good for trapping sand, too."

"That's the dirt?"

Obi-Wan nodded. He rubbed it with his fingers, too.
"The officer said you're not supposed to touch that," Anakin informed him. "She said we need to leave evidence untouched."

Obi-Wan's lips twisted in a faint smile. "Yes, we do," he agreed, "But she's already sending me the captured photos. And if security hasn't already done so, then we need to get a sample of the dirt for analysis. Then we can track down the shooter's location."

"Oh," Anakin said. And then, "Good." At least Obi-Wan was still saying 'we', for now. "What're we gonna do, then?"

Obi-Wan considered. Gravely, he said, "When the shooter regains consciousness, I would like to speak with her. And I'd like to get some analysis done on the dirt, and a datapad. And then we should still speak with Pallié Talein."

"A datapad?" Anakin asked.

Obi-Wan produced the datapad. "It's password-locked," he said. "I'll need to get it to Master Koon, have him take a look at this."

Anakin said, "I can crack it."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "You sure?" he asked, and Anakin bristled inside.

"Course I can," he said, just a trifle offended. "I take apart—I mean, I used to take apart droids for a living. Disabling all that security 'ware on a speeder's CPU is hard. Cracking a datapad's easy as opening a cookie jar."

"All right," Obi-Wan said, "Catch."

Anakin snatched the datapad from the air. It was a newer model, he noticed, probably one of those by Muja Inc. They never really got the latest in hardware and electronics on Tatooine, and from what Anakin'd heard, Muja Inc. was supposed to be top-notch; it produced the latest, most trendy models, rolling them out sector-by-sector from the Core Worlds to (eventually) dustballs like Tatooine. But he'd gotten a chance to toy with an old Muja datapad once, and he figured they couldn't have changed very much. Not like a Sienar 2000 Hawkbat—that speeder'd been a tough one.

He switched it on and instantly, the Muja logo flashed, followed by the password entry screen.

"Do you need some quiet or can you do it on the go?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

"M fine with anything," Anakin muttered. And then a thought occurred to him. "Hey, Obi-Wan?"

"Yes?"

"If I crack this, does this mean you're not sending me back?"

"As I said, Anakin," came the implacable reply, "We will discuss this later."

So much for that, Anakin thought, grumpily, as he worked on the datapad. How was he supposed to know that Obi-Wan would get himself into such a snit over following security up to go find him?

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Obi-Wan strode down the stairs, Anakin in tow. He'd seen to his burns, using the contents of his med-pouch—nothing a little bacta and disinfectant couldn't handle—but the issue of how to handle Anakin weighed heavily on him.
There had been Anakin's earlier outburst, for one. And then there was Anakin's insistence that he'd done nothing wrong disobeying orders. It was true, Obi-Wan would acknowledge, that nothing bad had come out of this. It was also true that the last thing he wanted to do was to stifle Anakin's independent streak. But the foundation of Jedi training was discipline, and if he couldn't instil that into his apprentice, then he would be doing badly by Anakin.

And then there was Anakin's questionable judgement. And the rudiments of Jedi protocol.

Obi-Wan sighed and set the issue aside for the moment. There was nothing he could do about it; perhaps he'd have a talk with Adi Gallia or Even Piell. He wondered if that was how it had been for Qui-Gon when he was training his first apprentice.

Except that Qui-Gon's first apprentice had been Xanatos, and Xanatos had eventually turned to the Dark Side. *That* was a thought that Obi-Wan didn't want to entertain, and he banished it with some effort.

"I got it!" Anakin crowed, holding up the datapad. He punched in a few keys and the password screen dissolved, leaving only a few words on the display.

**WELCOME, TALA ALTARIE.**

"Excellent work, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, pleasantly surprised. "Anything in there?"

Anakin shrugged and handed over the datapad. "Told you it was easy," he smirked, and Obi-Wan could see that the boy was basking in the praise. "Muja's good, but nothing next to speeders."

"I'll remember that," Obi-Wan murmured as he accessed the most recent messages and calls. Discarding what seemed to be overly-personal messages, a quick scan brought up a number of messages and comms to a person by the name of Nola Jabrazie, as well as a few messages to Pallié Talein concerning meeting times. He noted all of that down.

"Well?" Anakin demanded.

Obi-Wan showed him the latest message from Pallié Talein, confirming the timing of a specific meeting. It wasn't as recent, Obi-Wan noticed, but all things considered, it was interesting, since they had already identified Talein as a person they needed to talk to.

Anakin frowned. "I don't get it," he said. "So they're meeting up. So what?"

Obi-Wan shrugged and switched off the datapad and pocketed it. "So nothing," he said. "Maybe it means something. Maybe it doesn't. But people don't suddenly get up and decide to go and shoot other people for no reason, and there's much we don't know about Tala Altarie. Where did she get the modified E-5? What was her motivation? Where does she fit in all of this? Figuring out who she's been in contact with might give us a better picture of what's been going on."

Anakin nodded slowly, clearly trying to keep track of all the questions. "Right," he said. "So we talk to her? Or we talk to—to…"

"Pallié Talein," Obi-Wan supplied. He thought for a moment. "I think we'll talk to Talein first. Altarie's going nowhere, after all."

"Okay," Anakin shrugged. "Let's go then."

Chapter End Notes
A/N: Once again, thanks to everyone for their kind support of this story, whether it be through (much-appreciated) comments, kudos, and so on :) This took a bit longer than I expected, but I hope it's worth the wait, and that it wasn't too long since the last update. I'm still working on rebuilding that chapter buffer, but RL's calmed down a bit, so I've got that going for me.

Some notes on this current installment: all's not forgiven/cheery on the Obi-Wan&Anakin front. Young Anakin, as I see him, isn't really going to hold a grudge for long (it's exhausting)-or at least, he's got other things on his mind instead of holding this (for now). But the issue's been more or less buried rather than resolved, and both Obi-Wan and Anakin are still going to have to do long-term work to ensure a robust relationship of trust is established. It doesn't help that right now, Obi-Wan's in that ambiguous zone between guardian and friend-when he's very much going to have to step up to being an authority figure in Anakin's (early, relatively anyway) life. Whether he can get there is another question altogether.

-Ammar
Chapter Thirteen: Mining Concerns

By the time Obi-Wan and Anakin had located Pallié Talein's office, things had begun to quieten down on the campus. Security officers still searched the area, trying to ascertain if the second shooter was still around, but as Obi-Wan had said dryly, unless they went around checking footwear, he didn't expect them to have much success. After all, for one, Obi-Wan fully expected the shooter to have gotten rid of that helmet—it would've stood out in the crowd.

For another…

He thought of the weapon the man had used, the fluid way he'd navigated the space between the buildings. As far as Obi-Wan was concerned, they were up against a professional, and Obi-Wan didn't doubt that such an individual would have effectively disappeared by now.

They crossed the courtyard and went left, heading past the trees thick with flowers towards the political science department. It was in a building of its own, Obi-Wan noticed, and it had not escaped the damage of the occupation. In fact, half the roof appeared to be caved in; that surprised him. He hadn't thought the Trade Federation would've resorted to bombardment. But perhaps it was a stray shot from one of the many aerial dogfights that had taken place only a short time before, in Naboo skies.

HoloNet reception was still patchy at this part of the university, but it was easy enough to access the electronic staff register at the department entrance to determine where Talein's office was. A quick comm-call established that Talein was, in fact, in her office and had time to meet them.

"Was she really going to say no?" Anakin wanted to know, as they walked quietly down the corridor towards Talein's office; at the end of the second level.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I'll tell you about the Szithian Senator sometime," he said, wryly. "Esk'ize'ssa had the most creative ways of refusing to cooperate with a Jedi investigation…"

He trailed off as the next nameplate read, DR PALLIÉ TALEIN. He palmed the door-chime and waited.

"What—" Anakin began, but in the next moment, the door to Talein's office slid open.

"Welcome, Jedi Kenobi," Talein said, standing up to exchange a brief handshake with Obi-Wan. She preferred her hand to Anakin. "And this is?"

"This is my student," Obi-Wan said, "Anakin Skywalker." Almost mischievously, he added, "You might also know him as the Hero of Naboo."

Anakin shuffled restlessly, but Obi-Wan could tell that he was pleased by the mention, all the same. "Quite right," Talein said, with a faint smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Hello there, Anakin."

"Hi," Anakin said, and then she motioned them to the empty seats on the other side of the desk.
"I'm sorry I haven't been on top of cleaning up, lately," Talein said. She gestured to the piles of flimsiplast printouts, durasheets, and holo-readers stacked all over her desk, with a few empty drink-bulbs and a ceramic mug with the university logo, still stained with stimcaf. "As you might not be aware, it's the time they're processing tenure applications, so I'm rather distracted at the moment…"

Obi-Wan acknowledged the hint with a graceful nod. "Then I shall wish you all the best," he said, "And attempt to resolve my enquiries as swiftly as possible. Are you aware of the attempt on the Queen's life?"

Talein snorted. "Who isn't?" she wanted to know. "For all the palace put an embargo on news, it was all over the HoloNet like the latest Phozarcian pop hit on RaveMusic."

"Then you must know why any investigation would be interested in talking to you," Obi-Wan continued, calmly. "There have been suggestions that such a deed might've been committed by members of the Perdaé sympathetic to the Trade Federation."

Talein laughed. "You have got to be kidding me," she said, flatly. Obi-Wan kept his expression politely neutral and waited; one lesson he'd learned from Qui-Gon was that beings often tended to reveal more than they'd expected to when confronted with silence. Talein proved to be no exception to this principle. "Who said that? One of the Five, I suppose. They're rather protective of their own power-base."

"Even so," Obi-Wan replied. "Are you certain there is nothing to such claims?"

Talein looked him in the eye. "Yes," she said, without hesitation. "The Perdaé don't exist, Jedi Kenobi, and I certainly don't lead them, whatever you might have heard. I write manifestos, pamphlets. The people consume these, and they decide if my ideas have merit. The Perdaé are not a movement or an organised bloc, planning to take down the political system, with a concrete hierarchy. The Perdaé are everywhere and nowhere. Anyone with a HoloNet account can post and claim to be the Perdaé, or to do things in the name of the Perdaé. It's that easy, Jedi Kenobi."

Obi-Wan cleared his throat. "So I see," he said. "But this means you cannot deny that there may be those who see themselves as members of the Perdaé who are sympathetic to the Trade Federation—perhaps seeing the Federation as a means of bringing about much-needed change?"

Talein drew in a long, deep breath. "No," she said, at last. "I cannot."

"What about the meeting?" Anakin piped up.

Obi-Wan looked at Talein. He waited.

"What meeting?" Talein demanded.

"We apprehended a shooter on the campus earlier," Obi-Wan cut in, smoothly. "My apprentice was referring to the shooter—a Ms. Tala Altarie, who mentioned a meeting with you." He added, almost as an afterthought: "Ms. Altarie was rather displeased with the current state of political affairs. It's regrettable that she chose to express it through violence."

The blood drained from Talein's face. It was hard to fake such shock, Obi-Wan thought, although he did note that it was interesting Talein seemed to know nothing of it.

"The fools," Talein hissed. She buried her head in her hands. "I told them not to do it. I told them," she snarled.

"You told them what, Dr. Talein?" Obi-Wan seized on that last admission, injecting a sliver of cold
durasteel into his voice. "What is going on?"

She didn't look up. "The Youngbloods," she said, shoulders dropping. "They're a group—a splinter group. I told you, I write manifestos and pamphlets. They liked it. They liked it a great deal." Finally, she looked up at Obi-Wan. "They invited me to a few meetings as a guest speaker. They weren't interested in listening."

"Who are the Youngbloods?" Anakin asked, curious.

She looked over at him. "Revolutionaries," she said, still with that tired, dead voice. "Young revolutionaries. The system is broken, Jedi Kenobi. You must see that. Have you heard about the miner's revolt from last year?"

Casting quickly through his memory, Obi-Wan shook his head. "Why don't you enlighten us," he offered.

"Rori is our second moon," Talein explained. "It's an even bigger swamp than Naboo is, if you'd believe it." She paused, almost as if expecting a laugh. There was no response and Talein continued. "They mine kassoti there."

"A kind of spice," Obi-Wan said, as he saw Anakin open his mouth.

Anakin said, "Oh."

"Kassoti is unique in that it needs to be refined in a plasma bath," Obi-Wan said, to Anakin. "Which explains why it's being carried out on the moon—on Rori—and then transported down to the surface of Naboo. On top of the Velarra-controlled opal and malachite mines, Naboo has a small plasma mining industry—"

"Of which the Velarra own a significant percentage of shares," muttered Talein.

Obi-Wan inclined his head in acknowledgement. "That they do. And so it is convenient to refine the extracted kassoti on Naboo itself. Besides, small amounts of kassoti are used in stimulants, as an ingredient in common pain-blockers, and even in bacta."

"Wizard," Anakin breathed.

"Yes, quite."

Talein cleared her throat and took over the thread of the conversation. "In any case, things only began to deteriorate after they discovered deposits of cortorsis on Rori."

"We'd believed the discovery of cortorsis to be a strong influencing factor behind the Trade Federation blockade," Obi-Wan agreed.

"Likely," Talein agreed. "Resisting Senate authority only counts for so much." She shook her head. "There's little else Naboo has to offer them, apart from the fact that we're neither militarily nor politically powerful enough to be a dangerous target."

"What's coro-corto—" Anakin stumbled on the unfamiliar word.

"Cortorsis?" Obi-Wan said. "It's an extremely rare and dangerous metal in unrefined form, and very difficult to mine. That's actually why it's so very very useful when refined—because it resists energy. You can use it to strengthen the hulls of starships, to produce shields, body-armour…But precisely because it resists energy, it's so very difficult to mine. You can't use anything but the most basic of
tools—plasma torches, energy tools, they're all useless when extracting cortorsis. And without proper air filtration systems, cortosis particles are fatal to miners. And mining inevitably throws up the particles in the air."

"Okay," Anakin said. "But then why isn't it good? Shouldn't they be happy there's cortorsis on their moon?"

Obi-Wan glanced over at Talein. She said, addressing Anakin, "It's complicated. As a member of the Republic, Naboo is part of a free economic zone: it can't put up trade barriers and it must comply with galactic industrial and trade regulations. The existing mines are mineral mines—on the surface, primarily in the northlands, and plasma mines, deep in the waters, but largely inaccessible because the waters are dominated by the Gungan cities."

"All right," Anakin said. "What does this have to do with the corto—cortorsis?"

"Regulation 1751782," Talein said.

"It's a measure introduced by the Senator of Apatros last year," Obi-Wan interjected, recognising it from a negotiation mission he'd undertaken with Qui-Gon. "Regulation 1751782 was created by the senatorial commission meant to investigate galactic mining practices—and passed by a fifty vote margin in the Senate itself, meaning that Naboo has to comply."

Talein nodded. "Exactly," she said, exchanging a grim look with Obi-Wan. "One of the stipulations in Regulation 1751782 is that all mining equipment has to meet the standards issued by the commission. In practice, Naboo doesn't have the funding nor the infrastructure to fulfil these standards: we trade with the Chommell sector, rather than with the galactic economy. The result is that Naboo can't develop the cortorsis mines on Rori without violating galactic regulations, and the vultures are already circling: the Outer Rim Mining Concern has already been muscling in, trying to buy out the contracts for the cortorsis mines. But since the cortorsis mines lie in the same area as the spice mines, they want the kassoti miners out."

Anakin was frowning. "I don't get it," he said, after a while. "Why can't the Queen just tell them no?"

"Because Naboo must comply with galactic regulations," Obi-Wan explained. "This means that if a company with an impeccable credit rating like the Outer Rim Mining Concern applies for a license and is compliant with galactic mining law, Naboo does not have grounds to deny them a mining contract. If Naboo were to do so, it could be accused of unfair business practices, since the kassoti industry doesn't meet the Senate's requirements to be considered a protected industry." He glanced at the disbelief that was plain on Anakin's features and went on. "Oh, a clever ruler could find a loophole, no doubt. But then, the Outer Rim Mining Concern would have the grounds to take the entire affair to the courts. Cortorsis is extremely, extremely valuable, and since they absorbed Offworld, they've become a significant power, with many friends in the Senate."

"That doesn't seem fair," Anakin replied, slowly.

"You think?" Talein asked, sardonically. "And that's just the surface. The kassoti contracts are up for renewal next year. And while the dispute is ongoing, the miners can't expand their operations—in fact, they got slapped with a moratorium at one point. Which is why they revolted."

"What's that?"

"An order to cease mining," Obi-Wan said, absently. "So I take it the Senate isn't the most popular organisation on Naboo right now."
Talein shook her head. "Far from it," she said. "They're rather disliked, for good reason. The kassoti issue is just a symptom of the deeper problem: the Senate doesn't care about the small outlying planets in the Republic. Regulations are made by well-connected, wealthy planets like Apatros and Naboo has very little say in it."

"And the Youngbloods tap into this sentiment," Obi-Wan surmised. "What do they want, Dr. Talein?"

Talein shrugged. "Control. For Naboo to make its own policies. I don't know, and I don't think they do. A number of them are in the militia. Likely Altarie as well." She shook her head. "She was a good student. Wrote an incisive paper on how the Republic had failed Naboo—it was rather prescient, considering that we would later find ourselves blockaded and occupied by the Trade Federation. We didn't speak much. I didn't think anything of her interest in the Youngbloods."

"Why not?" Anakin piped up.

"It's good for them," Talein said. "Activism teaches them to care about their world, to want to make a difference. I'd sensed some darker rhetoric being circulated among the Youngbloods, but I didn't expect something like this to come out of it…" She trailed off, and there was a long silence.

"You've been rather helpful," Obi-Wan said. "Is there anything else you might be able to contribute to the ongoing investigation…?"

Talein shook her head. "That's it. I can't think of anything. I'll comm you or drop you a message on the HoloNet if I do."

Obi-Wan rose. He said, "Thank you for your time."

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Anakin said, "I'm completely lost."

"I wouldn't have expected you to follow most of it, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. He was striding on, down the corridors, headed towards the security office on the campus. "You're rather intelligent, but you haven't had much exposure to the workings of the Senate, much less business regulations in the Republic."

And there it was again: the resentment. As if Obi-Wan was implying he wasn't good enough, wasn't quite cultured or learned enough… Obi-Wan, who moved in those circles like a worm through sand.

He swallowed that, kept moving.

The silence between them stretched, grew heavier. Talking to Obi-Wan had been easier, earlier. Now, Obi-Wan seemed to draw the silence around himself like a thick warm Bantha-wool cloak, refusing to say more.

Finally, Anakin had enough of it. "Do you believe her?" he demanded.

Calmly, Obi-Wan said, "To some extent."

"Why?"

"I think she's underplaying who the Perdaé are," Obi-Wan said, simply. "It's clear the term 'Perdaé' has some traction on Naboo. Perhaps they're not a formal movement or political party, but Androl Oden clearly thinks he's speaking to some group of people, and that he's speaking for them, no matter how amorphous and ill-defined that group really is. Still, it's worthwhile remembering that..."
Iben Derriva clearly has a bone to pick with the Perdaé. Ideas of overthrowing the system likely don’t sit well with him."

"Could she be pretending she isn’t with them?" Anakin wanted to know. He thought about how sometimes on Tatooine, people pretended to be with Jabba the Hutt, because they thought it gave them some kind of power and influence. And sometimes it did; people didn’t want to anger one of the Hutt’s enforcers. He’d never done it himself; everyone knew he was Watto’s slave boy. Maybe Talein was doing the opposite of that.

Obi-Wan nodded approvingly. "A good thought, and I agree that Talein is distancing herself from the Perdaé, but ask yourself this: what does Talein gain from such a move?"

Anakin frowned in thought. "Well," he said, puzzling it out aloud. "I guess if she thinks we’re interested in the Perdaé, then maybe she’s better off not associating herself with the Perdaé?"

"But what does she gain from that?" Obi-Wan prodded. "If she’s actually closely-connected to the Perdaé, then talking to someone like Androl Oden would immediately implicate her in a lie."

"So she isn’t with them," Anakin declared. He glanced triumphantly at Obi-Wan. "She’s being honest."

"To some extent," Obi-Wan repeated. "But well-reasoned."

"I don’t get it," Anakin said, slightly buoyed by the praise, but also slightly crestfallen. What was it he was missing?

Obi-Wan slowed his pace and held up several fingers. "One," he folded the first finger back. "She’s clearly very familiar with the Youngbloods and their workings. She did not deny this. The Youngbloods, in turn, appear to be familiar with her writings, and possibly by extension, the Perdaé. Two," he folded the next finger, "Distancing herself from the Perdaé and the Youngbloods might be wise if she knows that they are in fact deeply implicated in some wrongdoing. Depending on how terrible that deed is, the risks of being caught in a lie might appear to outweigh the risks of being caught with them in such a deed. Three," he folded the last finger, so he was left with a fist. "She offered to comm us or drop us a HoloNet message if she thought of anything more." He waited, expectantly.

It struck Anakin, then, and he wondered how he hadn’t seen it earlier. "She never asked for your comm details!"

"Exactly," Obi-Wan said, approvingly. "Jedi comm details are not publicly available. Neither are HoloNet accounts. So how could she contact me? It was merely an offer meant to appear helpful, I think. She had no intention of further conversation."

"So, what does that mean, though?" Anakin asked. "Okay, she's not being straight with us. But do we go back and talk to her? Or is this one of those things we wait on again?"

"I think," Obi-Wan said, "She's hiding something. She knows more than she's letting on, or willing to share with us. This does not, of course, entail involvement in whatever scheme this is." He let out a quiet sigh. "But there’s no need to be hasty: right now, turning back and pressing her on it would not be likely to yield any more fruit than our previous conversation with her." He ran a hand along his bare chin, considering. "No, I think we are better off talking to Tala Altarie, who might give us another way of viewing Dr. Talein's story."
the most uncomfortable settings. A planetary security officer sat beside Obi-Wan: he'd learned she was the officer who'd accompanied Anakin on the rooftops.

Across from them, now awake and free of restraining cuffs, was the sullen figure of Tala Altarie, blinking painfully in the lighting.

"This interview is being recorded," Officer Talpho said, loud enough for it to register both on the holocams and the audio recorder. Her gaze was bored; she twirled the stylus about her fingers, idly, glancing back from the set of holographic files in the data reader before her, to the recalcitrant student who sat before them. "You have been arrested in connection with a shooting on the campus of the Arjuna University of Free Theed, as well as with an ongoing Jedi investigation."

"What of my right to silence?" Tala Altarie spat out, at long last. "Not going to tell me about that? I want to speak to a lawyer."

Obi-Wan said, "This is a Jedi investigation. As such, your cooperation is requested—"

"And if I refuse?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Then I leave Officer Talpho to deal with you. You should know this: being a Jedi doesn't entail exemption from planetary laws."

"Really," Tala said, thoughtfully. "So explain to me how Jedi are permitted to carry deadly weapons on planets such as Hushan, where all energy-plasma weapons are banned."

Obi-Wan's smile was cold. "We have an exemption and a legal permit." He had, in fact, run into difficulties as a fifteen-year old apprentice, applying for an exemption permit for a mission to Hushan. The mission had almost been allocated to another team as a result: the issue had been that as a fifteen-year old, he was a minor and thus ineligible for a weapon permit by the laws of Hushan. It had caused Qui-Gon no small amount of difficulty, and more than once, his Master had referred to it as a bureaucratic nightmare. "It is, of course, quite the bureaucratic nightmare to apply for one."

"Jedi discretion is well known," Officer Talpho cut in, sharply. She was, of course, referring to the various pieces of legislation that established Jedi authority within limited constraints, as well as protection from restrictions otherwise put into place by galactic law. Security forces, for instance, were generally required to cooperate with ongoing Jedi investigations, although the political reality was…considerably more complicated. "The question is, why did you decide to take potshots on the campus?"

Tala Altarie repeated, flatly, "I want to speak to a lawyer."

Obi-Wan turned to Officer Talpho. "I'll call Iben Derriva," he said, lightly. "The man owes me a favour, I'm certain he can find someone."

"Do it," Officer Talpho said. They'd talked about this possibility, among others, when setting up the office. "Unless you have a lawyer in mind?"

"Not a Derriva," Tala Altarie sneered. "I want nothing to do with them."

"You can't have it both ways," Obi-Wan said, almost conversationally. He offered the faintest nudge in the Force: not enough to qualify as a Jedi mind trick, but enough to take some of the edge off her hardened suspicion. "You can't both express confidence in the system by demanding a lawyer and at the same time, insist the Derriva are compromised."

"Why not?" Tala scoffed. "It's a false dichotomy: the legal system might be working, but it doesn't
entail I have to trust every single legal representative on Naboo, particularly those who have enriched
themselves for generations on it."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "Hardly," he countered. "The law is the law. If we'd asked Androl
Oden to come down and defend you, you might have a case. But the Derriva spend their time
interpreting the law, not making it."

"And you think interpretations of a law can't be political?" Tala challenged. "Grow up, Jedi. You
don't realise how ridiculous you sound, defending the sequestered elite of the system. So much for
defending peace and justice."

"So explain it to me," Obi-Wan said, with another small nudge in the Force. "Explain to me how you
think it's all broken and hopeless; explain to me how you think you're going to change things. Law
on Naboo is still tangled with requirements of precedents: even the Derriva can't ignore that."

Tala laughed. "You think? The Derriva have their fingers dipped deep in the pot. Everyone knows
they practically invited the Trade Federation onto Naboo, along with the rest of the Five. Probably
looking to make a killing off the cortorsis. Sure, they're bound by precedent. Precedent that
traditionally favours the wealthy uppercrust. The rest of us can go burn."

"Clearly not everyone," Obi-Wan said, dryly, "Since Dr. Talein seems to believe they were solely
motivated by geopolitical factors and the presence of cortorsis, while Iben Derriva claims the Perdaé
invited the Trade Federation in and helped them occupy Naboo by disarming the militia."

"Dr. Talein's in too deep to see how screwed the system is," Tala proclaimed. "And of course Iben
Derriva would say that: why would he admit to backing the Trade Federation? The Five always
think the Perdaé are behind everything—who are the Perdaé anyway? A bunch of narrow-minded
morons who post a lot on the HoloNet, posture, and pretend to amount to something." She narrowed
her eyes. "Even the sheep-herders are better at being patriots than the Perdaé."

"Yet you must surely realise your own logic applies to you," Obi-Wan replied, ruthlessly. "Of course
you would say that: why would you or the Perdaé admit to backing the Trade Federation?"

"I'm not with the Perdaé," Tala growled.

"You're with the Youngbloods," Obi-Wan said. It was not a question.

Tala Altarie's eyes narrowed; all of a sudden, she was once again actively hostile and suspicious.
"I'm still waiting for my lawyer," she said. "You can't do this."

"Technically," Officer Talpho said, "The Jedi can."

"More Jedi abuse of power," Tala Altarie sneered.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "You seem to be rather misinformed," he said, mildly. "There has been,
after all, an assassination attempt on the Queen. This makes the current investigation a Jedi
investigation, and your Queen has permitted this. While your cooperation is requested, it does mean
that I, at least, am not bound by the same restrictions Officer Talpho is. Which does put us in a rather
awkward position, doesn't it?"

"Definitely," said Officer Talpho aloud. "I'm getting used to not asking questions, it seems."

"The question," Obi-Wan said, "Is whether you're involved in trying to assassinate the Queen, or
whether you're just someone else's pawn. Personally, I'm starting to think the latter is the case. But
then, you never really know, do you?"
Anakin looked up as Obi-Wan entered the maintenance room. His tunic was, by this point, stained by grease and thoroughly rumpled. "It's boring and I'm hungry," he announced.

Obi-Wan took a quick glance at his chrono. "Well, it is getting late, so how about we adjourn to the street markets to get some food?" To sweeten the deal, he added, "You'll find that street food is markedly different from what you've been having so far. On some planets like Hushan, street food is an entire culture on its own."

"Whassat mean?" Anakin mumbled, falling in behind Obi-Wan.

"It means that their street food is exceptionally good—and rather different from what you'll find in the palace, or in cantinas or cafés. Sounds good?"

"Yeah," Anakin said, after a pause. "Is the street food on Theed any good?"

"According to the HoloNet and the Queen," Obi-Wan said, noticing how Anakin perked up at the mention of Queen Amidala, "It most certainly is. But nothing beats actual experimentation, so we should probably find one of the markets and try it out for ourselves."

"Wizard," Anakin said. He hid a yawn behind his sleeve. "We going, then?"

The Vasu Abrai market was, according to the HoloNet, one of the famous historical attractions of Theed, with a rich history going back to when Theed was first founded. Obi-Wan smiled and played the tourist, allowing Anakin to wander around, gawking at the brightly-coloured tiles of the market roofing, moving from stall to stall and buying a little of what was on offer.

From a stall manned by a Twi'lek, they picked up grilled, chewy skewers of what the Twi'lek confirmed was squid; from another stall, there were fish dumplings in a hot, savoury seaweed soup. Yet another stall sold chewy starch-cakes dipped and fried in a sweet sauce, and Anakin wolfed those down with reckless abandon, splattering sweet sauce in dark brown droplets on his tunic and all over his mouth.

"S'real good," he exclaimed, thankfully in-between bites. "This is one wizard market."

"It's a protected site," Obi-Wan said, absently. "The government preserves it as an important part of Theed's heritage, from their early days as a fishing port." He finished off his starch-cakes and found a nearby trash reptacle for the cardboard bowl.

The market was vital; teeming with life and the Living Force. Obi-Wan could not help but smile at the thought of how Qui-Gon would've enjoyed the Vasu Abrai market—nor, indeed, how his Master had often taken time out on missions to enjoy the local sights. "We cannot always be rushing from one place to another, Padawan," Qui-Gon had said, then, when Obi-Wan had objected to the slow pace they were moving at. "It's just as important to know when to pause and take a deep breath as it is to know when to move quickly."

And on another mission to New Apsolon, couched in Qui-Gon's gentle mischief: "Even in the middle of a mission, Padawan—don't neglect to taste the pastries."

Anakin tugged at his sleeve at a fourth stall, selling stuffed pastries; Obi-Wan paid up: he still had a decent amount of credits, and then just enjoyed the sensation of hot salted egg oozing from the flaky buttered crust.
It was good to see Anakin so excited, he thought, and indeed, he felt some of that thrill of discovery, as if almost because of Anakin—even while the information he had obtained from Tala Altarie weighed on him.

He tried to set that heavy feeling aside, to simply focus on the beauty of the market; the old columns, the mosaiced tiles of the ceiling depicting gigantic fish, the scents of freshly-grilled seafood and pastries and all sorts of delights, even the gentle glow of the glowrods illuminating the place, set in recesses in the pillars.

His comlink signalled, and Obi-Wan looked about for a quiet corner, tapped Anakin on the shoulder, and firmly cut through the crowd until he reached that point of lull and then answered it.

"Kenobi," he said, crisply, choosing to leave the visuals off.

"This is Plo Koon," came the filtered voice of the Kel Dor Master. "I have information you'll find important, Kenobi. We managed to slice the protections on Resnik's datapad."

"Master Koon," Obi-Wan greeted, tersely, aware of Anakin's wide-eyed presence by his side; of the flash of sullen unhappiness that made itself visible on the boy's features. "What is it?"

"Not on the comm," Plo Koon said. "Jedi channels are secure but this, this is big, Kenobi. Come back to the palace as soon as you'll can."

"We'll be on our way immediately. Kenobi out." Obi-Wan flicked off his comlink.

Anakin said, "We have to go?" There was a plaintive note in his voice; Obi-Wan thought he could understand it. There were many different side-streets and arteries in the market they'd yet to explore, and no doubt Anakin'd been looking forward to going down each and every one of them.

He kept his tone light, "I'm afraid so. Business calls, Anakin. It's always good to take some time out on a mission to just explore and enjoy, but a Jedi must remember that business takes precedence. And believe me—it can and will crop up at the most embarrassing and inconvenient moments." Such as when Qui-Gon was half-undressed in a tailor's shop. The tale behind that escapade, he would save for when Anakin was older.

"But then why even take time off at all?" Anakin whined.

"Because it's better to enjoy a little than not at all," Obi-Wan replied. "We're not droids, Anakin. And no matter what, even if our little excursion is cut off early, you've still had some fun, right?"

Anakin nodded woefully.

"Can we come back?" he asked, as he trailed Obi-Wan yet again.

"We'll see," Obi-Wan said. He relented enough to add, "I can't promise anything, but we'll do our best, alright?"

"'Kay," Anakin said.
Whoosh. This story is not dead; I was struggling between day job, graduate school, and some issues with the Naboo economy that it took me months to work out a solution to. (Economics is not my strong suit - this is an understatement.) I have mixed feelings about this chapter, particularly since it was written before 2016, but then continuously edited.

I'll say this: Tala Altarie, in retrospect, ends up reading like an attempt to explore what kinds of young revolutionaries (?) might arise in the Galaxy Far Far Away. We tend to see (in the EU and comics) action on the Jedi level and the Senate level. There's little attempt to explore activism or civil society within the Galaxy Far Far Away, or at least, not in terms of what this means for people who don't get to see things at the galactic level (and indeed, one might wonder if getting to that kind of perspective is a bit of a luxury.) Add to that the thought that not everyone must appreciate the Jedi - it's hard to believe the Jedi were universally liked, and the 'baby-napping' angle is a bit old. But throw in some anger at The System, the rampant corruption of it all, and then the Jedi immediately get implicated - either because they have the power to change things but choose to do nothing with it, or because they are consciously upholding a broken system.

Frankly, this is not a super-nuanced treatment of that issue. I don't have plans for this to show up again, but you never know. The focus of this story is elsewhere, so this was more just a peripheral: a reminder that there are layers upon layers in Naboo politics (and this, of course, is a microcosm...) Otherwise, as I've been implying: Altarie got played. The question is, who did?

Thanks to all who commented, left kudos, or bookmarked!

-Ammaren
Plo Koon jerked his head in a sharp nod of greeting as soon as Obi-Wan strode into the comm centre. "Kenobi," he rasped, through the breath mask. And then, "Skywalker."

"Uh. Hi," Anakin managed, and then, "Why're you using a breath mask? It's a breath mask, isn't it? And do you have googgles?"

"I'm from the planet Dorin," Plo Koon replied. "It's vastly different from worlds like this one, and if you ever visit, you yourself will need to don a breath mask—the atmosphere there has very little oxygen. My species cannot survive in oxygen-rich environments."

"Oh," Anakin said. "I didn't know that."

"There's much about the galaxy no one knows," Plo Koon replied, and turned to Obi-Wan. "Good news and bad news. My slicers've come through and cracked the datapad. The bad news is, this was topline O&P protection. It's got a live link to the company and the moment their slicers figured something was going on, they wiped the datapad. We managed to pull some bits of data off the datapad, but not enough."

Obi-Wan fought back a flash of irritation. They'd done their best, after all. "What do we have, then? You mentioned it was big."

"See for yourself," Plo Koon said, and motioned to the screen of his data terminal.

Obi-Wan moved over and accessed the files, one by one. "Conversation logs," he mentioned, aloud. Plo Koon nodded.

"We know there was more than one assassin hired," the Kel Dor Master stated, as Obi-Wan pored over the garbled messages that had been retrieved. "Resnik had an accomplice."

"We already knew that, though," Obi-Wan pointed out. And then, "Oh."

"What?" Anakin demanded, craning his neck and trying to get a glimpse at the screen of the data terminal.

"Resnik hired an ordinary street thug," Obi-Wan said. "But that's not what this message here says. Here, he's telling his employer he won't wait for their man to show up. Which means that someone else was supposed to be in the palace that day, entirely apart from Resnik and his hireling."

Plo Koon nodded. "Perhaps it indicates a healthy amount of distrust," he stated. "Perhaps it indicates something more. What was the man meant to accomplish?"

"If he was meant to kill the Queen, then he didn't show up," Obi-Wan pointed out. "With the palace guard activated and converging on Captain Panaka and myself, the Queen would've been a sitting target for an accomplice."

"My thoughts exactly," Plo Koon acknowledged. "So what, then?"
"The library," Anakin piped up. The two grown Jedi whirled about to stare at him and he shrugged. "It's the only thing I can think of," he said. "I mean, the librarian said stuff was missing, right? Someone'd gone through the place like a grouchy eopie."

Plo Koon let out a chuff of laughter. "Out of the mouths of children," he said.

"But what?" Obi-Wan replied, not entirely convinced. "It fits well with our information, but what did the palace library have that was worth stealing from? And this would mean that—that Resnik was double-crossed?" He frowned, trying to imagine how the pieces came together. "Resnik hires someone to bring down security, imagining he will make a move on the Queen. He's told someone will show up, but the man does not do so—or Resnik grows impatient and proceeds with his assignment. But our mysterious figure is there, and he uses that opportunity to break into the library and steal historical manuscripts? Hiring Arvol Resnik and brokering O&P protection for a glorified heist doesn't make any sense at all."

"You said you thought Resnik was part of what went on with the library," Anakin pointed out.

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "I still think so. But parts of the picture still make no more sense than when we first started. The sort of historical manuscripts that the palace library would carry are indeed of value—but only to a very small circle of collectors, and likely those interested specifically in Naboo artefacts. In fact, I'd guess that whoever hired Resnik and arranged this all probably would end up with a net loss, even after selling those artefacts. I have the impression that we're chasing at the wind, here."

Plo Koon said, "We need an assessment of what was stolen."

"There are some difficulties, but the librarian is working on that."

"I'll have some people keep an eye on the antiquities markets," Plo Koon said. "It'll be good to see if anyone tries to fence documents that look like they might've come from the library." He shook his head. "Get some rest, Kenobi. We've all got a big day tomorrow."

Anakin looked questioningly at them.

"The parade," Obi-Wan said, meaningfully.

"Oh!" Anakin remembered, then. "Are we going to have to do anything big?"

"Just stand there and smile," Obi-Wan said. "You'll be fine."

It turned out that they didn't get to turn in as early as Obi-Wan had expected to. Although Anakin was yawning and visibly fatigued, there were still a number of people in the palace who needed to be satisfied, and who were extremely unhappy that the Jedi had been missing for most of the day.

Sio Bibble, the governor, was one of them; palace security had flagged him the moment Obi-Wan and Anakin returned to the palace, and he ambushed them almost the moment when they were done conversing with Plo Koon.

"Master Jedi," Sio Bibble greeted, all but cornering them in the comm centre. "Might I have a moment?"

Obi-Wan returned the greeting and turned at Anakin's half-concealed yawn. "Do you need to go to bed first, Anakin?"
"M'okay," Anakin mumbled, although the exhaustion from the day's events was beginning to catch up with him. He rubbed at his eyes. "I wanna listen."

So Obi-Wan turned back to Sio Bibble. "What can we do for you, Governor?"

"I just needed to cover a few details of the victory parade with you," the man replied. He consulted the datapad he was holding—he was probably running a personal organiser program on it, Obi-Wan thought.

The victory parade, Sio Bibble explained, was to be held in the afternoon. In addition, he murmured, perhaps the Jedi would be so kind as to walk among the people and to take part in some of the games…

"It's a festival, among many other things," Sio Bibble explained. "We've organised a series of games and events to celebrate the liberation of Theed. It'd mean a lot to the people of Theed if the heroes of Naboo were joining in the festivities."

"Ah," Obi-Wan said. "I understand. Of course, we will do so."

Sio Bibble nodded; he seemed a stern man, seldom given to smiling. "That will do, then. I'll have an aide guide you to your positions for the victory parade, but you're just meant to assume a position of honour beside the Queen."

"Ceremonial?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yes."

"We will do so, then. Thank you for the information. It must be difficult, having to organise such a large celebration so soon after the Trade Federation's surrender."

Sio Bibble shook his head. "You have no idea, Master Jedi," he said, glumly. "It's a logistics nightmare, but it's extremely important. Particularly with us losing the Senator…” he seemed about to say something else, but trailed off.

Obi-Wan said, "I wasn't aware that the Chancellor occupied himself with planetary affairs."

Sio Bibble said, "When he's not on Coruscant, he does. Usually when the Senate isn't in-session. But it's unfortunate as his aide, Falce Valarin, typically helps with large planetside events like these, and he's a way with logistics. Otherwise, it's like herding a warren of womprats."

"What happened to Valarin?"

"Someone has to be acting Senator for Naboo," Sio Bibble pointed out. "He's taking over Palpatine's paperwork, and there's a decent chance the Queen will confirm his appointment as the Senator once the immediate fallout from the Trade Federation's illegal invasion is adequately dealt with. Capable man."

"So I see," Obi-Wan said. He thanked Sio Bibble again, and the governor showed himself out, wishing them a pleasant night.

"So we get to play games?" Anakin demanded, eagerly.

Obi-Wan laughed. "Yes," he said. "Yes, I believe we do."

It was not long ago, Obi-Wan reflected, as he watched Anakin sleep on, that he'd been Anakin's age:
always hungry, always sleepy. Qui-Gon had laughed and indulged him; letting him sleep in for an extra few minutes, allowing him to nap on long flights between missions, and finding the strangest of places to grab a bite. Now, rising slightly before the sunrise was easy enough; he'd needed a night to encourage his body to adjust to the day-cycle of Naboo, but once his circadian rhythms had recalibrated themselves to Naboo time, his eyes'd blinked open a little before the pale dawn light was falling in through the windows of his room.

Anakin, though, was still fast asleep.

He could honestly look back on his experience as Qui-Gon's Padawan and say that he'd tried a wide variety of utterly strange foods, from the baked chollata tarts on Fughrio to the cheese-rolled dumplings with a bitter sauce on Tumban, and even a couple of grilled insects and soups dumped with so many spices that Obi-Wan's tongue'd gone fairly numb by the time he was done.

How did you reconcile that, the need to acknowledge that Anakin was still young, still growing, with the urgent need to incalculcate Jedi discipline?

His mind wandered back to Anakin's outburst. It was increasingly obvious to Obi-Wan that Anakin carried a great deal of anger deep within him, and Obi-Wan simply wasn't sure where to begin to teach Anakin to deal with it.

*From the beginning, you must start. Nowhere else, there is.*

It was one of Yoda's sayings, now, that echoed in his mind like the ripples from a fallen pebble. He had to start from the beginning, because there was no other way, no other option. If he didn't build Anakin's education from the same, solid foundations Obi-Wan had received in his own youth, Anakin would never be certain in handling his anger; would falter, when he most needed the Jedi teachings.

He could not fail Anakin, as a teacher. And he'd promised Qui-Gon.

Obi-Wan's comlink signalled. He stepped quietly outside to the balcony to take the call, palming the door shut behind him so he didn't disturb Anakin's rest. "Kenobi," he said, briskly. He didn't recognise the displayed comm code.

"*Jedi Kenobi,*" said an unfamiliar voice, and Obi-Wan belatedly remembered he'd left visual identification off and made the adjustments. At once, the fuzzy blue hologram of Ren Yvar was projected from his comlink. "*A pleasure to be speaking to you. The palace guard was thoughtful enough to provide me with your comm code.*"

"So I see," Obi-Wan replied. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this conversation?"

Ren Yvar sighed. "*Jedi Kenobi,*" he said, almost disappointedly, "*We need to talk.*"

Obi-Wan glanced at his chrono. "I presume you'll be in Theed for the victory parade," he said, neutrally. "Rather difficult to have a celebration without members of the Five present."

"*Naturally,*" Ren Yvar agreed, and now traces of the careless arrogance slipped back in. "*I'll request the palace guard allow us a meeting in the Orech Room, then. In about, say, an hour?*

Obi-Wan thought about it. "An hour will be fine," he agreed, and Ren Yvar nodded his acknowledgement and terminated the call.

So, Obi-Wan thought, putting his comlink away. Word of his visit to a member of the Five had likely already begun to stir the hive. It was interesting that Yvar'd chosen to deal with him directly, but as
he thought back to the Five's conversation with the Queen, it was the sort of person Ren Yvar had seemed to be: arrogant, yes, but also blunt and direct.

Which, at this point, suited Obi-Wan just fine.

The Orech Room was yet another of the many meeting rooms in the palace: opulent, but with a distinct air of disuse. When Obi-Wan walked into the room, he discovered why; it was a room with deep reds and ochres and umber tones, and a large painting took up most of the far wall, depicting a man brandishing a blaster pistol directly at a falling Gungan, his foot planted firmly on the body of yet another fallen Gungan, with a Naboo army at his back and the Gungan forces only beginning to rout.

At the very edges of the painting, the artist had added hints of water, suggesting what would later befall the Gungans: a retreat to the deep bubble-cities, where the Naboo had only left them alone when the technological costs of hunting down the remnants of the Gungans had run too high.

And there, they'd grown again, all this while fostering a deep grudge against the Naboo. Until now, and that was why it had been no insignificant thing; an elected Queen of the Naboo kneeling down before the Gungans to beg for their aid, and Obi-Wan knew, immediately, that it was something that was dangerous to speak of. Most of the Naboo had forgotten but a number would chafe at the idea of kneeling, of begging the Gungans. The Queen had been crafty in spinning it as a tale of Gungan graciousness, with only a tentative hint of Naboo humiliation.

"Jedi Kenobi," Ren Yvar greeted, strolling into the room as if he owned it. A man; tall and silent shadowed him—likely a bodyguard, from the uniform he wore, and the way he scanned the room, instantly looking for anything suspicious and for the possible exits.

"Ren Yvar," Obi-Wan returned the greeting. He glanced at the man, careful to keep his expression as unreadable as possible. Ren Yvar, Obi-Wan reminded himself, had chosen his ground, had chosen this meeting room for a reason. Knowing that reason would help Obi-Wan put a context to Ren Yvar's so far hazy motives.

"I see you had no trouble locating the Orech Room," Ren Yvar said. He strolled up to the painting, with the air of a man admiring a piece of priceless art. "Did you know the painter who did this was Dasca Valenti?"

Obi-Wan frowned, and inspected the painting more closely. "My impression," he hedged, "Was that Valenti preferred landscapes to historical battles, and not one so throughly shrouded in folklore like General Orech forcing the Gungans into the oceans at Queen Faraé's orders."

Ren Yvar laughed. "Of course he did," he said. "He loved his landscapes—the northlands, the Lake Country, the swamps and fens, the roiling oceans, all of that. But he loved his history too, and this work by late Valenti is a classic, if little-appreciated."

"I see," Obi-Wan said, quietly, hiding his distaste. And when he did that; when he shoved past the part of him that disliked this posturing, that saw how empty it was when soldiers fought over pieces of land in the name of nations and were swallowed up by pyroclastic flows; when he looked past that, he saw where the subtle strokes that deemed this a Valenti were; the way the background was plasma-charred beyond recognition, the transparent sheen to the waters that marked Valenti's technique with layering strokes to depict water, and suddenly, he realised why this was a Valenti.

You were meant to feel it: the arrogance, this worm of unease as you saw what was meant to be a heroic moment in Naboo history, Orech's face haloed in victorious light, a cruel cast to his features;
the Gungans broken but unyielding, the masses gathering behind Orech akin to a mob rather than an army, and he wondered why he hadn't seen it before.

*Your focus determines your reality*, Qui-Gon always said. It was one of those Jedi teachings that seemed strange, the first time you encountered it. Reality seemed concrete; unshiftable, unyielding to the ideas of beings. Stone and duracrete cared nothing for your focus, your attitudes. If you thought that a durasteel wall would yield to you, it wouldn't. Fools ran at durasteel walls and bashed their heads on it and bled.

And yet: didn't focus matter? A typical Padawan exercise involved running at a durasteel wall, taking a few steps up it, and flipping through the air to land lightly on your feet, lightsaber held in a combat-ready position. And when you focused, when you thought about it and listened to the wall (and it was really one of the silliest things Obi-Wan'd been asked to do, at that time, until he'd quickly learned that Jedi training would ask you to do any number of silly and humiliating things and if you couldn't put aside your pride, you'd never make a good Jedi), you realised the wall wasn't solid. It wasn't unyielding duracrete; it was that and more. In the Force, approached in the right way, with the right focus, the wall was a series of particles; gaps held together tightly in the Force. The wind howled through it; the wind was the Force and you realised in that moment that you were all one in the Force: Jedi, durasteel, and wall.

It was the easiest thing to stride up the wall, to feel it yield against your feet, propelling you in a graceful flip to land, lightsaber already out and ignited. As with the simplest exercises and teachings, once performed physically by bored Initiates, you quickly learned that there were layers of complexity they took on once you became a Padawan and then a senior Padawan.

The painting was like that: he'd seen it one way, and when his focus shifted, so did the painting; now instead of a depiction of Naboo glory and nationalistic pride, he saw a subtle mockery, and wondered if the unease either interpretation stirred was why the Orech Room remained mostly unused.

Ren Yvar's eyes flicked over to him and his lips curled in a knowing smirk. "Which Valenti do you prefer?"

"Does it matter?" Obi-Wan wanted to know. "I'm fairly certain you didn't comm me to have a conversation on the works of Dasca Valenti."

"Perhaps I did," Ren Yvar replied. "There are some generals who think you can tell a great deal about an enemy by studying the way they react to works of art. If anything, Valenti is a mirror; a distorted one, to be sure, but an assortment of strokes on canvas tells you more about the perceptions, the prejudices—the mind—of the one studying his works, than about the painting itself."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "Are we opponents, then?" he asked, with studied indifference.

"Of course we are," Ren Yvar said, dismissively. "Enemies, I've come to realise, are far more reliable than allies." He clasped his hands behind his back. "Besides, let's agree to set aside any notion that we trust each other right now, or believe that we're on the same side."

"Why then the meeting?" Obi-Wan pressed. "If not to reassure me that you're perfectly concerned for the Queen's safety, then what?"

Ren Yvar shrugged. "I'd come down to Theed for the victory celebrations, in any case," he pointed out, turning away slightly from the painting. "It seemed a preferable choice to seek you out rather than to wait for you to find me. The question is, what do you want, Jedi Kenobi?"
"The same as with Iben Derriva or any of the Five," Obi-Wan said. "I want answers."

"The Queen's assassination," Ren Yvar said, very softly. The Force murmured a warning to Obi-Wan; he kept an eye on Yvar's security, out of the corner of his eye. The man stood in a posture most security officers would recognise as being one of watchful alertness; weight centred, hands resting before him, but with blaster pistol in easy access. He was carefully keeping away from the deep maroon carpet. "You were there, of course. You heard our assurances."

"Assurances come cheap," Obi-Wan countered. "I imagine that a man who distrusts allies might understand that."

Ren smirked. "Oh, of course," he agreed. "So what now, Jedi Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan said, "It's been a bad season for the homefarms."

Ren Yvar said nothing. He had gone very still, those dark eyes intent on Obi-Wan. "Bad seasons come and go," he replied. "What of it?"

"Bad seasons," Obi-Wan continued, "That go back to about five years. Reports of rustspore, of the wet seasons drowning chunks of the harvest…these things ought to take their tolls on profit, regardless of insurance." These hadn't been in Mace Windu's datasheet; they'd been in the general briefing material on Naboo Obi-Wan had internalised before he and Qui-Gon had set out to negotiate a truce. It swam back into consciousness now: comments that the Agri-Corps had been sent to Naboo to conduct a survey about the rustspore outbreak, and So-Ha Ulin had commented in her report that the recent wet seasons hadn't been doing Naboo's agriculture any favours.

"The problem with that picture," Ren Yvar said, very deliberately, and for a moment, his eyes flicked to the security officer, who moved over to the doorway, enough to grant them some semblance of privacy, "Is that it presumes the Yvar would nevertheless gain from Trade Federation occupation; much less from indulging Nute Gunray's absurd obsession with making the Queen pay for revealing him to be an embarrassingly incompetent leader. Tell me, Kenobi. Do you know the average price for shuura fruit on Bandomeer?"

He'd named, perhaps unknowingly, a planet Obi-Wan knew well, for he had once almost thought himself consigned to the Agri-Corps on Bandomeer. "There's no shuura fruit to be had on Bandomeer," he replied, and Ren Yvar nodded, a trace of that smirk reappearing.

"Exactly," Ren Yvar said. "It's that simple; surely you must've seen it. Our produce largely reaches planetary markets—and markets in the Chommell sector. We don't ship to Bandomeer, for instance, because there's no market for shuura fruit on Bandomeer. The Trade Federation represents the worst sort of potential alliance: there are simply no additional markets they could allow us to exploit. Oh, perhaps we'd have an easier time selling shuura fruit to planets with a substantial Naboo diaspora, like Feranti, or even Alderaan, and Coruscant always trades in produce but beyond that? That's a lot for pitiable financial gain."

Obi-Wan took a step back, onto the carpet, turning away from the painting. He said, "That's somewhat disingenuous."

"A bold remark."

"I would think a series of bad seasons would render Trade Federation connections a tempting option," Obi-Wan pointed out. "If only in outsourcing some of the agriculture to more stable worlds such as Verfleur, which have standing first-access treaties with the Trade Federation."
Ren Yvar fell silent.

"Perhaps even a joint venture," Obi-Wan thought, aloud. "Ways of diversifying your production, in order to spread out the risks of bad seasons eating into your profit margins."

"Perhaps," Ren Yvar agreed, at last. He offered Obi-Wan a thin smile. "Of course, the Trade Federation would need reason to find such an arrangement compelling. The benefits for the Yvar are clear; less so for the Trade Federation."

Obi-Wan said nothing.

"We are powerful," Ren said. "But we don't have all that much influence. Unfortunately. You know as well as I do that the Trade Federation would have demanded we serve up Naboo to them on a platter, in order to be able to leverage on their existing networks and capital."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "You expect me to believe that?" he asked, incredulous. "You, a member of the Five?"

Ren rolled his eyes; a surprisingly casual gesture, Obi-Wan observed. "Don't give me that," he said, bluntly. "Obtuseness doesn't become you, Jedi Kenobi. You were there. The Five are extremely influential but hardly the only source of power on Naboo. And if the Yvar had been tempted to sell our planet out, the Trade Federation would obviously be shrewd enough to realise we are but one family among Five. They would've needed to cut deals with at least three of the Five, including the Ersken."

"So you're claiming the Ersken are first among equals."

Ren affected a careless shrug, but the tension that lined his posture suggested it was anything but. "Fortunes change," he said. "Who can tell where the Ersken will end up?"

"Why do they have so much influence now?" Obi-Wan asked. "The highland vineyards are surely just as badly affected by the bad seasons as the homefarms. And rustspore is notoriously difficult to eradicate—whether from vines, or from shuura fruit."

Was that a hint of grudging respect in Ren's eyes?

"Investments," Ren said, curtly. "They chose wisely."

"How?" Obi-Wan questioned.

The Yvar heir paused, sizing Obi-Wan up. Obi-Wan had no sense that the man was attempting to dissemble, but he had no illusions about how cooperative Ren Yvar was really inclined to be. Perhaps, however, the question did not seem to blatantly infringe Yvar interests, for presently, the man shrugged once more and said, "Shipping contracts. The Ersken have been buying out the contracts to ship kassoti from Rori to the plasma refineries, and investing heavily in the shipping industry. They own the majority of the shares in Faraé Shipping Lines."

Obi-Wan blinked. That hadn't been in the briefing materials, and his surprise must've been evident, for a trace of that cocky arrogance was back in Ren Yvar's gestures, his crooked grin as he studied the Jedi. "Didn't expect that, did you, Jedi Kenobi?"

Obi-Wan tucked his hands into the long sleeves of his robe, seeking to buy a little time by the gesture to think. "No," he admitted, opting for honesty. It was, in any case, rather too late to pretend to be holding on to some scrap of knowledge. "Why is that?"
"Your guess is as good as mine," Ren Yvar said.

"And the Queen allowed this?"

"You may not think much of it, but the bad seasons spread. We fell on hard times," Ren Yvar replied. "Mining kassoti is profitable, but Naboo consumes a large portion of local produce. Food had to be imported; as the bad seasons dragged on, the Trade Federation started to lean on the agricultural worlds to sell us produce at higher prices. Kassoti miners were among the worst-hit, and they sold off their mining rights to the Ersken."

"Who," Obi-Wan guessed, shrewdly, "Took over the rights and set them back to mining, but now they make even less credits from this."

"Of course," Ren Yvar said. "Clever, you'll have to admit."

It was clever, Obi-Wan agreed, silently, if you thought nothing of the suffering of beings; if you thought it acceptable to exploit desperation. But another thought struck him, then. "Where did the Ersken accumulate the capital to buy out the shipping contracts? You mentioned they only began buying out the contracts when the bad seasons first hit."

"They took a loan," Ren Yvar said. He fidgeted with the ornate clasp of his belt. "As far as I know, they took out a loan with the InterGalactic Banking Clan."

Obi-Wan blinked. A deep and rich network of ties, of money, and of common interests, greed, and probably a touch of corruption bound together the Commerce Guild, the InterGalactic Banking Clan, and the Trade Federation. Ren Yvar surely understood the significance of what he was saying. "And how did this make the Ersken influential?"

Ren Yvar smiled. "Cortosis."

"Regulation 1751782 blocks the development of the existing cortorsis mines," Obi-Wan pointed out, recalling the conversation with Dr. Pallié Talein. "And the contracts for cortorsis mining and kassoti mining are separate."

Ren Yvar dismissed that with an impatient wave of his hand. "Details," he murmured. "To be fair, the Ersken don't own all the kassoti rights. The Miner's Union fought back. But the Ersken are a sizeable player, and the Miner's Union doesn't like sharing."

Obi-Wan translated that comment: if the Outer Rim Mining Concern wanted the kassoti miners out, they'd have to deal with the Ersken, who held a chunk of the contracts. But then there were two forces in this picture, tugging in different directions. One of them tugged the Ersken towards the commercial giants of the galaxy; where the Ersken had something the Outer Rim Mining Concern wanted, and the Outer Rim Mining Concern had something the Ersken wanted.

Access to extra capital.

The other force tugged the Ersken away from the commercial giants; the unholy alliance of the Outer Rim Mining Concern, the Commerce Guild, the InterGalactic Banking Clan and the Trade Federation. If the Ersken wanted to retain control of the kassoti mines, then they would have to be prepared to fight off the advances from the Outer Rim Mining Concern. This would put them on opposite sides with the Trade Federation.

Obi-Wan sighed, quietly. And this didn't even include the possibility that the Ersken were deep in debt—and the Trade Federation had used that as leverage, somehow. But surely Ren Yvar would know, if that were the case, he thought, and then chided himself for that. He would have to speak to
Ki-Adi-Mundi about the issue.

"What are you thinking, Jedi Kenobi?" Ren Yvar asked. Obi-Wan wondered if there was the barest hint of a taunt in the other man's voice.

He raised an eyebrow and turned aside. "It is a complex picture you're painted for me."

Ren Yvar nodded, stepping forward to join Obi-Wan. "The best paintings are," he said, and for that moment, Obi-Wan sensed they weren't talking about the state of affairs on Naboo any longer.

Out of the corner of his eye, Obi-Wan noticed that Yvar had left a scattering of bright reddish-orange dirt; stark against the deep maroon of the carpet.

Laughter and celebration filled the streets of Theed. Anakin—now wide-awake, having scarfed down a hasty breakfast and sluiced water through his hair—gawked at everything, from the tumblers, to the various stalls redolent with the mingled aromas of a dozen different foods, and the various games being set-up.

"Oh! Obi-Wan! Obi-Wan!" Anakin cried out, tugging at his sleeve. Obi-Wan plastered an indulgent smile on his face—he wasn't altogether fond of this crowd; it had always been Qui-Gon, with his connection to the Living Force, who had basked in the company of his fellow beings—and turned.

"What is it, Anakin?" he asked, trying to keep his voice neutral. Anakin didn't deserve to have Obi-Wan's feelings on crowds unleashed on him.

He'd either succeeded, or the boy was positively ebullient, because Anakin enthused, "D'you see that what is that it looks wizard—"

"Anakin, slow down—" Obi-Wan began, until he realised the boy was staring adoringly at an ice-cream vendor. The woman flashed them a grin; gap-toothed, with strands of greying hair escaping her braids.

"Care to try some street ice-cream?" she asked. "You've never had proper ice-cream until you've tried one from a street vendor."

Obi-Wan'd heard this sales pitch before, on at least a hundred different worlds, but they had time to kill, and Anakin had clearly been sold as she dexterously manipulated the long-handled scoop, rolling chunks of ice cream into balls and then manoeuvring those into crunchy wafer-cones.

He paid up for two ice-creams (because why not, Obi-Wan thought, shortly) and then Anakin gasped—annoyance mingled with surprise and delight as she handed him the cone, appeared to deposit the compacted ball of ice-cream and abruptly rolled her wrists, sweeping the scoop away—and the ice-cream with it.

"Hey!" Anakin exclaimed. "How did you do that?"

The vendor winked, and appeared to relent, only to snatch the ice-cream ball away again at the last moment.

Obi-Wan very carefully hid his laughter. A flash of memory, then. The market on Hushan had been no different, and he had been so young. And Qui-Gon had stood there, and watched, and laughed, in his rich, deep voice…

"Obi-Wan?"
Anakin stood, frowning up at him, ice-cream smeared on his mouth. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. He looked down at the ice-cream in his hand, and realised he had no idea what he'd ordered at all. He licked it, absently. Green tea. That had been Qui-Gon's favourite, he realised, and for no reason, tears pricked his eyes.

He couldn't go on like this, he knew. Couldn't go on as if he was fragile—continuously shattering and not-shattering at those unexpected moments; those small moments that drove needles into his heartbreak.

"It's good," Anakin enthused, apparently appeased by Obi-Wan's verbal response. "Hey, do they have this on Coruscant? This is wizard. How do they make it so cold? It hurts at first, like there's some sort of explosion going on in your brain, but once you get used to it…"

"Freezers," Obi-Wan said, absently. Of course Anakin'd never had ice-cream before, not as a slave on Tatooine…

He couldn't say why the idea offended him so. "Here." A tad roughly, he thrust his mostly-untouched ice-cream into Anakin's free hand.

"You sure about this, Obi-Wan?" Anakin frowned up at him. "You don't have any…"

"It's alright," Obi-Wan said. He tried a gentle smile. "Just enjoy it while it lasts, Anakin. It'll melt soon if you don't eat it."

"Yikes!" Anakin yelped, and immediately started in on the new ice-cream, alternating between both of them. "This one's weird, Obi-Wan."

"You don't like it?"


"It's green tea. Qui-Gon's favourite."

"Huh," Anakin said, through a mouthful of ice-cream. "You ate this with him all the time?"

"Sometimes," Obi-Wan said, thinking of a long-ago market on distant Hushan.

There was so much to do, Anakin thought, gleefully, a spring in his step. He thought Obi-Wan'd looked a little distant—he'd had on that sad and unapproachable face again, what Anakin privately referred to as his Qui-Gon face. He didn't know why; just that he'd always seen that expression on Obi-Wan's face, especially when Mister Qui-Gon was mentioned.

Then, Obi-Wan seemed to withdraw into himself, shutting everything out. Even Anakin.

Anakin didn't like it. So he laughed at the tumblers, and tugged at Obi-Wan's sleeve and generally played up his joy and excitement—and it wasn't even a lie, really—trying to see if it could be infectious, if he could make Obi-Wan enjoy the street festival.

It worked, sort of.

Obi-Wan smiled tentatively as they played a strange game that involved scooping up sewn cloth balls with their hands and tossing them and catch them, following a set pattern. Anakin was surprised to find that they were both good at it; he supposed it was the Podracing, at least for him. And hadn't
Mister Qui-Gon said something about Jedi reflexes?

People didn't throng them, not quite. But it seemed as if word had spread through the crowd, of who they were, and the people of Theed gathered around everytime they stopped somewhere, sometimes to watch and whisper to themselves; sometimes to clasp Obi-Wan's hand briefly in thanks, or to bend down to thank Anakin.

Some stall owners wouldn't hear of accepting anything for their food—the man selling fruit pies had been one of them, but Obi-Wan had insisted, pressing the appropriate credits into his hand.

He liked it, Anakin admitted. It made him feel all warm and glowy inside, being made much of and fussed over, and he wondered why Obi-Wan seemed to dislike the adulation so much. It was nice, having people call him the Hero of Naboo and tell him how thankful they were he blew up the Droid Control Ship.

Much better than being treated like a piece of furniture or equipment, just because he was a slave.

But he wasn't a slave, not any longer, and Anakin resolved he would never be a slave, ever, ever again. He would learn everything Obi-Wan had to teach him, and more. He would become so powerful that no one would ever chain him up, implant transmitters in his body, or hurt Shmi or any of the other slaves again.

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The victory parade, Obi-Wan'd explained quietly to Anakin as they stood there and smiled and smiled, was not really for their benefit at all, but more for the benefit of their Gungan allies. "There's a lot of bad blood between the Naboo and the Gungans," he commented, keeping his voice low. "By honouring them, the Queen seeks to ease some of the hard feelings, both among her people and among the Gungans. Hopefully, it'll take."

Anakin nodded, and tried not to fidget, appear restless, or unduly excited, but it was awfully hard to do that when his leg itched after lots of standing still with his hands clasped in front of him, and with Naboo starfighters screaming triumphantly overhead in formation, looping about again and leaving tangled vapour trails in their wake as they streaked across clear blue skies.

"Did you see that?" he whispered excitedly to Obi-Wan as the starfighters executed a sharp series of turns that should've had them smashing straight into each other, but the formation evened out, with no stragglers.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, and Anakin had the distinct impression that the older man was trying very hard not to roll his eyes. "Yes, Anakin, I did."

The Gungans, Anakin supposed, were pretty big on the honour part too: Gungans marched in the streets of Theed for the first time ever ("They've never, ever set foot in Theed," Obi-Wan'd explained, a while ago), and to a crowd that, despite being somewhat apprehensive, had settled into a celebratory, festive mood and was cheering them, roaring for them.

Boss Nass and Jar Jar rode on fambaa beasts in the centre of the formal procession; the latter, Anakin was tickled to notice, was waving to the crowd everywhere.

Petals drifted down from the sky, and Anakin blinked as one fell right in front of him.

"They've got to be really busy, dropping this," he muttered.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow, as if to say, You think? Still, as always, Anakin found his eyes drawn to Padmé, radiant in pure white ceremonial robes. Her smile widened just a little as they glanced at each
other, and he felt his heart stutter, just for a moment, in his chest.

A man Obi-Wan'd named the governor of Theed, Sio Bibble, stood slightly behind the Queen, holding a polished, transparent glass globe, glowing brightly with violet light.

"What *is* that?" Anakin whispered. "Are they giving him a toy globe?"

Obi-Wan glanced sternly at him, though he noticed the man's lips had twitched. "It's the Globe of Peace—a very important artefact to the Naboo. I'll tell you the story behind it later."

"How do you *know* all of this?" Anakin wanted to know.

"I read," came the dry response.

Letting out a quiet sigh, Anakin stood, and smiled, and smiled, and tried very hard not to tug at the new braid he sported. It was important, Obi-Wan had said, tentatively, and even though they couldn't quite get him to do it the traditional way until they were back on Coruscant, they'd have to make do for now. So they tied his hair back in a very short nerf-tail, and Obi-Wan knelt before him and braided it, with the quick, graceful movements of someone who must've done it countless times, throughout his life, who could've done it in his sleep.

And he looked so, so sad, as he did, that Anakin couldn't help but say, "It reminds you of him, doesn't it?"

Obi-Wan had drawn a long breath but did not falter in his braiding as he said, "Everything reminds me, Anakin."

The words hung, like that, in the air between them. Anakin was not sure what to say. Eventually, Obi-Wan tied off the braid with a simple blue thread and said, "You'll learn how to do this for yourself, when we get back to Coruscant."

"Okay," Anakin had said. He touched the braid, lightly. "This is important, I guess."

"Very," Obi-Wan said.

And that was that.

Chapter End Notes

Well, it's been a tiring couple of weeks, but here, have an update. As I'm reviewing my chapter buffer, I've noticed that this part/section of the story skews heavily towards Obi-Wan. This is slightly unintentional, as while young Anakin can get into a lot of trouble, the investigation is really being driven by Obi-Wan. This looks likely to balance out, however, with how much the Temple arc will favour Anakin, since it focuses a bit more on his settling in, though there'll still be things for Obi-Wan to do, of course.

At this point, we're on Chapter Fourteen: my projected end of the Naboo/Theed arc is at least Chapter Twenty-One, or Twenty-Two. As warned on the tin, this story is extremely slow-building, and not all the loose ends will be tied in a neat bow where the Jedi are concerned, although a canny reader will be able to deduce what has happened.

Thanks to all who commented, left kudos, or bookmarked!
-Ammar
Chapter Fifteen: The First Law of Battle

Obi-Wan sensed it; a warning in the Force, a sense of pressure. His hand closed around the hilt of Qui-Gon's lightsaber as he prepared to sweep Anakin to the ground.

The other members of the Jedi Council must have sensed it as well, for they had begun to move when the hidden mercenaries opened fire.

Obi-Wan would admit this later: the only reason he had remained in position, the only reason it was the easiest thing in the world for him to ignite Qui-Gon's brilliant green blade and deflect the blaster bolt targeted at Queen Amidala's head was because he had frozen.

He'd never frozen before. Not, at any rate, for a very, very long time.

It hadn't been fear, either. Just simple indecision: the knowledge that he was responsible for Anakin now, that there were many other Jedi masters present, and the knowledge that it was too huge a space—the attackers had chosen their targets well.

The Masters of the Jedi Council whirled forward; graceful blurs of motion, their lightsabers snaking out to deflect blaster fire aimed indiscriminately at the crowd. Normally, Obi-Wan thought, shaken, the approved move was to deflect the blaster bolts upwards.

But now, the parapets were thronged with people: curious onlookers, now screaming—and those responsible for scattering the flowers, and one or two in the garb of Naboo's planetary security forces, although it was anyone's guess if the mercenaries were concealed among them.

Meanwhile, the blue-robed Senate Guards were having collective hysterics as they attempted to form a safety cordon around the new Supreme Chancellor and simultaneously return fire. Palpatine was shouting at them; what, Obi-Wan couldn't make out. Nevertheless, a Force-enhanced leap brought Even Piell flying through the air. The cordon parted to let him through, and that was that.

Adi Gallia, too, broke from the rest, her lightsaber blazing orange streaks of motion, and Obi-Wan realised she was sprinting for the fambaa beasts. Oh, right, he realised. If the fambaa beasts panicked, they could easily do as much damage, if not worse.

"Obi-Wan?"

Anakin's voice was steady; the boy had nerves of durasteel, Obi-Wan thought, approvingly. If Anakin had been just a little trained, he would have felt safe asking the boy to protect the Queen. As it was, Obi-Wan's attention was scattered—there were too many variables at once, to account for—

The Force surged in warning, and Obi-Wan moved, lightsaber extended, batting away the high-powered blaster bolt aimed at the Queen's head. "Sniper!" he cried out, more for the benefit of palace security than anymore else.

Captain Panaka barked orders amidst sulphurous curses, hand going to his comlink. Most of his forces had been securing the perimeter along with officers from planetary security, and there were only a few in position; still, they moved inwards, even as the Queen's handmaidens began to hustle
her away.

"Stay down, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, urgently. He couldn't protect them all at the same time; most of his attention was focused on the Force, reaching out to sense for the next threat…

Another shot; he twitched his lightsaber, angling it high up into the blue sky, where it could do no harm.

To the handmaidens, he said, crisply, "Contingency plans?" Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mace Windu move through the parting crowd with the fluid, raw grace of a hunting cat, violet lightsaber held high, trying to draw fire from the hidden mercenaries. The crowd itself was screaming; trying to flee in panicked numbers. It was going to be a stampede, Obi-Wan realised, but it wasn't his situation to handle, and so he bracketed all of that and focused on the problem at hand.

"Get the Queen, the Gungan leader, and the Supreme Chancellor," Sabé said, by way of answer. "There's an armoured vehicle—"

"Good," Obi-Wan said, through clenched teeth. "Go."

It all happened at once, in that moment. Absently, Obi-Wan deflected yet another blaster bolt from the sniper—

As a very familiar man rose from the ceremonial guard surrounding the Queen and darted for the Queen, something in his hand—

Anakin screamed, "No!" and launched himself at the man's legs, tackling him. They fell down, rolling over in a tangle.

The knife flashed and Obi-Wan's heart stopped.

Boss Nass, of all people, was shouting in defiance; he still held the Globe of Peace in his hands and now he hefted it—

And as the would-be assassin flung Anakin aside and rose to lunge for the Queen, Boss Nass flung the Globe of Peace, in a powerful underarm throw.

The crackling Globe smashed into the assassin with a loud crack!, just as if it had been one of those plasma cannonballs the Gungan armies employed, flinging him to the ground, in an explosion of toughened glass shards and crackling plasma.

Obi-Wan was already moving; he had to trust that Panaka was going to send someone stationed up on the parapets to tackle the sniper. The assassin was the threat here, and as far as Obi-Wan was concerned, they needed him alive. There were too many dead-ends for his liking.

He struck out with the hilt of the lightsaber, intending to knock the man out, but had to dodge as the assassin recovered and attempted to stab at Obi-Wan with a dark knife. Obi-Wan came in close, and disarmed the assassin with a stiffened strike at his wrist, but ended up losing hold of the lightsaber. So instead, he grabbed the assassin by the collar and implemented a choke-hold. He held for the required count and let go, and then was taken by surprise as the seemingly-unconscious assassin lashed out with his legs, riding the movement so he came on top of Obi-Wan.

It was all ground-work, now; since Obi-Wan had lost hold of his lightsaber, he was fighting against someone who was clearly just as strong and experienced in the ways of hand-to-hand combat.

But Obi-Wan had something the other man didn't.
He had the Force.

And, he amended, as Anakin brought the hilt of the quiescent lightsaber smashing down on the assassin's head, he had an apprentice.

That changed things. Significantly.

Anakin looked at him, evidently not much worse for the wear. There was a cut on his cheek, trickling blood. "I thought you could use some help," the boy said. Shyly, he held out the hilt of the lightsaber, offering it back to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan said the first thing that came to his mind. "Don't do that."

Anakin looked downcast.

"I mean," Obi-Wan said, awkwardly, wishing he'd said anything but those first words. "Don't point the business end of a lightsaber within striking distance of anyone you don't want to skewer."

Anakin made an 'O' of understanding. "Right. Sorry," he muttered, looking away.

"It's basic lightsaber safety," Obi-Wan said, crisply, reclaiming Qui-Gon's lightsaber. "Just keep that in mind for future reference, will you?"

Some of Panaka's men were on the dais now; he handed charge of the unconscious assassin over to them and cast about. Someone among planetary security—maybe at the urging of Captain Panaka—had ensured an orderly evacuation of the public square. Mace Windu and the other Jedi Masters were moving against the mercenaries, and bottling them up, supported by precise blasterfire from the ranks of the Senatorial Guard.

They had things well in hand—they didn't need him.

"Okay," Anakin said. "You're bleeding, though."

Startled, Obi-Wan glanced down, and found out that he didn't remember taking a series of scratches to his arms. His tunic, too, had some blood staining it. Had the assassin cut him? He reached out to the Force, but he felt fine.

And then he realised what had happened as he plucked a shard of the shattered Globe out of his side. Oh dear, Obi-Wan thought. Hopefully, it wasn't going to bode ill for Naboo-Gungan relations.

"You did well, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, softening his tone, now that the situation was under control. Anakin grinned, although it was still subdued. "I'm the Hero of Naboo, didn't you know?"

Obi-Wan turned slightly. His gaze met that of Ren Yvar's. From across the dais, the other nodded to him; a subtle gesture.

"So I've heard," Obi-Wan said, mildly. "Try not to let it go to your head, Padawan."

The word felt…strange, on his tongue. He was used to hearing it, not saying it.

Obi-Wan set that jangling sensation of wrongness aside for now. He pressed a hand lightly to Anakin's shoulder and went to make certain the Queen was fine.

"Ceramic," Depa said, running a gloved hand along the matte-black blade. She shook her head,
wearily. "Of course. It's how he smuggled it past the security checks. The scanners didn't pick it up."

Obi-Wan said, pre-emptorily, "Don't touch it, Anakin."

Anakin guiltily stuck his hands into his pockets. "S'it dangerous?" he wanted to know.

"Considering that Master Billaba is handling it with gloves," Obi-Wan said pointedly, ignoring Anakin's stiffened posture, "Yes."

Anakin said, "I thought you said it was to not contaminate evidence."

"Could you both please kriffing shut up," Depa said, without looking up. "I'd prefer not to cut myself with this by accident."

Obi-Wan fell silent; partly, he would admit, out of surprise. Although Mace Windu had a reputation as the Council's enforcer—the Master who bitingly chewed Padawans out for breaches in discipline, it was Even Piell who swore like a crew member on a cargo ship. Depa Billaba was known for many things; among them, her composure.

He'd not expected that outburst. He could sense the tension in the room, now: thick and humming. He'd heard the strain in Depa's voice.

"Even, what do you make of this?"

"Now she wants my help," Even Piell muttered, darkly. He'd been leaning against the wall of the room, arms folded across his chest. "I told you: wetwork knife. I've seen them in use on Dezhev Olam." He strode over and knocked the knife against the table. "Do you hear?"

"Yes."

"Hollow inside," Even said. "Poison chamber. Don't get scratched." He eyed the gloves Depa was wearing. "Bit flimsy, don't you think?"

"How does the knife get refilled?" Obi-Wan asked, out of morbid curiosity.

Even glanced over at him. "Special cartridge," he murmured. "There's a mechanism in the hilt that allows you to feed it in. It's good for about one or two scratches before you need another. Sometimes people like a one-use knife, though. Then no way to refill." He let out a contemptuous grunt, making his displeasure clear. "Kind of like having a blaster good for only one shot."

Depa said, tartly, "So, a specialised assassin's weapon, then."

Even nodded. "Very specialised. Seen a few over the course of—several missions." He eyed Obi-Wan darkly. Obi-Wan had the sense that the fierce Lannik Jedi Master had wanted to say something else. Had been stopped, by Obi-Wan's presence. Anakin's presence.

"Then where did he get it?" Obi-Wan murmured. That was the thought that had been bothering him, since he'd recognised the assassin.

Even said, "Why don't you go ask him, Kenobi?"

"I thought you said anger was bad," Anakin piped up, as they strode the corridors of the security station.

"It is," Obi-Wan sighed. "They're people first, Anakin. And then Jedi. Sometimes…" he hesitated.
"Sometimes, we fall short of what we should be. And every member of the Order on Naboo tonight will be feeling this failure."

"Obi-Wan?"

He considered the boy, walking alongside him. Too young, in some ways.

"Twenty dead," Obi-Wan said, quietly. That was the grim tally of the assassination attempt at the victory celebrations. "Another forty-one injured. All civilians. If the Council hadn't been here...it would've been more. Master Billaba—stop looking at me like that, Anakin, you have to at least get used to my using her title—is extremely cross with herself for being unable to prevent more deaths."

And if he hadn't frozen up, torn with sheer indecision, the Queen would've been dead this very moment. The nearness of that outcome terrified Obi-Wan. He could admit this. He wasn't perfect. But their choices had so very nearly led to disaster.

Anakin said, "They were shooting into the crowd," Anakin shrugged, and Obi-Wan noticed that Anakin hadn't been shaken—not terribly—by that knowledge. "Killing them. But if they wanted to kill Padmé—"

"Queen Amidala," Obi-Wan corrected, sternly.

"—yeah, well, if they wanted to kill her, why kill the others?"

Obi-Wan hesitated. He'd figured that out, in the aftermath, as he helped secure the public square; as Captain Panaka and his men had made sure Queen Amidala, the Supreme Chancellor, and Boss Nass had been escorted to safety, for no one wanted to deal with the repercussions if the Gungan leader or worse still—the Chancellor himself!—were to be assassinated.

Aloud, he said, "Because they knew too much about the Jedi."

Anakin said, "Huh?"

Obi-Wan glanced about them; the corridor was empty, at this moment, and he sensed no one else nearby. He bent down and said, quietly, "The Jedi are not perfect. You know this. The Force warns us of danger, but the Force isn't a radar screen or a HUD. It doesn't always offer extremely specific warnings." He frowned at the confusion on Anakin's face, trying to think of how to explain it better. "All right," Obi-Wan said, at last. "You remember the tactical display overlay on the Naboo starfighters?"

Anakin brightened up. "Yeah, that was wizard. It's where they put information from all the sensors, right?"

"Integrated into a visual display, yes. Tactical display overlays prioritise: they identify the pressing threats and tell you where those come from. The job of the astromech droid is to analyse the data and to crunch it and to make sure what you get on the overlay is actionable."

Anakin tried out the new word, lips moving slowly.

"In other words, that you can act on the basis of the information given," Obi-Wan explained. "Without the astromech droid, a pilot in the middle of a dogfight would suffer from information overload. Imagine if his starfighter took a hit—with all that data still coming in, and warning signs going off, he'd be hard-pressed to decide what to prioritise, where the biggest danger was, what to pay attention to."
He saw the flash of understanding in Anakin's gaze. "You sensed too many threats," Anakin said, slowly. "Didn't you?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "All of us did. Didn't you?" he threw the question back at Anakin. The boy shook his head, and stared down at his feet.

"I guess…I guess I had a bad feeling," Anakin admitted. "But I thought I was just nervous. Does this mean I'm not going to be a good Jedi?"

Obi-Wan shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "It's a skill, like anything else, Anakin. It's acquired with practice and training, and there are days even Master Yoda has difficulty interpreting the warnings of the Force."

It had been more than that, though. Obi-Wan had come to the conclusion that the attack had been deliberately orchestrated: step by step, as one of the ritual sword-dances of the Isjaoen shamans. As a game of dejarik, or even of tavok, played by a master.

Qui-Gon had taught him to play tavok; his Master had taught him the skill, he'd said. It was one of the sparse moments Qui-Gon had said anything at all about his own Master, and Obi-Wan had seized on it.

"He was a master at tavok," Qui-Gon said, at last. He looked down at the checked board and the scattering of white and black stones placed on the tiles. "He played a game with Farr en Shadur before, you know. He won. But he never delighted in the game, the way Farr en Shadur did."

"Master?"

"To the true master," Qui-Gon said, quietly, "A game of tavok is a thing of beauty. Of prime significance is the anam-vok; the unexpected move that changes the entire board; radically transforms the game—shifts loss to victory. Anam-vok elevates the game; enables both game and players to transcend themselves." He smiled, wryly. "Farr en Shadur once told me he felt a true tavok player only played anam-vok once in their lifetimes, if they were truly inspired; if they were so fortunate as to find that moment in which devotion meets grace and inspiration."

"It's a game, Master," Obi-Wan said, hesitantly. He set down his tavok piece, and waited for Qui-Gon to make his move.

"Do you know what the Koshudi call tavok?" Qui-Gon asked; a seeming tangent.

Obi-Wan shook his head.

"Tahur-gi-vok," Qui-Gon said. "The Great Game. The Divine Game. The Koshudi make a religion of tavok, Padawan. Some of the Koshudi insist that playing tavok brings about a state of deep spiritual enlightenment."

Obi-Wan grinned. "Does that mean I don't have to meditate if we play a few more rounds of tavok?" he asked, slyly.

Qui-Gon answered his smile with his own. "I tell you what," Qui-Gon said, studying the placement of the pieces calmly. "If you win this game, I won't assign you extra hours of meditation for impertinence, Padawan."

Obi-Wan let go of the memory; slowly, carefully. He made himself breathe, feeling the emotions loosen in his throat and chest. Perhaps he would have to teach Anakin tavok, he thought. Eventually.
"Each move was planned," Obi-Wan said, aloud, as much for his own benefit as for Anakin's. "Like a game of tavok. Dejarik," he added, when Anakin just looked confused, but it seemed Anakin wasn't familiar with dejarik either. "They fired on the crowd to create a dangerous and volatile environment, where the Force could not be relied upon to give specific warning. And they fired on the crowd in order to slowly peel Jedi protection away from the Queen, layer by layer."

They'd fallen for it, of course—predictably. The Jedi could not have allowed civilian deaths on their watch. Not like that. And so Master after Master had moved towards the mercenaries embedded in the crowds, and away from the Queen. Obi-Wan had been the only one not out of position because he'd hesitated.

That, again.

He'd been meant to leave, with the others, Obi-Wan thought. Except that their opponent had planned for that, too. The sniper had pinned down Obi-Wan, while the assassin with the poisoned knife had gone for the kill.

"The assassin with the special knife," Anakin said, echoing the direction of Obi-Wan's thoughts.

"Yes. I expect they didn't count on you, or on Boss Nass." Which reminded him… "Just as I expect you didn't count on the scolding you're going to receive."

Anakin winced. "I saved her life, though," he pointed out. "No one was going to stop the assassin."

"I know this. But you also put yourself in danger," Obi-Wan said, evenly. "It was an extremely reckless and ill-considered move."

"Isn't that what being a Jedi is about?" Anakin countered. "You do that all the time. You put yourself in danger for other people."

"I do not throw myself into the face of the first dangerous thing to come by," Obi-Wan retorted, stung. He reminded himself that he wasn't setting a good example for Anakin, if he didn't control his frustration. Reminded himself if was the fear talking, as much as anything else. "Anakin—the point is that I am responsible for your safety. We expect trained Jedi apprentices to do their duty. You've never been trained."

"Does it matter?" Anakin asked, with a strange sort of perceptiveness. "The other Jedi kept saying I was too old, too angry. Gallia told me that the Jedi path was one of service and selflessness. Am I only supposed to be selfless or whatever, after I go to the Temple?"

Obi-Wan hesitated. How did he explain it: the necessary balance between suicidal recklessness and the need for the Jedi to put others above self? From a certain point of view, Anakin's actions had carried the day. He'd saved the Queen, with a disconcerting lack of regard for his own life.

I see selflessness, he thought, and he couldn't quite bring himself to condemn Anakin for it, either.

But virtue could co-exist with vice, and it was for this reason that Iphanas Olekion, the Watchman of the sector that encompassed Telos and its sister-planet Akrasia had written, so long ago, In all things, balance.

He let out a long sigh. "Just look before leaping next time, will you?"

Anakin offered an obviously disgruntled nod as they continued down the corridor, in silence. Obi-Wan wished he knew what to say. Qui-Gon had always known, he thought. He wished for some of
his Master's wisdom, now. He wished he knew just *what* to do with a new, reckless young apprentice.

Obi-Wan was being unfair, Anakin thought, grumpily, dragging his feet down the corridor. He made it sound like Anakin thrived on danger, when half the time, trouble seemed to find *him*, and did Obi-Wan really expect Anakin to do nothing about that?

*Look before leaping, Anakin, don't be reckless, Anakin*, he muttered, to himself. It wasn't as if he was some kind of thrill-seeker. He hadn't even made anything explode or crashed any Pods or starfighters in the past few days!

As they neared the area in the security station where the assassin was held, a shape disentangled itself from the wall. Anakin didn't recognise the man, but it seemed he knew Obi-Wan and Obi-Wan knew him, because the Jedi came to a halt and held out a hand to stop Anakin.

"Ren Yvar," Obi-Wan greeted, coolly. Anakin wondered if that was the voice he used when he got mad at people. He'd never heard Obi-Wan talk like that to anyone before. "I see palace security gave you access."

The name didn't ring a bell, and Anakin frowned, wondering how Obi-Wan knew that man.

"Jedi Kenobi," the man greeted, shortly. "I intend to talk to him. We can go together." He flashed a visitor's pass, but Obi-Wan barely glanced over at it.

"A distinctive reddish-orange dust," Obi-Wan said, softly. "The labs analysed it, Yvar. It's so very distinctive because it occurs on only one region on Naboo: the homefarms near the low valleys."

Ren Yvar said, "You choose a curious time to have this conversation, Kenobi."

Obi-Wan arched an eyebrow. "Do I?"

Anakin knew threats; could sense the edge to Obi-Wan's voice, the tension in Yvar's body. He moved slightly backwards, so Obi-Wan was between him and the man, reminding himself that he'd really rather not get lectured about his overwhelming recklessness again. (The thought was slightly bitter.)

Yvar's gaze flicked over to him for a brief moment. "I see you've brought your apprentice with you this time."

So Obi-Wan had met Yvar without him? Anakin felt a flicker of annoyance; maybe even outrage. Wasn't he supposed to go where Obi-Wan went? Wasn't that what being his student meant? Or maybe Obi-Wan didn't trust him enough. Maybe Obi-Wan was thinking of leaving him alone, because he was too reckless for Obi-Wan's standards.

It was just a touch of self-pity, Anakin knew, but he wasn't keen on digging himself out of it just yet.

"This has nothing to do with him," Obi-Wan said, sharply. "You chose to have this conversation, right here, right now. That was not a decision I made."

"Panaka screened me himself, did you know that?" Yvar said. "He was more thorough than usual. I'm not carrying anything that could be used to kill him, and I'm fairly certain that if the esteemed Jedi Kenobi is with me, security will be able to relax, confident in the knowledge I can't silence him."

Him?
Obi-Wan said, "How do I know he's not working for you?"

"How do you know it wasn't me?"

"You're shorter than he is," Obi-Wan said, simply. "Although you both used the same boots." He'd caught sight of the boot-print on the carpet.

An almost-smile, from Yvar. "So I am," he said.

"You haven't answered my question."

"Is there an answer that would satisfy you?"

They were fighting, only with words. Each sentence was the humming flash of a lightsaber blade, seeking to cut deep. "No," Obi-Wan said, after a moment, inclining his head. "So why should I allow you with me?"

"Panaka gave me the pass," Yvar said. "That man can't be bought. He would not have allowed me here if he was not satisfied I had nothing to do with the attempt on the Queen's life, even with that Jedi Master breathing down his neck. Another consideration: Junaka was sworn to me. I know him. I want him to answer for what he's done. And my knowledge may prove useful."

"Fine," Obi-Wan said, at last, shortly. "When did you find out?"

"About the same time he decided to assassinate the Queen," Yvar said. He folded his arms across his chest. "Any other questions?"

"Yes. Has he done anything else?"

"Not that I know of," Yvar said. "But those were Guild mercenaries in that crowd, alongside some of the suborned militia. I have trusted accountants going over everything right now, checking for any sort of irregularity. But Junaka never had access to my accounts and assets."

"He had access to your person," Obi-Wan pointed out. "All he needed to do was to pickpocket access cards, or memorise carelessly-left behind passwords…"

"I know my security," Yvar said, flatly. "He did not have access to anything important in terms of material."

Obi-Wan's nod seemed clipped. "How long has he worked for you?"

"Three years," came the reply. "He came with the strongest recommendations."

"From whom?"

"The Senator's office," Yvar replied. "Falce Valarin wrote up his recommendation letters himself, and Senator—sorry, Chancellor now—Palpatine signed it."

"Hmm," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin wondered what he was thinking about. Instead, he asked, "What are Guild mercenaries?"

"Are you going to explain it to him?" Yvar wanted to know.

"Guild mercenaries," Obi-Wan said, ignoring Yvar, "Are mercenaries who are contracted out under the Mercenary's Guild. This means that you're getting decent-quality mercenaries for your credits,
"and the contracts are carefully drawn-out and recorded."

"Except," Yvar interjected, almost mocking, "The Guild keeps its companies under tight supervision. There are rules, and opening fire in a crowd of civilians never passes muster."

Obi-Wan frowned. "You're familiar with them, then."

"Where else do you think I went, before I had to come back to Naboo?" Yvar asked, and this time, Anakin noticed his voice was bitter. He swallowed the pain, though, with that cocky smile. "The Guild would never countenance a contract that asked them to cause as much damage in a crowded square as possible. Much less with the Supreme Chancellor in attendance."

"And assassination?"

Yvar shook his head. "No. Bad form. You want the bounty hunters, for something like that, if not people actually good at wetwork. Those never get covered by Guild contracts."

Obi-Wan shook his head, and for a moment, Anakin thought he was disagreeing with Yvar. But he wasn't. "So: attackers we're supposed to believe are Guild mercenaries, Junaka turning out to do assassination on the side, and the security cordon getting badly broken by the militia. Does this sum up everything that happened earlier?"

"Presumably not," Yvar said, with surprising cynicism. "I'm sure you've missed something somewhere, Jedi Kenobi. The first law of battle demands it. Far be it from me to tell you what it is, though."

"Ah, the first law of battle," Obi-Wan said, sarcastically. "How I've missed it."

"What's that?" Anakin just had to ask.

"Shit happens," Yvar said.

Obi-Wan could not shake the nagging sense that the Jedi were being played—had been played—and masterfully. He hadn't said as much to Anakin: that the attack had taken such advantage of how the Jedi sensed threats in the Force, of how Jedi would behave, that he felt certain the mastermind behind it knew the Jedi; knew how they operated.

His mind could not help drifting back to the tattooed Sith Lord he'd killed. The Zabrak had been fearsomely skilled, and Obi-Wan did not doubt that even had he been well-rested, and Qui-Gon in his prime, they could not have defeated the Sith in a fair fight.

Which was killed? Mace Windu had asked him, that day in the hangar. Master or apprentice?

Had the Sith been behind this?

But no; he could not go on, seeing Sith behind each move and shadow. Yet there was some merit to the thought, surely. The Trade Federation had been unprecedentedly belligerent, both in action and language. The Sith Lord had appeared—first on Tatooine, to engage Qui-Gon, and then once again, at that hangar in Theed, as they were storming the palace. Had it been sheer opportunism? Or had the Sith been tracking them in some way?

Or had they stumbled repeatedly across the Sith, because of some strand connecting the Sith to the Trade Federation?
But perhaps he was jumping to conclusions. You didn't need to be a Sith to know the Jedi would prioritise the protection of civilians over defending the Queen. That the numerous attacks muddied the clarity of the warnings offered by the Force was, perhaps, an unexpected bonus, rather than something actively planned for.

But something still sat uneasily with him. Obi-Wan just couldn't figure out what.

"Stay right by the door, and go nowhere else," he told Anakin, as he was about to open the door to the holding cell. Anakin opened his mouth to argue, but Obi-Wan continued. "He's been subdued and the cell separates both the prisoner and the interrogator, but I don't want to take any chances without knowing his capabilities."

"He's very good," Ren Yvar said, helpfully.

"Even better," Obi-Wan muttered. He palmed open the door to the holding cell, using the access pass he'd been given. The door slid open with a quiet whoosh, revealing the would-be assassin—Junaka, Obi-Wan remembered; Yvar had supplied his name—dangling, suspended, behind the buzzing energy-walls of a containment-cell.

The assassin regarded them, his expression neutral. Obi-Wan sized the man up; yes, he appeared to be a good match, in build for the sniper with the helmet and the Phokas Mark VI rifle. More importantly, the soil residue Anakin had found pointed to someone with access to the homefarms: someone like Junaka, who worked as Yvar's bodyguard.

He decided to start with the basics. "You recruited Tala Altarie," he said, watching the man for any reaction whatsoever. There was none; no flicker of recognition at the name. Or perhaps Junaka had a very good poker face. "One of the Youngbloods. Tried to kill me and my apprentice."

Junaka said nothing.

Ren Yvar said, "You were supposedly on leave. Family business, you said." There was anger in his voice. No doubt the last thing he'd wanted was to discover that Junaka's actions had brought potential consequences to his door. "Except you were in Theed, attempting to kill the Jedi."

Junaka refused to reply.

"The problem," Obi-Wan said, "Is that I can't see what's in it for you. You were caught trying to assassinate the Queen. Naboo doesn't have the death penalty, but it's still a life penalty. Silence doesn't help you any longer, Orm Junaka."

"And you're offering a deal?" Junaka spoke up, finally; his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Obi-Wan said, "I'm authorised to offer a deal—"

"Nerfshit," Junaka spat. "This is Naboo—you have no authority here, Jedi."

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "The Jedi can recommend clemency," he said, mildly. "It's true I don't have the authority myself, but I'm certainly capable of brokering a deal with the approval of the Queen and planetary security."

He accessed the Force, letting it trickle into him, here and now, and brought it to bear on Junaka, trying to influence the man's mind. "Cooperation is your best bet, Junaka."

His voice hard, Junaka said, "No. I don't think it is."
So much for Force suggestion. The problem with using the Force to suggest a course of action to another being, Obi-Wan thought, was that it always had the tendency to backfire just when you most needed it to work. There were beings—like Toydarians, of course—who had a natural resistance to Force suggestions. And of course, strong-minded subjects, and in particular, Force sensitives, tended to throw off suggestions with ease.

"You're with the Youngbloods."

It was Ren Yvar, and a statement Obi-Wan had not expected. Neither had he expected the shallow nod from Junaka. "So I am," he said, shortly.

"Why work for the Yvar, then?" Obi-Wan asked. "If you detest the system, why work for those who symbolise just how broken it all is?"

Junaka gave a harsh laugh. "You know where to find the largest sceptics of the Republic, Jedi?"

"Enlighten me."

"In the halls of the Senate," Junaka said. "And especially in the offices of those who work for them. I saw it all, working for Senator Palpatine, and I was sick of it." His voice crept down, to a whisper. "Have you not seen it, Jedi? Coruscant is about who has power, influence, wealth. How many of the Senators voted to put a stop to it, when the Trade Federation came for Naboo?"

"And so you listened to those who spoke of change," Obi-Wan surmised. "No matter the cost."

"What has the Republic done for us?" Junaka asked, bitterly. "We took this planet back by ourselves. The Jedi watched."

Obi-Wan's fingers brushed against the energy barrier, and he felt the light sting, almost as a rebuke. "My Master died defending your planet—"

"My condolences," Junaka said. The strangest thing was, Obi-Wan could not tell if he was being sincere, or mocking. Perhaps a bit of both.

"That doesn't explain why you chose to work for us," Ren Yvar said, his eyes cold. "I imagine you left the service of the Senator, because you grew disillusioned. But if you're expecting me to imagine you a patriot, an idealist, why the Yvar? Why not Naboo's militia, or the palace guard?" He paused. "Here's a suggestion, Junaka: try to paint a prettier picture if you're selling nerfshit."

Except that there had been something, there: an emotional resonance to Junaka's words that led Obi-Wan to believe there was at least a seed of truth in his words.

"If this is true," Obi-Wan said, ignoring Yvar's words, "Then where does the Queen fit into this?"

Junaka shrugged. "The Trade Federation wants her dead. Badly. That reason enough?"

"You fool," Ren Yvar said, his voice laced with disgust. "And so you sold yourself to them, as a knife."

"Who was your handler?" Obi-Wan demanded, pushing against Junaka's mind with the Force, willing the man to yield to him.

Junaka's eyes glinted. "I'd be a fool to betray them to you, Jedi," he murmured. "Good luck flipping over each stone in search of traitors."
"Nerfsht," Ren Yvar said, pacing the debriefing room. The veneer of arrogance and self-possession Obi-Wan had seen earlier was in tatters. This was a man who'd been played, and been played badly, and he knew it.

Anakin sat at the table, toying idly with a multi-tool.

Obi-Wan said, "What can you tell me of his background?" Junaka, as expected, had proved to be mostly uncooperative. The most Obi-Wan had gleaned was that he, in fact, planned the attack in the public square.

"As I said," Yvar replied, "He came highly recommended by both Senator Palpatine and Falce Valarin. Took the militia track here, on Naboo, and then moved on to served a few years as airborne infantry with the Republic, before returning to Naboo to serve in Senator Palpatine's security."

"And then yours."

"Yes."

"Did Senator Palpatine ever mention why he left?"

Ren Yvar shook his head. "Nothing beyond a well-written recommendation letter, laced with the usual boilerplate about how Junaka was seeking opportunities elsewhere. Nothing to hint at a rift. Seemed like a perfectly amicable separation."

Obi-Wan nodded, sharply. "Fine. So Junaka's a professional. Did he ever give you any indication that he felt strongly about Naboo's place in the Republic?"

Ren Yvar snorted. "You think this is the sort of thing that comes up when trying to employ security?"

Obi-Wan said nothing.

Yvar shook his head. "Of course not," he said. "You're better off talking to Falce Valarin, if you can still get hold of him. He might have a better idea of Junaka's activities and sympathies."

"My impression was that you would be inclined to vet the head of your security thoroughly."

"Of course I did!" Ren Yvar snapped. "I found nothing that stood out in his background, and absolutely nothing that would hint at something like this." And of course, Obi-Wan thought, the fact that the man had served as security for then-Senator Palpatine would've played a not-insignificant role in giving him impeccable references.

Ren Yvar, he thought, was going to have his job cut out for him, when he reviewed all his accounts, and probably raked his own security over the coals.

Obi-Wan switched tack. "Then I need to speak to Falce Valarin," he said. Tried not to feel frustration, as yet another dead-end threatened to emerge. Investigation, an officer of the Coruscant Security Force had once told him, was never linear: discovering crucial pieces of information was as much luck as a matter of good reasoning and sharpness. Obi-Wan had taken part in investigations before, but this one seemed to frustrate him so. "What can you tell me of him?"

"Young, bright," Ren Yvar shrugged. "Came out of the Apprentice Legislator's Programme, as does practically everyone in politics on Naboo. Worked for Senator Palpatine for over a decade, now. Probably a shoo-in for the vacant Senator position, now." He paused. "Oh, and he's a connoisseur of art. And he especially enjoys collecting old art from Naboo."
"Do you consider yourself a patron of the arts?"

"Possibly," Ren Yvar replied. "I've certainly collected my share of pieces. We've spoken on several occasions about the merits of art from different periods in Naboo history." He smiled knowingly. "Not the sort of thing I expect the Jedi would be terribly interested in."

Obi-Wan grunted. "Comm me if anything comes up," he said, at last. "I'm going to see Falce Valarin. Come, Anakin."

"The Jedi Master with Panaka already said the same thing," Ren Yvar said.

Obi-Wan blinked. Yes, he thought, Ren Yvar had mentioned that the first time, but Obi-Wan'd been too preoccupied to pick up on that particular strand. "Who was it?" he wanted to know.

"Jedi Master Adi Gallia."

Adi Gallia was an excellent judge of character, Obi-Wan thought, but even Adi Gallia could be wrong. Nevertheless, he suspected she'd been instrumental in ensuring that Ren Yvar had access to the security station, and that he hadn't been confined on suspicion of orchestrating the attack on the victory celebrations and the Queen's assassination.

Why? What were her reasons?

He didn't know. Still, he had to trust her.

"Fine," he said, shortly. "Comm one of us." He turned to leave, Anakin already putting the multitool away and following behind him.

"This is so slow," Anakin grumbled, even as they threaded their way out of the security station. He half-expected Obi-Wan to lecture him about how Jedi didn't mind things being slow, but to his surprise, the Jedi only chuckled.

"Yes. Yes, it is," Obi-Wan agreed. "And this investigation is particularly slow and tangled, and I would be lying if I said I wasn't frustrated."

Anakin took a moment to parse that sentence. "Isn't there anything you can do about it?" he demanded. It sat ill with him that they'd been going around, asking questions, getting half-killed, and for all of that, people were still trying to kill Padmé and they hadn't been able to either put a stop to it, or do anything much about it at all.

Obi-Wan merely sighed. "It's not that easy, Anakin. I'm doing what I can." He shook his head, slowly. "Everytime I think there's a lead, it just closes off. Whoever is behind this, they're frustratingly clever at picking their pieces."

"What do you mean?"

"Think of it as a game, Anakin. Whoever is playing this very dangerous game is doing it from a distance, so as not to get their hands dirty. We've known for a while that the Trade Federation doesn't like the Queen, and would happily see her dead for her role in upstaging their attempted blockade of Naboo. But there's nothing—yet—that directly connects the Trade Federation with what's going on." Nothing, except the Queen's suspicions, and how much the Trade Federation hovered in the background: in terms of the resources required to hire Arvol Resnik, and O&P protection—in terms of the indirect connection between the Erskens, at least according to Ren Yvar, who frustratingly, could perhaps not be trusted, and the other commercial giants of the galaxy."
Obi-Wan ground the heel of his hand against his forehead. They were close, he could tell. Frustratingly close. The attempted assassination should have opened new avenues of investigation, but they'd threatened to close as soon as they'd opened.

"Does it have to be the Trade Federation?" Anakin asked, shrewdly.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Possibly not," he admitted. "But then, we're left in the dark again. Who would have the Queen assassinated, and why?" For this time, Junaka's intent had been clear: he'd been targeting the Queen, rather than her Jedi protection.

Something about that bothered him. Obi-Wan didn't know what it was. He set aside the thought for the moment; allowed it to steep at the back of his mind until it was ready to surface.

"Maybe they're not connected," Anakin offered, tentatively. "Maybe the guy who tried to kill you and kidnapped me isn't working with the assassin back there, the one who tried to kill the Queen."

It was a thought Obi-Wan turned over in his head for a few moments before he shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Why?"

"Junaka," Obi-Wan said, by way of explanation. "He's the common factor connecting two separate investigations. If we treat the first attack as being on me, and the attack during the victory celebrations as an attack being on the Queen, then Junaka is the connection, because he tried to kill us at the university, and then later tried to kill the Queen."

Anakin frowned, trying to make sense of that. "You recognised him?"

"He has the same build, and the same skill-set," Obi-Wan pointed out. "His face was obscured with a helmet then, so I couldn't recognise his features. But what's critical is that as Ren Yvar's head of security, he would have access to the homefarms—and so he would leave the exact kind of soil traces you noticed that day."

"Oh," Anakin said, softly. "That makes it even more confusing, then," he complained.

"Why?"

"Because," Anakin said slowly, feeling for the words, "Why the change? Why you then the Queen? I guess maybe he thought you were a hard nut to crack, but…"

Obi-Wan waited.

"It's kind of like getting into a fist-fight," Anakin said, at last, thinking of some of the scrapes he'd ended up in on Tatooine. "You don't wait to do your worst, 'cause by then, everyone knows and they'll be careful of you. You want to go hard and take everyone off-guard from the start."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan assented. "That's one way of thinking of it." He palmed open the final door, giving the security officers stationed there a nod of greeting, and they stepped out into the fresh, open air of Theed.

"What's another?" Anakin wanted to know, feeling a surge of irritation.

"Sometimes, it's better to make people underestmate you," Obi-Wan replied. "In this context, sometimes goals change." He let out a heavy sigh. "I truly hope Falce Valarin will be more forthcoming. I'm getting rather tired of dead ends."
"Me too," Anakin muttered, with heartfelt sincerity. An important thought occurred to him. "D'you think he's got something to eat?"

Obi-Wan was startled into a laugh. "Well," the Jedi said. "I suppose I can't hurt to ask."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all who have waited patiently for this next installment of In All The World! Grad school, as usual, has been beating me like a rented gong, but I have been coping. To all who favved or commented or followed or left this fic some love in one way or another, thank you. This chapter is meant for you. (I might edit this A/N to insert some commentary later. Right now, I'm just tired.)
Chapter Sixteen: Shell Game

Falce Valarin, the acting-Senator for Naboo, was a slender and wiry man, with prominent cheekbones, and pale eyes that seemed to miss nothing. "Knight Kenobi," he greeted, as Obi-Wan entered the office, Anakin in tow. "And unless I miss my guess, this is your apprentice, Anakin Skywalker."

"Acting-Senator Valarin," Obi-Wan tucked his hands into the sleeve of his robe and bowed politely. "A pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise, Knight Kenobi. So, how may I help you?" Falce Valarin gestured to the sparsely-decorated office. Some Senatorial aides took pride in their position, using it as an opportunity to showcase their wealth and power. Falce Valarin, though, seemed to prefer a neat, spartan office, although it was currently stuffed with half-full packing-crates.

Obi-Wan noticed a sculpture, near the open window: it was metallic, and the light glinted off the abstract curves and whorls of the design. "You like it?" Falce grinned, and suddenly appeared friendlier. "I always say that art reveals much of the audience, rather than the artist. I've had lots of different people in this office, and it's always some other piece of work that catches their eye."

"What is it?"

"It's a work by Zoltan Gavarie," Falce said, coming alongside to study the sculpture. "A little-known local sculptor. The interesting thing about Gavarie is that he was fascinated by the history of the Jedi." A sly, side-glance at Obi-Wan. "In fact, you might say, he was obsessed by the history of your Order, and where it crossed Naboo history."

"I see," Obi-Wan said, neutrally. He wondered if Falce, too, had any interest in Jedi history.

Falce smiled. "I suppose the Jedi tend to be a bit secretive. Well, in any case, this sculpture's called The Lady of the Lake. A bit overwrought, obviously, but it refers to the legend of Jedi Master Visas Marr."

Obi-Wan blinked. "The Miraluka? The Master Visas Marr who wrote the Meditations in Exile?"

Falce shrugged, carelessly. "I couldn't say, of course. I'm not given much to literature." Out of the corner of his eye, Obi-Wan noticed that Anakin was studying the contents of the bookcases. The sculpture hadn't interested him. "But yes, she remained for a while on Naboo, primarily in the Lake Country, during the reign of Queen Phaisté. It's said the Queen would often travel to the Lake Country, seeking the Jedi Master's advice. Certainly, a royal residence was built in the Lake Country during Queen Phaisté's reign."

"You said it was a legend."

Falce shrugged again. "The records are sparse," he said at last. "And practically anything from that period is more or less a legend. As much a legend, at any rate, as tales of General Orech and Queen Faraé, although I suppose the latter are at least somewhat better-documented. Perhaps the palace library has more information—they certainly have a rather eclectic collection."
Obi-Wan nodded. "I didn't take you for a scholar."

Falce grinned. "Most don't. My interests are all over the place, although working as Senator—sorry, former-Senator—Palpatine's aide hasn't given me very much time to pursue them. My first duty, after all, is to the people of Naboo. But anyway, you didn't come here to listen to me ramble on about the works of Zoltan Gavarie and Jedi Master Visas Marr. So, what can I do for you, Jedi Kenobi?"

"I was hoping you could tell me something of Orm Junaka," Obi-Wan said. "He was caught trying to assassinate Queen Amidala, and before that, he was implicated in an attempt to kill me."

Falce's grin immediately faltered; was replaced by a look of practised sympathy. "I'm sorry to hear that," Falce murmured. "Truly; I did not expect Junaka to have become such a troubled man. He was exemplary when working for this office..."

"What did he do, for you and the Chancellor?"

Falce said, "Do you care for some refreshment, Knight Kenobi?"

Anakin said, his voice small, "D'you have something to eat?"

Falce smiled, but this time, it was strained and didn't quite reach his eyes. "Yes, of course, young Skywalker." He punched a series of numbers on a wrist-comm and put in an order for "Refreshments, for my guests," before turning back to Obi-Wan. "It's a long enough matter, I suppose. He worked for us for several years. In fact, he came to Chancellor Palpatine's attention through his service with the Republic military—I understand it was something of a sensitive mission to Vorai Iddan."

Vorai Iddan—Obi-Wan cast back through his memory, and then recalled that Vorai Iddan was one of five worlds within the Vorai system. A civil war had raged on Vorai Iddan, but eventually, the neighbouring worlds of Vorai Tappi, Vorai Kaffix, and Vorai Opphe had been dragged into the conflict. Eventually, the Republic had been forced to deploy several Master-Padawan teams, alongside its military in order to put a stop to the conflict, for the Vorai system war was destabilising regional trade, and (although this was not publicly admitted), the outpouring of refugees was causing anger in its wealthy neighbours, the Skrai and Gaxil systems. Neither the worlds of the Skrai systems nor the worlds of the Gaxil systems wanted to admit the hordes of the displaced. And they were part of alliances strong enough to have a significant voice in the Senate.

"The Republic is broken," Qui-Gon had said, once, over a late night's cup of safflower tea. He sighed and shook his head. "I fear that it becomes increasingly rare that the Senate does what it needs to do, rather that what serves its interests."

Such an opinion, Obi-Wan knew, had become increasingly common—whispered among the ranks of the Jedi Order—but never publicly acknowledged.

It was dangerous, in so very many ways.

"Are you familiar with it?"

"Unfortunately, no. However, Junaka's records were exemplary, and I believe he was issued two commendations for gallantry and courage under fire. And he was extremely professional and thorough, in his time with us. There was no indication of any sort that he had been..." Falce hesitated, before electing to say, "Compromised."

The door hissed open, and a young girl sauntered in, carrying a tray with a pot, several cups, and pastries. She smiled at all of them. "The refreshments you requested, Falce."
"Ah, yes, thank you," Falce murmured, and as she retreated, having set down the tray on Falce's desk, he said to Obi-Wan, "Ashté's a decent assistant—at some point, I'm really going to have to promote her. Possibly once the matter of the new Senator has been settled. Caf?"

Obi-Wan thanked him, and poured the steaming beverage into cups. Anakin padded over and helped himself to a pastry at once. "Mmmph," he said, cramming it into his mouth. "S'good."

"I'm glad to hear that," Falce laughed. "The chef at the Senatorial office here is simply excellent. It's one of the things I miss about Naboo, every time I'm on Coruscant instead."

"Are you here often?" Obi-Wan asked, even though he suspected he knew the answer. While the Senate was not always in session, Senators often returned to their homeworlds to manage local affairs, leaving aides and legal teams behind on Coruscant to inform them of any important issue that might arise in their absence.

"Depends," Falce said. "Senator Palpatine generally preferred to have me on Naboo, while our team on Coruscant handled Senate affairs. Still, I've worked for him on several difficult Senate sessions—and committee meetings—so I'm sufficiently familiar with our Coruscant office and the workings of the Senate." He smiled faintly and helped himself to a pastry. "Look at me, going on as if I'm trying to convince you to appoint me Senator for Naboo. Won't you help yourself to a pastry? I promise there's enough for you and your apprentice."

They both turned to glance at Anakin, whose cheeks were bulging. "S'good, Offi-Wan," he said, unapologetically.

"Well, then," Obi-Wan said, with a raised eyebrow directed at Anakin. "It seems my very young apprentice recommends I should try one." He helped himself to a pastry, and bit into it. It was crunchy on the outside, but soft and moist within, slathered with rich, golden butter, and crusted faintly with coarse salt.

"I told you," Falce said at his expression, a proud smile on his sharp features. He helped himself to a steaming mug of caf. "I'm never unhappy to miss a session of the Senate, because the chef here works miracles with food."

"So I see," Obi-Wan managed, a few moments later. "Did you have any direct contact with Junaka?"

"Not often," Falce said. He shifted and sat down on an armchair, his legs crossed at the ankles. "And only in his capacity as a security officer for this office. There was the occasional scare, of course—prominently, when the miners were protesting against Ersken buy-outs of their contracts—but otherwise, we did not talk very much."


"Ashté is…friendly," Falce said, for seeming want of a better word. "Warm, generous, outgoing. Junaka was none of those. He kept to himself a great deal, so we seldom interacted beyond the scope of his assigned duties."

"So I take it you wouldn't know if Junaka had any sympathies towards the Youngbloods?"

"Actually," Falce said, "I do know—he did become extremely sympathetic towards the Youngbloods, particularly in the period before he resigned. They were picketing the office—they objected to our signing the Republic Armaments Convention, on the grounds that it would lead to the disbanding of Naboo's planetary military, which was really the point of it all…" He sighed.

"Anyway, I suppose they felt very vindicated when the Trade Federation took over without any
resistance at all. But Junaka refused to disperse them. He felt they had a point. That the Armaments Convention was really about making people dependent on the Republic's military, and by extension, the Senate."

"What happened, then?" Obi-Wan prodded. "I'm told that you did, after all, write him a recommendation letter which praised him highly."

"He soon felt he could not, in good conscience, continue to work for this office," Falce said, simply. "Which I can, of course, respect. Hence the recommendation letter—which is standard practice for our employees—and then he offered his resignation and went to seek employment elsewhere." He shook his head, sadly. "I did not expect him to have attempted to assassinate the Queen."

Obi-Wan sipped at his caf. It was strong, bitter, and dark, but at least it was warm, and he didn't object to the stimulant. "So I see," he replied. "Did it strike you as strange?"

"What did?"

"His refusal to disperse the Youngbloods," Obi-Wan said. "It seems a strange stumbling block, for all you and Ren Yvar have emphasised his professional qualities. One might think that professionalism requires the ability to put aside your personal feelings about the matter."

Falce shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. "But even professionals have standards, surely. I presume that Junaka found his—or at any rate, found a line he would not cross." He stared down at his cup of caf as if it could provide him some form of answers. "In a way, it's reassuring."

"Pardon?"

Falce smiled crookedly at him. "I would think it difficult to trust anyone who has no limits," he said. "If there is no line they wouldn't cross, if there is absolutely nothing they wouldn't do."

"Why?" and this high, child's voice was Anakin's, now, as he sat, legs dangling off another armchair too tall for him, really, and sipped his caf, making a face at the taste.

"Well," Falce said, "To have a line means you have limits; it means you have principles and morals you'd stand by. Even the most hardened bounty hunters have limits—mostly, they call it professionalism, which means they can be bound by a contract. What would it be, to be so utterly unfettered, by morality or principle?"

Anakin said, and in that moment, he didn't sound like a boy at all, "I guess it would be like looking into the heart of the sun. That's what it'd mean, to be truly, utterly, free."

Obi-Wan shivered, and he knew Falce had seen it; knew, because Falce met his gaze, and his pale eyes were too knowing.

*Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.*

But he could not explain it, not here, not now: not to a Senatorial aide who knew nothing of the Sith, and not to a boy who must become a Jedi, who must not fall, and in that moment, Obi-Wan grasped the immensity of the task that had been set before him—no, that he had accepted willingly; that he was bearing on his shoulders.

"Will that be all then, Knight Kenobi?" Falce asked. "I don't mean to rush you, but there's quite a bit of work to be doing, especially since Naboo currently lacks a Senator. I'm holding things together for the moment."
Obi-Wan dipped his head in a nod of acknowledgement. "Of course," he murmured. "I shouldn't keep you from your duties. You have my thanks, Falce Valarin."

"A pleasure to help in a Jedi investigation," Falce replied, and allowing Anakin to snatch up a few more pastries and cram them into his mouth—indeed, Obi-Wan commandeered a napkin and set aside a few as offerings to the boy's insatiable appetite—he showed them to the door.

Obi-Wan was striding ahead, and Anakin was struggling to keep up. The Jedi was quiet, and Anakin had the sense that it wasn't quite right to speak, Obi-Wan was mulling over something. He wasn't sure what it was, but he couldn't help feeling kind of left out all the same.

Was he baggage? Obi-Wan'd been dragging him around to talk to person after person, but for all of that, Anakin felt like he was just being dragged along because Obi-Wan had to have him there, rather than because Obi-Wan wanted him there.

He didn't know why it mattered to him.

No, that was a lie. He did know. He wanted Obi-Wan to approve. He wanted to be a great Jedi Knight—the best!—wanted it with a painfully intense desperation. Because he couldn't justify leaving Shmi any other way. Couldn't justify turning back on his mum, and refusing to look back, even though she told him to.

And great Jedi Knights began as good Padawans, didn't they? Began by being their Master's shadows, like Obi-Wan had been Qui-Gon's, as essential as air and light. Not by being unwanted baggage, who couldn't take a step without screwing things up, one way or another.

And he didn't even know what was going on, anymore. So Junaka had been some kind of model security officer. Great. Where did that leave them?

"Obi-Wan?"

He'd called out, even before he was quite conscious of having made the decision to do so. But Obi-Wan stopped, and turned back to look at him. "Yes, Anakin?"

"What happens now?"

Obi-Wan sighed, and Anakin wondered if the question had irritated him. "I'm not sure, Anakin," he admitted, frankly. "As far as I'm concerned, Falce Valarin has been fairly helpful, but that just leaves us with confirmation of something we already knew—a connection between Junaka and the Youngbloods. It still doesn't answer the question of where the supposed-Guild mercenaries came from, or who they really are, or where the knife and the sniper rifle came from, although I suppose the latter could be chalked up to Junaka's days with the Republic military."

"Are we going to find out about the mercenaries then?"

Obi-Wan hesitated. "Maybe," he said, slowly. "I think Master Windu and Master Piell will be working that angle, however, and it's best not to cross lines of investigation. In fact, I'm not certain we'll be continuing the investigation much longer, Anakin."

"What?" Anakin demanded. "Why?" It was stupid, that's what it was, he decided fiercely. Padmé had almost died, but Obi-Wan was refusing to look into it any further?

"Our mandate only goes so far," Obi-Wan said, his voice soft. "The Council offered our assistance to the Queen in the aftermath of the attack, and she consented, but if matters continue to stall, the
Council may recommend Naboo security take over the investigation. Or," he offered, "The Council may very well station an actual Master-Padawan team here to continue the investigation. It would not be the first time a team is called off halfway through and the investigation handed to another."

"That's...that's rubbish," Anakin muttered, sullenly. "It's not like you're doing that awful a job! Aren't we? We're making some progress, anyway."

Obi-Wan pinched the bridge of his nose with a hand. "Yes, I suppose," he replied, eventually. "But the Council is aware you require training. It also helped that they needed to keep us on-world until the victory celebrations were complete. In fact, really, the only thing keeping us on this investigation is the fact that the Queen is familiar with us, and that they did not expect this assignment to so quickly escalate. It would not be wise to send a new Master-Padawan team into an extremely dangerous assignment, and the Council is surely aware of this. Furthermore—you need training."

"But you're teaching me now, aren't you?" Anakin said, in a small voice.

"Not enough," Obi-Wan replied. "And what you really need is access to the vast resources of the Temple, and the ability to settle down into a routine." He sighed. "None of which is forthcoming on this mission. In any case, I merely speculate. I would not be surprised if another Master-Padawan team is already en-route. But I do not know."

"So, what are we doing?"

Obi-Wan let out a long breath. "I suspect it makes no difference," he said, at last. "Even if we hand over the investigation, it's best to canvass as many of the options as possible. As I said, Master Windu and Master Piell are likely handling the Guild mercenary angle, while Master Billaba was examining the knife, which will probably be handed over for analysis—all things considered, I think we're best sticking to our original plan."

"Which was?"

"Talking to the rest of the Five," Obi-Wan said, simply. "We've spoken to the Derriva and the Yvar, but that leaves the other three members of the Five who are not spoken for. And then, perhaps it might be wise to see Androl Oden about the involvement of the Perdaé and the Youngbloods."

"D'you think he knows about the Youngbloods?"

"If Pallié Talein knows something about the Youngbloods," Obi-Wan replied, "And she most definitely does, then I'd assume Androl Oden might as well. But that reminds me—it might also be wise to place some pressure on Dr. Talein. The Youngbloods are appearing in this investigation far too many times for my liking."

Abruptly, his comlink signalled, and Obi-Wan answered it. "Master Koon? Yes, this is Obi-Wan—oh. I see. I understand, Master, we'll be there right away."

"What happened?" Anakin asked, wishing Obi-Wan had thought to set the comlink to project, so he could've listened in on whatever was going on.

"Master Plo Koon called," Obi-Wan said. "Ki-Adi-Mundi's made progress on the accounts. That Master's a certified genius with data, all things considered. They want us at the palace."

"No more dead ends?"

"Hopefully not," Obi-Wan said. He smiled at Anakin, and then reached into his tunic and produced a napkin. "Here. You seemed to be enjoying yourself, so I saved more pastries for you. And you did
say you were hungry."

Anakin took the napkin. He didn't know what to say. He'd not noticed Obi-Wan saving some pastries, and—and it felt kind of good, to know that the Jedi was looking out for him. That Obi-Wan'd thought about him.

"Thanks," he said. "D'you want some? We can share."

"I'm not particularly hungry," Obi-Wan said.

"Mum said we should share, though," Anakin pointed out. It didn't feel quite right, Obi-Wan always feeding him, and never really taking anything in return. "Tell you what—we should sneak off somewhere, and bring some food with us, and have a proper picnic, just like I used to do on my days off on Tatooine. Sometimes, I was with Mum. But other times, I'd go with Kitster or another friend."

Obi-Wan seemed to think about it. "Another time, alright?" he said, gently. "We're needed back at the palace right now."

"Okay," Anakin said, and smiled, and how easy and light it was to do that! "You promised, though. I'm going to hold you to it." Another thought struck him. "Maybe we can do that at the Lake Country! You said we might be going there, didn't you?"

"To speak to the Ersken, yes," Obi-Wan said slowly. "Very well, then, perhaps we'll squeeze in a picnic to the Lake Country on the side." He grinned at Anakin. "I'm sure the palace kitchens will let us take some things."

"Wizard!" Anakin whooped, and for once, he didn't at all mind the endless talking and slogging and the countless dead-ends even though he took exception very much to the people trying to kill Padmé. To see the Lake Country and have a picnic at once? He couldn't imagine anything at all better. "Should I save the pastries?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I don't think it makes a difference either way," he said. "We can always reheat them in the palace kitchens. Or we can probably obtain food from the palace kitchens. If we're going to the Lake Country, it'd have to be tomorrow because of the travelling time, so perhaps you're better off eating the pastries now—" he stopped, noticing what was going on.

"Good," Anakin informed him, through a mouthful of pastry. "Cause I wasn't really sure I could wait."

Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi was the Council's resident data specialist: he excelled in sifting through large swaths of information and reaching sharp, focused conclusions in short spans of time. He worked well with Plo Koon, of course: Plo Koon was a genius with both communications and encryption, but then, one didn't sit on the Jedi Council without being exemplary in many ways. And there were many Jedi who were considered masters of one skill or another, but who did not sit on the Jedi Council. There were many reasons, and the least of them was politics. As Obi-Wan only knew too well, being the Padawan—former-Padawan, he reminded himself—of Qui-Gon Jinn.

Truly, if Qui-Gon fought the Council less, chose his own objectives less, interpreted his orders less creatively; if Qui-Gon Jinn not been content to drift around, carried by his own whim and what he considered to be the will of the Living Force, if he had been more orthodox, less of a maverick—if he had not been Taras-Rja, of all things—he might have found his own seat on the Council.

But he had not been; and indeed, he had been Taras-Rja to the core, preaching compassion and
loving-kindness for all things as the path to mystic communion with the Living Force, and none of that was in any way close to orthodoxy, and the last thing the Council wanted was the threat of schism in the Order, all over again.

His vision threatened to blur as Obi-Wan thought back to their many confrontations and disagreements, for Obi-Wan, despite Qui-Gon’s teachings, had never been an adherent of Taras-Rja, and it was this fact which had led them to quarrel, time and again.

But he saw now that Qui-Gon would not, in some essential sense, have been Qui-Gon without that blazing streak of defiance; without that deep and abiding sense of compassion, of loving-kindness, as much as the man fell far from the ideal in the way all beings failed and yet struggled towards what was right and what ought to be done; in the way they wavered and deviated, but the Force still drew them onwards, water in the course of a mighty river.

He understood, perhaps too late, and breathed, fighting back the tears, until he felt like a Jedi again, ready to face the Council members, to learn what they had to say.

They strode into the comm centre.

Plo Koon glanced up from his data terminal. "Good," he rasped, through his breath mask. "You're here."

"Master Koon, Master Ki-Adi-Mundi," Obi-Wan greeted both of them. "You commed ahead."

"Yes, I did," Plo Koon said. "Take a look at this, Kenobi." He swivelled about in his chair, permitting them access to his data terminal. Obi-Wan strode over and frowned at the lines of text and numbers displayed there.

"What is this?"

"Guess," Plo Koon replied, instead of answering. Reflected in the terminal screen, Obi-Wan was aware of Anakin scrutinising the information, biting his lip as he struggled to come to terms with the data.

"I don't understand, Master," Obi-Wan finally said. "It looks like the audit information for Edaan Corp." He read the name off the terminal: the name itself didn't ring a bell, which indicated it was likely not a major galactic corporation. And as far as Obi-Wan could tell, everything seemed to be in order. Edaan Corp was not doing particularly well, but neither was it in danger of bankruptcy.

He could almost hear Qui-Gon, hear his former Master say, into his ear, "There's such a thing as being too perfect, Padawan. Perhaps that in itself says something."

Plo Koon grunted. "Ki-Adi, your turn," he said, and the Cerean Jedi Master easily took over.

"Edaan Corp is a local company on Naboo," he informed Obi-Wan. "It primarily exports Ersken wines, but has recently expanded to valuable minerals and precious stones."

"So, the Velarra," Obi-Wan said. But Ki-Adi-Mundi was shaking his head.

"Context matters," Ki-Adi-Mundi said. "I did some digging. Edaan Corp has no ties to any of the Five, apart from the commerce it does with the Velarra and the Ersken. In other words, it's a distributor, rather than a subsidiary. The first issue is where the capital came from. Edaan Corp was opened by two locals: Ule Marran and Cidé Perola." He shifted the terminal screen so Obi-Wan could take a look at his own terminal. "Cidé Perola and Ule Marran have extremely scant records in Naboo's planetary database."
"Unsurprising," Obi-Wan replied, frowning down at the new set of information: yet another audit report. "Naboo's always had strict privacy laws, and many of the isolationists tend to distrust planetary governance, much less data-collection."

"Yes," Ki-Adi-Mundi admitted. "But the fact that the database contains practically no information about them is also a point of concern. What's more interesting are the records you're currently reading."

"They don't match," Obi-Wan said, quietly. And then, "Where did you obtain them from?"

"Cross-checking and extrapolation," Ki-Adi-Mundi replied. "Koon helped with pulling out the information. We culled data from the HoloNet: primarily focusing on the Erksen and the sale of Erksen wines outside of Naboo. Then, I ran some calculations on what the financial situation of Edaan Corp might be, given these parameters."

"What's happening?" Anakin asked, his voice soft.

Obi-Wan looked over at him. "Edda Corp's been submitting deceptive audit information," he said. Forestalling Anakin's next question, he added, "The audit reports show that there's nothing wrong at all with Edaan Corp's financial accounts, which might in itself be slightly surprising."

"Perhaps," Ki-Adi-Mundi said, at last. "I certainly wouldn't have put it past the auditors to have cleaned up the data a little. But the point remains: based on the actual sales of Erksen wines to Edaan Corp, as well as the rate and pricing of Erksen wine on the sector market, Edaan Corp should be making a loss. But they're not: their latest audit reports seem unremarkable. In fact, they managed to expand operations to Velarra minerals. So either they falsified the information given to the auditors, or they're getting capital from somewhere."

"Or they bribed the auditors," Plo Koon said, dryly.

"Yes, that as well," Ki-Adi-Mundi acknowledged. He stroked his wispy white beard. "Either way, Edaan Corp is…extremely irregular."

"Okay," Anakin said, "But what does this have to do with anything?"

Obi-Wan smiled. "Anakin," he said, gently. "Master Mundi was investigating irregularities in the Trade Federation audits. We have our link."

"A distant link," Ki-Adi-Mundi admitted. "But a link nonetheless. An extremely low-ranking Trade Federation official by the name of Lomay Akvo didn't manage to cover his tracks very well. A significant transaction took place—from the Trade Federation to a chain of shell companies, and finally, to Edaan Corp. I did some digging, and," he shrugged. "It looks like Edaan Corp fits the description."

"And there's the most damning factor," Plo Koon spoke up. "The export of Erksen wines hasn't significantly changed. It's well within projections. So Edaan Corp is taking in the credits, but it's not actually buying Erksen wine, or Velarra minerals."

"If Edaan Corp is a shell company," Obi-Wan said, slowly, "Then where are the credits going to? And for what purpose?" Already, he could hear Qui-Gon cautioning him. Let us look at the who, his Master had said, countless times, on numerous missions. That will lead us to the why. He amended the question, "Who are Ule Marran and Ciré Perola?"

Ki-Adi-Mundi was shaking his head. "The better question is," said the Cerean Jedi, his features displaying his concern, "Do they even exist?"
"What happens now?" Anakin asked. He'd not been able to follow some of the financial details Obi-Wan and the other Jedi were throwing around, but he got the idea that Edaan Corp was pretty bad news, and Obi-Wan had conferred hastily with the other Jedi before beckoning to Anakin and leaving.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Master Mundi is going to continue digging. It's important to know where the money is going to, and for what purposes."

"Uh huh," Anakin said. "You said that, earlier. And what's the other Jedi doing?"

"That's Master Plo Koon, Anakin—he has a name—and he's going to try to see if he can uncover anything at all associated with Ule Marran and Ciré Perola. As Master Mundi mentioned, it might lead us to a dead end. But at least the dead end will be informative."

"Huh?" Anakin didn't get it.

"We'll know just a little more," Obi-Wan explained. "Namely, that Ule Marran and Ciré Perola are false identities." He smiled, amused at something Anakin wasn't understanding. "It's almost appropriate, in a way."

"Appropriate how?"

"False identities, shell company—oh, nevermind," Obi-Wan sighed, and Anakin cast about for something else to say.

"Well, they didn't sound like they wanted to send us back to Coruscant," he said. Felt no small amount of relief at the thought. Being sent off felt a lot like giving up; admitting defeat. And he wanted to make sure Padmé was safe, and the only way he'd know that for sure was if they caught whoever was trying to kill her.

"No," Obi-Wan agreed. "They didn't. I suppose this means we continue the investigation, for the moment. Still, the ranking Masters present are Master Yoda and Master Windu, so if the decision were to be made, it would most likely come from them."

"Are they very powerful?" Anakin wanted to know. They had to be, he thought, almost enviously. Both of them just seemed to move with a sense of weight, that was the best way to describe it. Pressure against his skin. And didn't the Jedi have to elevate the absolute best among them to the very top of their ranks?

"I don't know if that's the best word," Obi-Wan said. He was frowning, now. "Master Yoda is extremely wise and strong in the Force, but..." He gave a hapless shrug. "Anakin, I've told you already: the Jedi don't think in terms of power. Master Ionness Olek was raised to the Council for insight; it was recorded that she struggled to even so much as move a glass with the Force."

"Will I be able to do that?" Anakin asked, seizing on the next interesting tidbit Obi-Wan had revealed. He remembered the dream: dark robes flowing about him like faraykh wings, the gleaming blue lightsaber in his hand. Touching each slave and watching as their chains fell away. Kitster'd laughed at him, when he'd confided in his friend.

"We don't wear chains, Ani," Kitster Banai said, dark eyes wary. "Get your head out of the sky, Skywalker."

It had become a running joke between them, but Anakin, then, had frowned. "It's not just a dream," he said, stubbornly. "I know it."
"Yeah, and the Jedi are going to swoop in and take you away." Kitster shrugged. "Stop dreaming, Ani. This is Tatooine—the Jedi don't come here. And we're slaves, so they wouldn't bother with us. Save that for the holodramas."

Kitster'd never idolised the Jedi, the way Anakin had. Had listened to the stories and merely shrugged and went on with his life. His mum shook her head; had laughed and called Kister a little old man in a boy's body. None of them said you had to do a lot of growing up, real fast, if you were born a slave.

Obi-Wan hesitated, for some reason. "I see no reason why you shouldn't," he said, at last, running his hand along his cleanshaven chin.

"But maybe I couldn't?"

Obi-Wan shrugged, again. "We won't know what you can do until you do it," he said, gently. "We know you're an extraordinarily gifted pilot and mechanic—but did I ever tell you about my friend Nejaa?"

Anakin shook his head. It seemed like a strange question, though. Obi-Wan had said practically nothing about his friends, using the time instead to mostly lecture Anakin in the many, many, many rules associated with being a Jedi.

"Nejaa Halcyon," Obi-Wan said, his eyes going distant for a time. "We didn't grow up in the same clan—not the way Bant, Garen, Reeft and myself did, so we weren't as close. We got to know each other after we were paired together in a tracking assignment as Senior Padawans—I won't bore you with the details."

"Okay," Anakin said, even though he really would have liked to hear the details, to learn more about this new world he was stepping into. "And?"

"Nejaa has one problem. Though perhaps it's not exactly correct to call it a problem. It's—shall we say, a known tendency in the Halcyons; they can't perform any kind of telekinesis whatsoever."

"What's tele—telekinesis?"

"The ability to move objects with the Force," Obi-Wan explained. "Considered one of the most basic Jedi skills."

"But he couldn't do it."

"That's right," Obi-Wan said, calmly. "Most of the Halcyons can't. It's quite strange, really—some of the researchers have written papers about this, trying to make sense of how the Force is inherited along bloodlines. To be sure, Nejaa is extremely good at using the Force to affect minds and absorb energy. Another Halcyon trait. He just can't make things move. We all have our strengths and weaknesses, Anakin. Part of the challenge is trying to work with them."

Now Anakin was extremely confused. "Wait. You said 'the Halcyons.' There are more of them?"

Obi-Wan sighed, and now he looked extremely...uncomfortable. "Yes. There are."

"Doesn't that go against the thing about attachments?"

"Jedi are not permitted attachments," Obi-Wan said, carefully. "This includes marriage, and this has...not stopped a number of Jedi from getting married. The situation is...complicated. Sometimes, very rarely, exceptions are made. Master Mundi is one example."
Anakin gaped. "How come?"

"His species has an extremely low birth-rate," Obi-Wan said, matter-of-factly. "For practical reasons—and not without much debate in the Order!—it was finally accepted that Cerean Jedi would be exempted from the prohibitions against marriage."

"So, you're not married?"

"No."

"Mister Qui-Gon wasn't married?"

"No."

"But if Ki-Adi-Mundi is on the Council, and he's married, doesn't this…" Anakin tried again.

"Doesn't this mean that attachments aren't that bad, if someone who's married can be on the Council?"

Obi-Wan chuckled. "That line of argument resurfaces, time and again, yes."

"And?"

Obi-Wan looked thoughtful. "I think we'll discuss it in your classes," he said, "Once you've settled in at the Temple. It's a lengthy and drawn-out debate, with deep historical roots. I don't think this is the best time to do it justice. Returning to your original question: there are Halcyons who aren't in the Jedi order. Nejaa's parents, for instance, were not Force-sensitive. And Seyvas Halcyon is far older than Nejaa, but he's Nejaa's uncle. So Halcyons show up now and then in the Order, but the Halcyon Jedi do not themselves marry. Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Seyvas Halcyon did," Obi-Wan said. "He was discovered and expelled from the Order." There was a brusqueness to his voice that had not been there previously; that seemed to forbid further discussion of the matter. "Come, Anakin."

"What are we doing, then?"

Obi-Wan did not look back, although he did slow his stride to match Anakin. "As I see it," Obi-Wan said, "Master Mundi and Master Koon have their own tasks. As do the rest of the Council. Which means that we must be careful not to cross lines of enquiry and to support their efforts. Given what we know, I think the discovery of Edaan Corp means that it's wise to talk to the Velarra and the Ersken."

"Because Edaan is buying their stuff?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's one place the credits could've gone," he said. "Under the cover of ostensible purchases. And it's still a connection: why claim to be purchasing goods from the Ersken and the Velarra? That's worth investigating. Not to mention that we know Edaan Corp isn't the only one with access to funds it shouldn't have."

"Who else?" Anakin asked. He struggled to remember all the ground they'd covered so far, but nothing came to mind.

"The Ersken," Obi-Wan said. "Ren Yvar was mentioning. They brokered loans with the InterGalactic Banking Clan in order to get capital to fund a takeover of Naboo's shipping
companies."

"But then you know where the credits came from, don't you?"

"It's true," Obi-Wan admitted, "But I don't like it anyway. Too much money is flowing around in the background, and it seems like an interesting coincidence."

"All right," Anakin said. An extremely important thought struck him, then. "So we're still going to the Lake Country, aren't we? What are we having for our picnic?"

Obi-Wan offered him a tired smile. "Priorities, Anakin," he said, absently, but unbent enough to say, "Let's go to the kitchens and see what they have for us, shall we?"

Chapter End Notes

And I'm back! Like I said, I'll keep wrestling with what the story should be, but I do not like to abandon WIPs and will not leave this one behind. Hello to any new readers, and apologies and gratitude to any old readers still keeping up with this work! It's worth noting here as I did previously that I'm playing fast and loose with canon for this fic: I'm aiming for minimal compliance with the Prequels, but anything else is up for grabs! Drop me a comment if you have some questions about what's in and what's out!

Cheers,
Ammar.
Chapter Seventeen: Negotiating Distance

The wind ruffled Anakin's hair as the landscape drifted past the landspeeder. It wasn't anywhere near as fast as a Pod, of course, and Obi-Wan seemed extremely reluctant to floor the accelerator, but Anakin didn't quite mind the pace. He was drinking in the sights, even as the city of Theed receded into the distance, to be replaced by gently-swaying grasses and bright, colourful flowers, and the occasional tree.

That many plants just boggled Anakin's mind. Having grown up all his life on a desert planet, he couldn't really quite conceive of how there could be so **many** of them.

The mountains loomed in the distance.

"Are we there yet?" he asked, fighting back a yawn, and Obi-Wan laughed.

"We'll take quite a while yet, Padawan. Best enjoy the sights while you still can."

The picnic basket was carefully-balanced on Anakin's lap, and his stomach growled as his nose caught wind of the extremely tantalising aromas kept hidden beneath the starched white cloth. But he had to wait, he thought, stubbornly. They were supposed to have a **picnic**, and the last thing he was going to do was to give in and snack and then ruin it for Obi-Wan.

They'd gotten up at the crack of dawn—or even before the barest sliver of light had begun to illuminate the skies of Naboo, and Anakin was still feeling sleepy. And hungry. He wondered how it was possible to be both at the same time, and breakfast felt like it'd been days ago. He sighed, quietly.

"If you lift the cloth," Obi-Wan said, "You'll find a pack of hot buns underneath. That's not for the picnic."

Anakin shot him a suspicious look, but Obi-Wan's eyes were on the wide road. "How do you know?" he asked, as he cautiously peeled back the cloth and noticed that Obi-Wan was in fact right: there was a self-heating plasti-pack right on the top, and what looked like a couple of buns inside.

"I asked them to put that in there," Obi-Wan said, matter-of-factly. "It's a long way to the Lake Country by landspeeder, and I figured you might get hungry along the way. And you're probably pretty hungry now."

"How did you know that?" Anakin demanded, still hesitating over whether he ought to fish out the plasti-pack and have a go at the buns. "Did you read my mind? Is that another Jedi thing?"

"No," Obi-Wan said, "And reading minds is...an extremely complicated affair, and most Jedi can't do that. It's easier to pick up flashes of emotion from someone, especially if you're close to them, and sometimes the Force gives you a sense for when someone is lying, but minds are hardly books to be read." He looked surprisingly cheerful. "At least, that was Master Poof's favourite saying, and he's about the closest thing to an actual telepath that we have in the Order, and that's because he's Quermian, so as Trell Hjuyen likes to say, that's cheating."
"Does he really cheat? And what's a Quermian?" The agony of indecision!

Obi-Wan glanced over at him and said, mildly, "I did mean it, Anakin. Those buns are meant for you. Eating them won't ruin the picnic."

"Okay," Anakin said, slowly, giving in. "D'you want some? I noticed you didn't really eat anything at breakfast." Breakfast had been a more or less quiet affair; Obi-Wan had barely touched the food before he stood up and said he had arrangements to make. That worried Anakin, even though he wasn't sure what he was supposed to do about it.

"Thank you, Anakin, but I'll manage. It's best for me to keep my attention on the road, and I need both hands to drive the landspeeder."

"We could take turns," Anakin suggested, helpfully, but he did not expect the look of utter horror that Obi-Wan bestowed upon him.

"Not until I'm certain you can drive a landspeeder without treating it like a Pod," Obi-Wan said, very firmly. "And not until we can get you formally registered and licensed—without breaking oh, about fifty different galactic transport regulations in the process."

Anakin frowned. "I handle Pods, though! And I even got to fly a starfighter without crashing it." he complained, working the plasti-pack open. His mouth watered as the fragrance of baked goods drifted out. "You sure you don't want one?"

"Yes, I'm sure, Anakin, thank you—and a Pod is quite a different beast from a landspeeder, while you had Artoo to help you with the starfighter. Still, if you're going to drive a landspeeder like a Pod, I'm deeply worried for your passenger."

Anakin wondered if the Jedi was making fun of him. He couldn't tell, and for some reason, it annoyed him. He let out a frustrated huff and bit into the steaming bun—and was pleasantly surprised as the taste of oranges flooded his mouth.

It took some of the edge off his mood.

Obi-Wan glanced at him and said, shrewdly, "The kitchens were very keen to know that you liked oranges. So they made marmalade."

"Mmmph," Anakin said, and then swallowed and tried again. "I think I like them."

"The kitchens or the marmalade?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

Anakin considered the question seriously. "Both, I think," he said, right before moving on to the important task of demolishing the next bun. The question about telepaths and Quermians was, for the time being, forgotten.

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The Lake Country, Obi-Wan would freely admit, was beautiful. He parked the landspeeder near the boundary of the Erksen estates, choosing to walk on in by foot. The slopes of the mountains were covered in vineyards, and although enough of the morning mists had dispersed, the air was still crisp and cool.

He'd walked more than a thousand different planets, across the course of his apprenticeship to Qui-Gon, and each time Obi-Wan told himself that nothing could surprise him any longer, it still did. Certainly, they'd been to pristine mountain lakes before; had seen the immense wroshyrs of Kashyyyk, walked among the numerous pines and cypresses and sorrellan of Toprawa, and the red-
cumbling deserts of Ikadd Vaahan, and the pellucid waterfalls of Ragoon-6 but even this—even what should have been the fairly prosaic beauty of Naboo's Lake Country—still threatened to take his breath away.

Did, in fact, take his breath away.

As it did each time a mission brought him to some place new. Qui-Gon had laughed, placed his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder, and reminded him not to lose his sense of wonder; this instinctive connection to the glory of the Living Force.

Walking by his side, the picnic basket left temporarily in the landspeeder, Anakin badgered him with flurries of questions. "What are all those plants on the mountain?"

"Those are the Ersken vineyards, Anakin. They grow grapes there, which are harvested, and taken to the wineries to be made into wine. In fact, the Naboo is home to different varieties of grapes—blue wine is one of their exports."

Anakin made a face. "Is it like bantha milk?" he wanted to know. "It's blue and tastes funny."

Obi-Wan shrugged. "I wouldn't know," he said. "I've never tried either of them."

"You should've come with Mister Qui-Gon, then," Anakin said. "Mum always keeps a jug of bantha milk in the fridge. She says it's healthy." Obi-Wan noted Anakin's choice of words. *Keeps*, he thought. But putting it all into perspective, it had been so little time since Anakin had left Tatooine.

*I need to give him time*, he thought, quietly. Only time would numb the hurt of separation, and it seemed overly cruel to insist that Anakin curb even the subconscious habit of referring to his mother as part of his present.

He almost laughed to himself at the irony. Who was he to tell Anakin that he had to put his mother firmly in the past when Obi-Wan himself could not even begin to let go of Qui-Gon? If letting go of attachments was the Jedi way, then it was a path he was still walking imperfectly, of late. The Order did not expect perfection: that much was true. *We are not saints but seekers*, Jedi Master Sajhe Kass had written, and it was a phrase that had cut Obi-Wan to the quick, even as he'd read it as a young Padawan.

But how could he begin to guide Anakin in the shedding of attachments if he struggled—however imperfectly—with the same task?

It was a path they were going to have to walk together, Obi-Wan knew; he would have to keep letting go until he stopped thinking of his loss, until the thought was no longer quite so accompanied by pain, until everything stopped immediately eliciting memories of his time with his Master.

How long had it taken Qui-Gon to come to terms with Tahl's death?

It was a shift he could not pinpoint in retrospect; even now, sifting through his memories.

"Where are we having the picnic later?"

Obi-Wan wrested his attention back to the present moment. "You'll see," he said, smiling with effort. It felt like he was broken glass. "I've found a place on the map that shouldn't be too far from the Ersken estates. Patience, my very young apprentice." He glanced up at the sky, but it was a clear blue, with a few puffy clouds lazily drifting across its expanse. "At least it's the perfect weather for a picnic."
A worker greeted them, at the door of the manor, and guided them through the house towards the airly verendah at the back, with a clear view of the looming mountains. Sirdaé Erksen met them there. Her hair was tied back loosely and clasped at the nape of her neck, and a light woven shawl of fine Pashmin wool draped about her shoulders.

"Jedi Kenobi," she greeted. She glanced over at Anakin. "And of course, you're his student, Anakin Skywalker. All of Naboo has heard about it. So, I presume you want to talk about the attacks?"

Obi-Wan inclined his head in a nod. "Yes, of course. Thank you for taking some time out to speak with me."

She motioned to the wooden table and chairs at the verendah. "Please, sit. I'll call for some refreshments—have you ever tried Erksen wine?"

"I've never had the opportunity," Obi-Wan said, to which Sirdaé clucked and said, disapprovingly, "Then you must taste it, Jedi Kenobi. I insist," and asked the house worker to bring glasses of the blue, and juice for the student.

"Maric told me about the incident at the parade," Sirdaé said, quietly, as they waited. "I would never have expected things to get so bad." She sighed. "First the Trade Federation, now this. A terrible year for Naboo, all in all."

Maric must have been the golden-haired youth who had represented the Erksen at the victory celebrations, Obi-Wan thought, remembering the members of the Five who had been present. "Were you otherwise occupied?"

Sirdaé nodded. "I would have come in person, otherwise. Unfortunately, there were ongoing difficulties with the negotiations over our exports to the Chommell sector, and my presence was needed. Maric's a good boy, but he's still inexperienced."

"Your heir?"

"In a manner of speaking," Sirdaé agreed. "He's actually my nephew." Little of the formality with which she had spoken to Queen Amidala, now: she was making an effort to seem approachable and honest, although her expressions remained cold and distant. Obi-Wan had the impression that it was a carefully-considered approach. Ruthless, the information on the data-stick had said. Obi-Wan didn't doubt it for a second.

The worker returned with a platter of cheese, a few glasses, and bottle of wine, the surface of the glass just faintly clouded. Anakin was proferred a glass of juice, while Sirdaé worked open the bottle and poured them both some of the pale blue Erksen wine of Naboo.

Obi-Wan had not been one for wine; nevertheless, his training with Qui-Gon took over, as he managed to sample it, and offer a few polite comments, to his host's pleasure. He remembered Qui-Gon holding forth on the vineyards of Serenno, and laughing as he downed bowls of rakiss with the nomads of Ferghun, matching them bowl for bowl, until they spoke approvingly of the tenacity of the Jedi.

Memory. You never escaped it; the glimmer of melancholy blue in the wineglass. He set his glass down for the moment, and said, "Do you export this, or is this mostly for local consumption?"

"Our Cortán variety is especially popular in the Chommell sector," she explained, "That's the one you're drinking. On Naboo, they prefer sweet wines—so we do have orchards of shurra fruit, and strawberries."
"I see," Obi-Wan said. "Has the Cortán been increasing in popularity?"

She was trying to figure out what he was driving at, Obi-Wan knew, so he did his best to frame it as idle curiosity about wines, nothing more. "If things go well," Sirdaé said, "We hope to penetrate the market in the Hyphiss sector next." Which was the neighbouring sector, and a non-answer.

He helped himself to a piece of cheese, and was surprised at the rich, crumbly taste, with a strong aftertaste that almost had his eyes watering. "That's shaak cheese," Sirdaé said, noticing his reaction. "Most offworlders aren't used to it."

"So I see," Obi-Wan muttered, because it was the most non-committal comment he could manage at this point. "Do you mostly work through local exporters, or sector ones?"

Sirdaé studied him, her pale eyes hard. She said, "We don't go through the Trade Federation as a distributor, if that's what you're asking."

Another tack, then. Obi-Wan smiled. "Hardly. My sense is that the Trade Federation is highly-unpopular on Naboo, in light of recent events. And in any case, their business practices often leave much to be desired." There were sayings about how the only Neimodian worth trusting was a dead Neimodian; what was more astonishing was that most of those sayings were Neimodian.

She gave the barest hint of a smile. "That is indeed true. We would not gain much from working through the Trade Federation. Our distributors are largely local, although we have a few on Iphaen and Kiroen." She named two other planets in the Chommell sector. "On Naboo, we mostly work through Uitil Distributors, and Teno Fine Goods."

Interesting.

"Have you heard of Edaan Corp?" Obi-Wan asked.

She hesitated. It was not for very long; a millisecond, at most, but Obi-Wan was a Jedi, and he was trained to pick out that very sort of thing. "No," she said, taking her sip from her wineglass. "I'm afraid I haven't heard of it."

Several possibilities presented themselves to him at this point in time; Obi-Wan chose two of them and began. He nudged Anakin—a light touch, in the Force, but the boy sensed it, nonetheless, and stiffened.

"What is it, Anakin?" he asked, affecting the demeanour of a weary Knight, burdened with an extremely trying apprentice.

"Need the 'fresher," Anakin muttered, squirming under the combined regard of both Sirdaé and Obi-Wan himself. Anakin, Obi-Wan thought approvingly, was a quick study, but they'd discussed and rehearsed this on their way to the Ersken holdings.

He pressed his lips together in a tight disapproving line, and said, to Sirdaé, "I apologise to further impose upon your hospitality, but would it be possible—?"

"Of course," Sirdaé said graciously, and called for the worker to show Anakin to the 'fresher. As they left, Obi-Wan leaned back in his chair and took up where they'd left off.

"It's unfortunate, then," Obi-Wan sighed. "Edaan Corp came up several times in our investigations, and they primarily work in distributing Ersken wines—probably your Cortán—and Velarra minerals, though they've only branched out to the latter of late."
"Then it is a falsehood," Sirdaé said, firmly. "We do not do business with Edaan Corp, nor do we know of Edaan Corp."

It was a stern denial, which stood out all the more in its implacability. She knew of Edaan Corp, Obi-Wan could tell. But she was also firm in denying any connection between Edaan Corp and the Ersken. Why? What gains did she get from this?

"Let me offer a possibility," Obi-Wan said. "The Ersken do not do business with Edaan Corp. But one of your number had floated the idea, previously. Had mentioned that they were looking into yet another local distributor—and why not? They were, perhaps, left in charge of the collaboration with Edaan Corp. And here we are now. Could I be right?"

A flicker of unease, that Obi-Wan only sensed through the Force. "I think," Sirdaé Ersken said, firmly, "You're dealing in unsubstantiated speculation, Jedi Kenobi. I think that this is entirely inappropriate. The loyalties of the Ersken have never been in doubt."

Obi-Wan offered her a thin smile. "We were merely speaking of Edaan Corp," he said, knowing. "Interesting how loyalties have suddenly come into the picture."

It was at this point that both the worker and Anakin re-appeared, Anakin squirming and yelping, "Let me go, you koochoo!" and unleashing a tirade of Huttish profanities on the worker which, in a warped way, was extremely amusing because nobody else seemed to understand what he was saying, even if Anakin's outrage was translating clearly across linguistic boundaries.

"He was spying on you, Mistress," the worker said, flatly, depositing Anakin in a squirming heap at the table. "I caught him trying to read your correspondence."

"We will discuss how he got away from you later, Emer," Sirdaé said, her voice cool. "Well, Jedi Kenobi? Is this the way of the Jedi? To abuse their host's hospitality?"

At the same time, Anakin said, to Obi-Wan, his voice triumphant, "She knows about Edaan Corp! Maric's working with them!"

Obi-Wan said, calmly, "Well, of course I should not have been surprised. This amends our possibility—strictly hypothetical, of course. Maric approaches you with a lucrative offer to buy Ersken wines from a new local distributor, Edaan Corp. You presumably determine that Maric needs to learn to take on more responsibilities—he's your heir, after all—and bestow upon him the responsibility for the Edaan deal. At some point, you realise that the wine isn't actually being purchased by Edaan Corp—perhaps Ersken assets are even vanishing, without any sign of actual returns. And then you know that Maric is involved in something shady, and presumably, that there's something wrong with Edaan Corp. But what is it?" he met her eyes. "You were trying to protect Maric, weren't you?"

Assuming, of course, that Sirdaé hadn't known; that Sirdaé hadn't deliberately orchestrated this all as a means of having plausible deniability, with her nephew meant to take the fall should the twisted chain come to light.

He made a mental note: they would have to ask Ki-Adi-Mundi to investigate the Ersken accounts as well, for any irregularities that might show. They knew, now, that there was collaboration on some level between the Ersken and Edaan Corp—the only question was how deep that collaboration ran.

He could almost see the calculations coming to light; Sirdaé evaluating her possible options. Her eventual nod was not so much a concession as it was a deliberate play. "Yes, Jedi Kenobi," she said at last, her voice even. "Maric brought up Edaan Corp, and I delegated the task of brokering a deal to
him. We lost a good amount of our Cortán to the deal—it was an exceptionally bad deal, and the family had put him under discipline. It was considered that we should appoint someone else, maybe Ulié, to be the family heir, but Maric appeared contrite and had been working hard to redeem himself…"

He sensed her resignation in the Force, but it was mingled by a sense of ruthless calculation. Obi-Wan was not quite sure what to make of it.

"And?"

"And then the Trade Federation invaded. And the attacks happened—the last being the attack on the victory celebrations." Sirdaé exhaled. "Tell me, Jedi, am I supposed to think him responsible for that attack as well?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said, quite honestly. "But a number of mercenaries were involved. If the Ersken have lost track of any assets, it's quite possible some of it went to funding the mercenaries." He made no mention of Ren Yvar's own difficulties with regard to Junaka. "If you had Ulié in line to become family heir, though, then why protect Maric?"

"Have you never had family before?" Sirdaé asked; sharp, ironic.

Obi-Wan met that sting with a shrug. "I consider other members of the Order to be my family," he said, lightly. "And I consider Master Qui-Gon Jinn to be the closest I have to a father."

"You protect your own," Sirdaé said, and Obi-Wan thought of how hard he'd fought to find his Master, when he'd been kidnapped by Jenna Zan Arbor; how hard Qui-Gon had pushed them all when Tahl's life hung in the balance. He understood, of course, but Sirdaé Ersken, all reports said, was ruthless and calculating, and he sensed that even now; laced with emotions was that cold core of calculation, of determining which option was the best.

Best for what?

He said, "I didn't expect you to be driven by sentiment."

"One could say the same of the Jedi," Sirdaé said, and now her eyes flicked over to Anakin. Obi-Wan shifted slightly, and then wondered at the instinctive movement. Her lips quirked in an almost-smile. "You see?"

He acknowledged the point. "Even so. Given that Maric was in disgrace…"

Nothing seemed to ruffle Sirdaé's composure, even now. "Of course," Sirdaé acknowledged. "Maric was in disgrace. But what would that have meant? Stripping him of his rank as family heir. He would not have been cast out of the family, or," she raised an eyebrow, "Put on trial for treason, or at least potential collaboration. The Ersken stand by their own. Call it sentiment, if you like, but it's a principle the Five have always held fast to."

"And if it does come down to a trial?" Obi-Wan challenged. "Who will the Ersken side with, then?"

"Naboo, of course," Sirdaé said, quietly. "What else would you expect, Jedi Kenobi? We are Naboo, first, and the Five second. And we are loyal." She held his gaze, this time, clearly willing him to believe her.

Obi-Wan wasn't sure he did.

"Of course," he said, bowing his head in a deferential nod. And then, "I would very much like to
Anakin was practically squirming with impatience by the time they were walking back out to the landspeeder. "Did I do good?" he demanded, as soon as they'd left the chilly company of the worker behind.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "I should very much think so. Did you manage to save the correspondence?"

"Yup!" Anakin smirked. "I raided their local servers and uploaded it to my datapad. Wanna see?" he proferred it to Obi-Wan, but Obi-Wan held out a forestalling hand.

"Later, Anakin," he said. "But very well done."

Anakin felt an ember of warmth deep in the pit of his stomach. "It wasn't easy to get away from that guy," he confided in Obi-Wan. "I had to kick him in the shins and then run."

Obi-Wan did let out a chuckle of laughter. "Oh dear," he murmured. "Anakin, I take it that subtlety is not your strong suit."

"It worked," Anakin muttered, mildly offended. "Was I supposed to talk him into letting me go?"

"I would have preferred less attacks on anyone in Ersken property," Obi-Wan said, mildly. "Appropriate force includes unarmed physical attacks, as well as the use of the Force."

Anakin let out a gusty sigh. "Aren't the Jedi allowed to do anything at all?" he wanted to know, kicking at a few pieces of loose gravel on the path.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "From a certain point of view, yes." He seemed almost on the verge of telling Anakin something, but then changed his mind.

A thought struck Anakin, then. The woman had said that the person they were looking for—Maric—was in Theed. Did that mean…? "Are we missing our picnic after all?" he demanded, urgently. "I mean, she said he was in Theed and you said you wanted to speak to him, so does that mean we've got to go back even though it's a beautiful day for a picnic?"

Obi-Wan gave him an inscrutable look. "Would it be so bad if we did?" he wanted to know, as they reached the parked landspeeder.

"You promised," Anakin blurted out, because he didn't know what to say. Knew he had no power over this decision, knew that this was some kind of test, knew that he didn't care, he'd been looking forward to this so badly, and who knew or cared if it was a kind of attachment, a kind of letting go?

"I did," Obi-Wan said, calmly. "But we've also had this conversation before, haven't we? Sometimes, duty calls. And as Jedi, we must put our duty above our personal desires."

"But why?" Anakin said, wretchedly, even as he knew what the answer would be, attachment once again, the need to have your own personal desires and to cling to them above all else. Even as he knew he didn't like that answer, or want it.

Obi-Wan let out a heavy sigh. "Because that is the Jedi path, Anakin," he said, gently. "I've told you, again and again. The Jedi path is not easy: it is one of sacrifice, of learning to set aside the self and the needs of the self. Of learning to serve the Force and the greater galaxy around us."
"What happens if the Force and the galaxy disagree?" Anakin asked, wishing his voice was not so shaky, wishing he wasn't on the verge of frustrated, cheated tears. Wishing that the picnic hadn't meant so much to him, because he'd built up all his expectations on a lovely day with Obi-Wan and it just wasn't fair.

Obi-Wan said, "Then we hope that doesn't happen. Jedi have made...questionable choices, in difficult positions. All we can do is to hope for the wisdom to make the best of bad choices, in such times." He looked at Anakin. "And all we can hope is that we do not live in such times. But we do not get to make that choice. We can only live with the time that is given us, Anakin."

Anakin shivered. For some reason, those words felt...significant, for the lack of a better word.

Still, Obi-Wan's severe expression cracked slightly. "In any case, I have a call to make." He produced his comlink and entered in a code and waited. Finally, there was the sound that indicated his call had connected.

"Kenobi," said the annoyingly calm voice of the Jedi Gallia. "What's happening?"

Obi-Wan outlined the progress of the investigation thus far, in crisp, brief sentences: that they had discovered a connection between the Trade Federation and Edaan Corp, that they had reason to believe the Ersken were working with Edaan Corp, and that they needed time to get down to Theed, so would it be possible to dispatch another Jedi to speak with Maric, in case he made a run for it?

"Of course," Gallia said, simply. "I'll see to it, myself. I'll also ask Koon and Ki-Adi to go over the accounts of the Ersken. Send the files you've obtained to me. I presume you're not entirely certain of Sirdae Ersken herself?"

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan replied, motioning to Anakin, who transferred the files via tight-beam to his comlink, and from there, across the connection to Gallia. "I think her behaviour is almost entirely consistent with the alternate hypothesis that she set up Maric to take the fall, knowing that there was another Ersken in line to assume the role of family heir, should Maric end up being disinherited."

Gallia sighed. "Yes, of course," she said. "There are—unfortunate developments, Kenobi. Mace Windu and Even Piell have managed to trace the source of the mercenaries. Depa is tracing the origins of the weapons, while Eeth Koth and Saesee Tiin are investigating the ostensible connection to the Youngbloods."

"And Master Yoda?"

"Persuading the Senatorial Guard and the palace guard not to have collective hysterics," Gallia said, wryly. "I can't blame them—no sitting Chancellor in the history of the Republic has ever faced attacks in their very first week in—"

Obi-Wan suddenly stiffened, and cut in, "My apologies, Master, but this has been bothering me."

Silence, punctuated by the crackle of static. Gallia was waiting.

"The attack was—ostensibly—done by Junaka, sympathetic to the Youngbloods, who are extremely jaded about the existing system of Naboo and the overall structure of the Republic."

"Yes. What are you thinking, Kenobi?"

"I'm thinking," Obi-Wan said, carefully, "That if the Youngbloods were truly hostile to the Republic, if Junaka truly had such motivations—then why attack the Queen? It was known that the Chancellor would be present, and even if it wasn't known, presented with the opportunity to bloody the
Republic's nose, Junaka should have taken it."

"Perhaps he felt that killing Palpatine would achieve nothing—Palpatine, after all, had just assumed office. Perhaps he was friendly with the man, from his days in Palpatine's office."

"But Junaka ostensibly left because he was disillusioned with politics. That seems to imply a certain disregard for what Palpatine was achieving."

"Perhaps," Gallia conceded, with a static-laced sigh. "The waters are considerably clouded, Kenobi."

"I know, Master. Would you have me return to Theed?"

Anakin stiffened.

"Not immediately," Gallia said, at last. "The representatives from the Velarra and the Helukala won't be immediately available until the evening. The state dinner for tonight has been postponed to tomorrow, and Depa's working with the palace guards and Senatorial Guards to ensure no further breaches happen."

"I understand, Master. May the Force be with you."

"May the Force be with you," said Gallia, and then, "Enjoy your picnic, Kenobi." The transmission cut out.

Anakin felt chills along his spine. "But…" he stammered. "But…how did she know?"

Obi-Wan looked amused. "I met her in the kitchens this morning," he informed Anakin. "She wondered what I was doing with a picnic basket."

"And she's letting us go? Just like this?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan confirmed. "Ordinarily, if we were the only Jedi team on Naboo, we would've had to postpone the picnic in favour of rushing back to Theed to intercept Maric Ersken. However, we are not the only Jedi team on Naboo—far from it—so there's hardly any need to behave as if we are. And furthermore, I was not in fact trying to persuade Master Gallia to take over the investigation. I wouldn't put it past Sirdaë Ersken to warn Maric, nor would I put it past Maric to wise up to what's going on and attempt to flee. Stranger things have happened, and all in all, I'd rather not let him slip through our fingers if I can help it. Master Gallia is well-placed to intercept him, and highly respected as a diplomat. She'll know if he tries to lie to her."

Anakin said, slyly, "It just so happens that the best way to do things is for us to have a picnic?"

"Quite," Obi-Wan agreed, deadpan. "So, shall we go?"

The palace librarian had supplied him with the latest surveys of the Lake Country, and at his request, had even recommended a few sites for a picnic. Obi-Wan had chosen Marr Lake; the place where Jedi Master Visas Marr had once built for herself a home and lived in self-imposed isolation.

Marr Lake was two hours away from the Ersken estates, by landspeeder, and Obi-Wan reached out to the Force to take the edge off his tiredness and felt the vibrant liveliness of the Living Force flood into him. Of course: out here, the Living Force was stronger than anything, generated by the complexity of the cultivated Naboo wilderness.
Anakin was peering out at the landscape as the mountains and vineyards faded into the background; as they traversed the snaking mountain paths to emerge into the valley that Marr Lake resided in.

"Where are we going?" he'd asked more than once. Each time, Obi-Wan had cast his apprentice an amused look and merely said, "Patience."

Each time, Anakin had withdrawn into a silence that was only slightly petulant. The natural beauty of Naboo was clearly appealing to him; was, perhaps, even an extremely exciting new thing to him. The picnic basket was once again balanced on his lap.

Should he have done it? All words aside: coming back to Theed would have allowed them to pursue whatever investigative ends there were. Qui-Gon had told him more than once that there was no point in second-guessing a decision already made: his attention was best spent focusing on the here and now, but here and now, he was Anakin's teacher. And it certainly seemed only appropriate that he continue to ask himself what was the best way to train Anakin, to teach him what he needed to know.

Should he have insisted on returning to Theed? Anakin needed to learn to set aside his desires, Obi-Wan knew. He'd sensed the boy's frustration, pouring off him in waves, when Anakin had confronted the possibility of having to call off their picnic. And yet wasn't it unnecessary cruelty, to teach the lesson when the situation hadn't called for it?

_The mission will teach what I cannot_, he thought, resolving to set aside non-attachment for another day. Lessons were not taught—or learned—for the sake of it, but because they emerged from the Jedi path.

"What's that house?" Anakin piped up. The landspeeder was running along a bumpy stone path now, as Marr Lake loomed up ahead, and Obi-Wan made out the shape of a wooden cabin in the distance.

"We're heading for Marr Lake," Obi-Wan said, and waited to see if Anakin would recognise the name.

Anakin frowned, tapping his fingers restlessly against the landspeeder door as he struggled to recall, and then brightened. "Visas Marr. She's the one you were talking about, with Falce Valarin, right? The Jedi who lived in the Lake Country?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Marr Lake was named after her. She lived here a long time, in self-imposed isolation."

"But why?"

"Why the lake was named after her, or why she chose to live alone?"

"Why she chose to live alone," Anakin said. "Isn't that... Isn't that horrible? I mean, Mum and Kitster used to talk about some of the crazy hermits who wanted to live deep in the desert, but... I'd think I'd go crazy, with no one to talk to, and nothing to do."

Obi-Wan considered that for a long moment. "Some Jedi feel the need for solitude," he said, eventually. He guided the landspeeder to an unobtrusive parking spot and shut down the engines. "They feel it... clarifies things. There's something to be said for it; living somewhere quiet, away from the noise and bustle of the world, with nothing to come between you and the Force."

"Oh," Anakin said, but of course, he didn't quite understand. Not yet. _You'll learn_, Obi-Wan thought, among other things, as he locked the landspeeder and picked up the picnic basket.
The trail to Marr Lake was cultivated wilderness: rough rocks laid down in a simple if uneven trail that had Anakin hopping a few times to maintain his balance. A wooden sign with multiple arrows pointed out various directions: where the trail circled around to lead into a forest walk; where the trail approached the shore of the crystalline lake, and where the trail proceeded towards the lone cabin on the other side of the lake.

"Would you like to eat first?" Obi-Wan asked his young charge. "Or would you prefer to see the house first?"

"We get to do both?" Anakin asked, in no small amount of disbelief.

Obi-Wan checked his chrono. "Yes," he said. "We have time for both."

"Oh," Anakin said. "Well, then, I'd like to eat first. Are you okay with that?"

Obi-Wan smiled. "Then we shall do just that," he pronounced. Closer to the lake, the soft grass gave way to sand and gravel. Instead, Obi-Wan skirted the shore and selected a springy tuft of grass with a fine view of both lake and house, and then laid out the picnic blanket.

Anakin all but flung himself down, as they sat, and Obi-Wan unpacked the culinary wonders that had emerged from the palace kitchens: sandwiches, still steaming hot from the plasti-pack, a tureen of broth that made even Obi-Wan's mouth water, buttered pastries, sweets, and fresh fruit, among them, oranges.

He laid out the abundant spread before them, noticing with amusement that Anakin was barely restraining himself from tucking-in until Obi-Wan had set everything in place. As soon as Obi-Wan opened the plasti-pack of pies, Anakin’s hand shot out with Jedi-like speed and snatched one up.

"S'good," he declared, after a big bite. "You should try it!"

"I will," Obi-Wan said, and made good on his word by selecting his own pie. He didn't quite recognise the filling; it was a sweet fruit of some kind, but as he ate, the candied sweetness was replaced by a faint sourness—a sort of tangy aftertaste on his tongue.

He wondered what it was. Perhaps he should ask the kitchens, when they returned to Theed. Yet another point to catalogue, if only for Reeft's sake. He smiled faintly at the thought of his Dressalian friend's outrage when he'd learn that the aftermath of Obi-Wan's Naboo mission had involved a great deal of eating.

Qui-Gon had once speculated that it was a phase Reeft would grow out of. Time had proven both Qui-Gon and Binn Ibes wrong: as far as Reeft was concerned, food was life, and his friends had taken to providing him with information on the various kinds of foods they'd encountered, and even recipes.

Anakin said, quietly, "There was a place back home that was really good for picnics. There was a huge old tree there, which was why we liked to have a picnic there. On a clear day, if you closed your eyes, and there wasn't too much sand or dust, Kitster and I—sometimes, Amee and I—we used to pretend we were on some other green planet. I took Mum there, too."

Obi-Wan was silent, listening.

Anakin was looking at him, as if he expected Obi-Wan to say something.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said, gently. "I hope you understand that I'm not your friend." He saw a stricken look on Anakin's features; fleeting, of course, as the boy tried to hide his distress. It was cruel, of
course. It was also necessary. "Not like Kitster, or Amee. Not like your mother. You'll likely meet your own friends, of course, once we return to the Temple but I am not your friend and more importantly, I cannot be your friend. I am supposed to be your Master, your teacher, and this means that our relationship cannot be that of a friend to another."

"Why not?" Anakin asked, shakily.

"Because I am responsible for you," Obi-Wan said, simply. "My responsibility is to train you, to teach you discipline, and at times, I will have to give you orders you strongly dislike, or to even discipline you, and I promise you at those times you will think very much ill of me."

"But you and Mister Qui-Gon…" 

"That was between us," Obi-Wan said, a little more coldly than he should have. "That was past, and even then, I deferred to Qui-Gon, in the end. When we return to the Temple, we must become teacher and student in truth, Anakin. I can be your friend or your teacher. But not both."

"Oh," Anakin said, at last, in a very small voice. "I guess I see now. Master."

A grudging surrender, Obi-Wan knew. The traditional Jedi honorific hung in the air between them, bearing both the weight of Anakin's past and the weight now of their forced separation. He turned back to the broth, blowing on it to cool it.

It was necessary, he knew, to make sure that their relation was in its proper place. You could not build anew until the foundations had been properly cleared, properly prepared. But he couldn't help feeling as if in gaining clarity, he had also lost something equally valuable.

Chapter End Notes

And now we come to one of the moments that first inspired 'In All The World' - three years and almost 90k+ words later! In All The World was heavily inspired by the approach of Katherine Addison's 'The Goblin Emperor', and the final conversation between Anakin and Obi-Wan in this chapter pays homage to a conversation between Maia and his protectors there. Anakin is looking for a friend. Obi-Wan cannot be that figure. Not now, in any case. As they grow, their relationship will change. But - and this was probably not done in the best way on Obi-Wan's part - boundaries have to be set.

There's also a brief homage to Gandalf's speech on having to do our best with the time that is given us from Lord of the Rings in here.

Again, I'm happy to answer questions or address comments, so feel free to ask away! At this point in time, I have sufficiently resolved the hanging plot issues and am pleased to announce that there will be a regular updating schedule of each Tuesday until the end of Part 1. The fic will go into intermission for a shorter duration after that, but I'll discuss that when we get to it. And then on to Part 2, or the Temple arc.

As usual, thanks to all who have commented, questioned, or in some way, followed and supported this fic. May the Force be with you all.

Cheers,
Ammar
Chapter Eighteen: Perspective and Baggage

Anakin's cheeks burned as he trudged behind Obi-Wan, on their way to the house. The remnants of their meal weighed down in his stomach like gravel. Of course, he told himself. What else had he expected? He was nothing to Obi-Wan: just the boy who had been taken on board the starship by Qui-Gon.

Just baggage.

Why had he thought that Obi-Wan was starting to warm to him?

Because Obi-Wan had smiled and acted as if he cared, of course. Because he'd gone out of his way to make sure Anakin was fine, but now it was just part and parcel of his having to teach Anakin, which meant it hadn't been about Anakin, after all. Not really. Anakin hated that, feeling like a squirming sandfly grub.

Obi-Wan searched around for a handle and then worked the sliding door open. Anakin supposed that the deceased Visas Marr hadn't been much for technology. The house itself was simple, and if it hadn't been made of wood, Anakin might have thought it resembled the slave quarters on Tatooine.

A weathered bronze plaque on the door was written both in Naboo script and Aurek-Besh, stating that the late Jedi Master Visas Marr had lived in the cabin during the reign of Queen Phaisté. There was more about boring history stuff, and Anakin resentfully glanced away from the plaque and followed Obi-Wan into the house.

It was small, but not quite claustrophobic. Cosy, Anakin decided. That was the word for it. There were scarcely any furnishings, and those that remained were roughly-hewn wood. For seemingly no reason, Obi-Wan chuckled at a charred-wood chair.

"What's so funny?" Anakin asked, in spite of himself.

"Don't you recognise the charring?" Obi-Wan asked him.

Anakin frowned at it. He didn't, he wanted to say, but…

"I suppose Master Marr really needed a chair that day," Obi-Wan murmured. "If you look at the black lines of the chair, those are actually scorch marks. She used her lightsaber to cut the wood to what she needed."

Anakin gawked. "Don't touch it," Obi-Wan added. "Most of the house has been left exactly as it would have been in Master Marr's day, but the curator won't be happy if we've been fiddling around with things."

"How would they know?"

Obi-Wan motioned, and startled, Anakin followed the direction of his gesture and caught sight of the camera embedded in the corner of the ceiling. "Oh." It was hard to stay angry at Obi-Wan when they were already talking, but he was determined not to make it easy for the Jedi.
It was fascinating though, in a way. Boring, sure: Anakin wasn't all that curious about how Visas Marr had lived, but Obi-Wan took him through the house, triggering holographic displays at various points, which demonstrated bits and pieces of the dead Jedi's routine. He wondered if Obi-Wan was trying to tell him something, but it seemed like that was just it: that Obi-Wan thrived off this contact with the past; with the dust and detritus of history, and he didn't understand that at all.

They paused at the simple pallet, the thin blanket slightly upturned, and not for the first time, Anakin did admire the artifice of the place: the careful illusion that Visas Marr could've stepped back into the house at any point in time, ready to resume her life from the point in time it had been frozen at.

"She wrote Meditations in Exile," Obi-Wan said, at one point, examining a writing desk, and Anakin blinked, wondering why the name sounded so familiar before he dredged it from the memory of a conversation Obi-Wan had had with Falce Valarin. "She wrote many other things, of course, but the Meditations were her most famous work. It's a collection of essays and papers—part-memoir—surrounding her life spent travelling with the Exile, and reflections of her life at Marr Lake." He gave a dry smile. "If you're really that interested, there's copies available in the Archives, back in the Temple."

Anakin wasn't that interested, but he wasn't about to tell Obi-Wan that. "Who's the Exile?" he asked, instead.

Obi-Wan chuckled. "Don't ever let Bant—or Master Nu—catch you saying that."

"Why?"

"Because the Exile's identity is a matter of debate," Obi-Wan said, simply. "We know that there was an extremely influential Jedi known as the Exile during the period of the Sith Triumverate—you'll learn briefly about this during history classes—but that Jedi was almost always referred to as the Exile in our historical texts. Scholars, historians, and Archivists have shed much digital ink and even crossed lightsabers over the actual identity of the Exile. Perhaps...myself, I think we will never truly know."

Anakin thought that was the best answer, because he really wasn't sure how people could actually get to the point of fighting over whether some dead Exile was supposed to be someone or someone else, and he said so.

Obi-Wan laughed. "As I said, don't let Bant or Master Nu catch you saying that. These Archivists take history extremely seriously, and treat the fact that no one seems to know who the Exile was—among other mysteries—as a point of personal offense."

Anakin didn't know who Bant or Master Nu were, but he wasn't inclined to ask at this point in time. There were too many things associated with being a Jedi, he thought grumpily, even as they trooped past the humble nook that had served Visas Marr as a kitchen, and he was seriously starting to wonder how they ever got around to smiting things with their lightsabers.

The drive back to Theed was fast; Obi-Wan carefully pushed the landspeeder as much as he dared, although Anakin was dozing off in his seat. He woke the boy only after they arrived once more in Theed and returned the landspeeder to the palace.

"Huh? Mmmhn," Anakin slurred groggily as he woke up. It took him a few long minutes to realise they were no longer in the countryside, and that the sky had now darkened with the impending evening.
"We've reached Theed," Obi-Wan said. "If you're too tired to carry on, you may go to your room and rest."

"What're you gonna be doing?"

"I will be speaking to the Velarra and the Helukala. Both this evening, if I can manage it." Obi-Wan paused. "There will probably be food," he added. "It's a dinner appointment with the Velarra."

Anakin frowned. "I mean, I'm your student, right? Isn't it my job to go along with you?"

"Not all the time," Obi-Wan replied. "And not when you're tired. Although admittedly, you won't always have a choice about that last part."

Anakin fought back a yawn, clearly considering his options. "I'm going," he announced. "Especially if there's food."

"Good," Obi-Wan said. "Then go get cleaned up. I'll meet you outside your room in an hour."

"Where're you going?"

Obi-Wan hefted the picnic basket. "To return this to the kitchens," he said, eyebrow raised. "With my commendations."

"Oh," Anakin said. "Could you… could you…"

Obi-Wan waited. Anakin shifted his weight from one foot to another, struggling with the words.

"Could you thank them for me? I mean, they didn't really have to, and I know we're not friends and all but the picnic was nice and we had that, and I want to let them know I liked it. A lot."

"I can do that," Obi-Wan promised. "Go. Get a shower, Anakin. Where we're going, they'll look down on us if we present ourselves as scruffy, unwashed nerf-herders." He remembered with a faint smile Qui-Gon telling him the same thing. But back then, he'd replied, cheekily, "But what, Master, aren't you a scruffy, unwashed—"

"Insolent," Qui-Gon had growled, flicking water at Obi-Wan. "Go scrub yourself clean as penance. Or I shall be forced to dunk you repeatedly in cold water until the urge to amuse your tongue fades."

"But Master, a Jedi only resorts to violence in extremis," Obi-Wan responded, innocently.

Qui-Gon replied, deadpan, "Not scruffy, unwashed nerf-herders."

Anakin only nodded, and padded off in the direction of his room. There was still that distance—partly self-imposed, he knew—making itself known at times like this. They were Master and Padawan; not officially, but it was as good as done. But even then, they were not yet—quite—truly a Master-Padawan team.

It took time, Obi-Wan knew. But he couldn't help remembering the ease with which he'd connected with Qui-Gon, even from the very beginning. His apprenticeship had its share of bumps and rocky bits, but in the end, they'd had a deep and strong bond on which to fall back on, and Obi-Wan wanted that with Anakin, for Anakin's sake. He wanted the boy to have what he'd had.

But he couldn't rush it. And comparing it with Obi-Wan's own apprenticeship was only going to blind him to what they did have.

And what did they have?
His thoughts were beginning to go around in pointless circles, now. Obi-Wan shook his head, mostly
to himself, and let out a quiet sigh. There was no point in thinking about it, not like this. He would
have to focus on what he could do, here and now, and to leave the rest to the Force.

Still, a thread of disquiet followed him, even as he began to head for the palace kitchens, basket
tucked under his arm.

Jurité Velarra met them in a restaurant so expensive that it would have cost Obi-Wan several months
of his stipend. Of course, now that he was a Jedi Knight, his monthly stipend would increase. But
even then, the cost of dining at such a restaurant was enough to make Obi-Wan wince.

Anakin was simply boggled by the grandeur of the restaurant, even as the Jedi were shown to a
private dining room, where Jurité Velarra already awaited them. A show of power? Obi-Wan
wondered. Or an attempt at bribery?

The two, of course, were not exclusive. A younger Obi-Wan would have gawked at just how much
the restaurant oozed privilege and exclusivity; at how much wealth beings squandered and flung
away. Now, he hid his weary cynicism with a Jedi Knight's veneer and merely smiled pleasantly as
Jurité greeted them and invited them to order what they wished from the menu.

Anakin scrutinised his menu with the demeanour of someone thoroughly overwhelmed by the task at
hand, and then looked positively scandalised as the waiter swooped in to unfold the napkin and
spread it over Anakin's lap. Obi-Wan merely scanned the menu and briefly ordered something safe
and neutral and (relatively) inexpensive. Jurité was allowing her wealth to make a statement. Obi-
Wan chose to make another kind of statement.

Either they didn't have meals for children at this establishment, or they had figured that Anakin, as a
Jedi in training, wasn't to be treated as a child. Obi-Wan glanced over at Anakin, and said, quietly,
"Do you need help?"

Anakin swallowed hard. "Yes," he muttered, grudgingly relinquishing the menu. Obi-Wan glanced
at it once more and smiled.

"Done," he said, and placed an order for Anakin. The waiter—awaiting diffidently by the side—
recited their orders back at them, and then took off for the kitchens.

"I heard about the Ersken heir," Jurité Velarra said, with a quiet tsk. "Terrible business, that."

"I would be interested in what you heard," Obi-Wan replied. "My apprentice and I unfortunately
only spoke to Sirdaë Ersken, and are…poorly-informed as to recent events."

Jurité raised a dark eyebrow but assented gracefully. "Maric Ersken tried to flee Theed," she said,
and if she didn't betray any trace of glee, Obi-Wan could still sense a faint undercurrent of
satisfaction in the Force. He wondered at it; perhaps there were tensions he wasn't aware of, between
the Velarra and the Ersken. "He was caught at the spaceport by one of your Masters—I believe it
was Master Koon."

Obi-Wan nodded in understanding. If Adi Gallia had ended up mobilising Plo Koon as well, Maric's
attempt at flight would not have gone well. Among his other skills, Plo Koon was a superb and
daring pilot, more than ready to forestall any attempts to escape in the air.

"He's in custody now, and my understanding is that the Ersken are…in an uncomfortable situation."

"Why?" Obi-Wan asked. The waiter returned with a bottle of wine and began to pour; first in Jurité's
glass, of course, and then in Obi-Wan's.

"Why?" Jurité asked. She laughed. "Because they can't decide how much they want to disown him, of course. They could do that: disavow all connections and declare that Maric was his own agent. But Sirdaé is no fool: either she was unspeakably careless in allowing Maric full control over the project, or she was thoroughly misled by her own heir, which is a subspecies of folly on its own…"

"Or she collaborated," Obi-Wan finished for her. "I see."

Jurité's dark eyes were knowing. She sipped from her wine glass. "Yes," she said, softly. "I believe you do. And of course, the Erskens absolutely despise not knowing which way to leap. It's one thing if this were an investigation conducted by planetary security. But when the Jedi themselves are speaking to Maric, then well…” she set down her wine glass. "It's difficult to know exactly what is going on."

"I notice you do not find yourself overly-troubled by their predicament."

Her eyes gleamed. "No," Jurité replied, with brutal honesty. "I don't. It's their problem, not mine, and an old woman is allowed some trace of satisfaction at seeing the mighty Erskens dig themselves into a hole."

Briefly, Obi-Wan considered the possibility of a set-up, but then just as briskly set it aside for the moment. There was no point borrowing trouble, at this stage. He would simply have to keep his eyes—and ears—open.

Fleeing, though. It was a bad sign, all in all, and it didn't bode well for Maric, although the fact that it seemed to be an act of panic—an amateur's mistake, even—didn't sit well with Obi-Wan. At every turn, they seemed to be running into brash, callow conspirators, rather than any sort of tavok master. His instincts told him that those were catspaws: they'd been used, and then discarded upon outliving their usefulness. But none of them were the mind behind all that was going on.

The waiter returned with a basket of steaming hot rolls, which Anakin tore into with obvious relish. Obi-Wan shot him a stern look, and Anakin sighed, picking up the absolutely wrong knife to butter his rolls with. Jurité noticed, for the crow's feet about her eyes crinkled with amusement, and Obi-Wan added deportment lessons to the very, very, very long list of classes Anakin needed to have at the Temple.

Alternatively, they would just have to keep him away from diplomatic missions for a long time. Not that Anakin was in danger of being sent out on such missions anytime soon.

"Is there much hostility, then, between the Erskens and the Velarra?"

"Nothing substantial," Jurité said. She slit her own rolls open and buttered them with firm, steady strokes. "And nothing that we'd set each other up for. Would the Erskens laugh, though, if we had a bad business venture? Undoubtedly."

"What is the source of this mild hostility, then?"

Jurité said, "Competition. Power. Isn't it always? The Erskens are ascendent, now. They're the first among the Five; surely it hasn't escaped you that Sirdaé Erskens tried to speak for all of the Five, that day. The Yvar are desperately cleaning house to make sure that security chief of Ren Yvar's hasn't done anything untoward, and the Erskens are fumbling. All in all, it looks like a good time for the Velarra to be more assertive."

Obi-Wan said, "If the Velarra are completely uninvolved."
Jurité shot him a cold smile. "Yes," she agreed. "But let us save such direct talk for dessert, hmm?"

Anakin was thoroughly bewildered and out of his element. This restaurant was a little like the palace: so grand that it made you feel small and lost. He was presented with a perplexing array of eating utensils, and Anakin wasn't at all sure why he needed so many forks or knives or spoons.

Obi-Wan, though. He handled the medley of utensils with a polished grace that seemed a perfect part of their surroundings. Anakin grimly studied the hostile array of eating utensils before he decided to just stick with whatever struck his fancy. In any case, it wasn't as if Jurité Velarra was really looking at him: if anything, while her eyes did flick to Anakin on occasion, she spent considerably more time talking with Obi-Wan, and it was enough to drive Anakin nuts.

Talking. Did the Jedi do so much of it? He was being unfair, he knew, but it had been a miserable, tiring day, and as far as Anakin was concerned, there had been practically no lightsaber action at all, and then there was Marr Lake, and all of that seemed to say that the holodramas were pretty bad at telling people what being a Jedi was all about, and maybe Kitster had been right to tell him he needed to keep his head on the ground and firmly out of the clouds.

It was important work, though, wasn't it? Someone was trying to kill Padmé, had tried more than once, and it seemed extremely important to Anakin that they cut through this tangled mess and find whoever it was and stop them.

His meal came, soon enough. Anakin frowned down at it. It was some kind of bird, he knew as much, with its crisp skin a rich brown. He poked at it, dubiously, before slicing off part of it with the same knife he'd grabbed earlier. It was sweet and spicy; he tasted orange and some other stuff Anakin couldn't have, for the life of him, named. He thought he recognised the greens and tubers on the plate, but they had been carefully sliced and arranged in patterns meant to intimidate, with their complexity. As if you weren't supposed to ruin it by eating it.

Meanwhile, Obi-Wan was calmly eating his own meal, which Anakin also did not recognise, while holding forth on the difficulties of acquiring new mining equipment in the aftermath of the Trade Federation invasion.

"I wouldn't have thought you familiar with mining operations," Jurité Velarra said, at last. Her meal seemed to be some sort of fancy salad, like Obi-Wan's. "It seems you are a man of many talents indeed, Jedi Kenobi."

Obi-Wan bowed his head. "Hardly," he replied. "I had the dubious fortune of seeing mining operations from the inside while I was on Bandomeer. Offworld, you understand."


"The Jedi exist to serve, Mistress Velarra. I'm certain you're aware of that." Something had passed between the two of them, in that exchange. Something Anakin did not understand; could not understand.

"What's Offworld?" he asked. The moment collapsed; shattered, as they both looked at him.

"A mining company, Anakin," Obi-Wan said. "They used to be a significant corporate entity but collapsed in the aftermath of…investigations into their mishandling of the natural resources of Telos." There was something there Obi-Wan wasn't telling him. Anakin knew that much.

"Offworld was known for ruthless and underhanded business practices," Jurité Velarra said, and added, dryly, "Even among those whose hands can barely said to be clean. Offworld, for instance,
trafficked in slaves, buying them in significant numbers from Togorian pirates and raiders in order to
drive down operating costs on planets such as Weqlun and Bandomeer." She nodded to Obi-Wan.
"You were acquainted with that, were you not?"

Anakin blinked. "You were a slave?" he demanded, hotly. "And you didn't tell me?"

Obi-Wan set down his fork and knife, spread out his hands in a hapless gesture. "Would it have
changed anything?" he asked, quietly. "It was only for a while, Anakin. Until Qui-Gon came for
me." As he had come for Anakin. "Being a Jedi is not safe. You may be imprisoned, tortured, even
executed. Jedi have been seized and killed before. Tahl—Qui-Gon's closest friend—was blinded.
Master Yaddle spent centuries imprisoned on Mawan. Jedi are just as vulnerable to enslavement,
torture, degradation, indignities and utter, utter humiliation—perhaps even more so, because breaking
a Jedi is a powerful symbol to anyone looking to establish their credentials as someone not to be
trifled with."

It was the matter-of-fact way in which Obi-Wan had said it that made it worse. As if Anakin
should've known, should've been expected to know. As if it shouldn't mean something to Anakin
that Obi-Wan had experienced it, if only for a while. That Obi-Wan had been rescued, even as he
had been.

And if Obi-Wan knew, then he couldn't quite tell himself that Obi-Wan didn't understand, anyway.

Jurité Velarra coughed, lightly. "It seems to me we sometimes ill-appreciate how much the Jedi
sacrifice in service of the Republic," she said. "Thank you, Jedi Kenobi. And thank you, Anakin
Skywalker. For your service." She raised her glass to them briefly, almost daring Obi-Wan to reject
it.

He folded with grace as he clinked his glass with hers. "To justice, and the Republic, Mistress
Velarra," he replied, and they drank.

Dessert was a rich, creamy slice of cake that tasted of chocolate and caf. Anakin was poking at his,
curiously. Obi-Wan sliced his own cake and said, "So."

"I did agree we'd speak on the matter over dessert," Jurité Velarra agreed, placidly. "If only because
the cake here is worth dying for. So, Jedi Kenobi. Ask your questions."

"Did the Velarra have anything to do with the spate of assassination attempts on the Queen?"

"No, from the very beginning," Jurité said, firmly, and he could sense no trace of uncertainty at all in
the Force. "We did not collaborate with the Trade Federation, and when they occupied Naboo, we
found them extremely eager to assume control of our assets and operations."

"The missing ionite," Obi-Wan said.

She inclined her head in a nod. "Among other things, but especially the ionite."

"What about the ionite?" Obi-Wan asked. It was a sudden realisation: the Trade Federation had
extensively helped themselves to the ionite in the mines, Jurité had said, but he'd dismissed it earlier
as not being germane to the investigation. But this was before learning about Edaan Corp; before
discovering that at least one of the Ersken had been suborned. And what did the Ersken control, if
not shipping? "What happened to it?"

Jurité set aside her fork, disapproval pressing her lips into a thin line. "I am not aware of it," she said
at last, "Though what the Trade Federation might do with illicitly-obtained ionite alarms me."
"Nothing good," Obi-Wan surmised. He found the idea alarming, as well. The disruptive properties of ionite made it excellent for punching through security systems and shielding. To have shipments of unaccounted-for ionite in the hands of the Trade Federation or sold on the galactic market filled him with unease. "Do you think you might be able to offer estimates of how much ionite was taken?"

"Do you plan to do something about it?"

He temporised, "I am not without limitations, Mistress Velarra. If you look to me for action against the Trade Federation, you would be better off speaking to the Queen."

"You have the Queen's ear," Jurité noted. "Do not underestimate your position, Jedi Kenobi."

"I may counsel the Queen," Obi-Wan agreed. "But in any case, my plans favoured discovering where there was a sudden glut of ionite on the market." He made a small gesture with his hands. "I have a number of contacts who would know, if there seems to be more ionite to go around."

"And if there isn't?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Then that tells us something else too, does it not? That they are stockpiling. Or that they are channelling ionite, behind the scenes, to some other player. Ionite isn't vertex, Mistress Velarra. It's not the sort of thing you stockpile for wealth and prestige. Ionite is only valuable insofar as it can be used——"

"Or," Jurité cut in, "Denied to someone." She sounded thoughtful; he hoped he was successful in directing her attention to the other possibilities.

"Yes," he acknowledged the point. "That also."

"What will you do with the information then, Jedi Kenobi?"

"If I obtain it," Obi-Wan said, "I would see if that information in any way incriminates the Trade Federation. The invasion of Naboo was an extremely bold move on the part of the Federation, Mistress. Nothing about this entire situation has been correct, or logical." His eyes flicked, just for a moment, over to Anakin, who had finished his cake. "My teacher used to remind me that if things seemed illogical, it was because you are seeing them from the wrong perspective."

"And what is the right perspective, then?"

"That, I hope to discover as well." He added, a few moments later, "It would likely ease the Queen's position on the missing ionite, if she were to feel reassured that the Velarra have had no role in the assassination attempts."

Jurité returned to her slice of cake. "I have made such assurances, Jedi Kenobi. The Velarra have not moved against the Monarchy."

"You were at the parade."

"A terrible thing," Jurité said, her expression darkening. "Naboo bled, that day. It speaks ill of Maric Ersken that he did not consider such an act deplorable."

"Do you have any suspicions?"

"Oh?"

Her lips twisted. "Maric's a young boy, Jedi Kenobi," she said, flatly. " Barely out of leading strings, as far as the Ersken are concerned. Sirdaé Ersken doesn't like to give up power or control. He doesn't have terribly original thoughts, and planning something of this scope is beyond him. Of Junaka…" Jurité shook her head. "I encountered him a few times, in the company of Falce Valarin. He did not strike me as a revolutionary."

"Do you consider yourself an excellent judge of character, Mistress Velarra?"

She pursed her lips. "Do you, Jedi Kenobi?"


"I'm afraid I don't have the Force," Jurité said, in turn. "So I simply rely on my experience in making judgements. But you were asking for my thoughts on the matter, rather than any accusations I would make."

He nodded acknowledgement of her point. "Yes. One more question, if I may?"

She waited.

"Have you heard of Edaan Corp?"

No surprise; no glimmer of recognition. "No," Jurité Velarra said, firmly, and he believed her. "Give me your comm codes, and I'll have the information sent to you as soon as I can arrange it."

"Thank you," he said.

"Speak with the Queen," Jurité told him. "And if even that fails, make sure you nail the Trade Federation to a post, Jedi Kenobi."

Obi-Wan smiled. "It will be my pleasure, Mistress Velarra," he said, and meant it.

They walked back to the palace in silence. It was dark, illuminated only by the gentle glow of the streetlamps.

"You didn't tell me," Anakin said, at last, dragging at his feet. It felt just a tiny bit like a betrayal.

Obi-Wan let out a tired sigh. "It changes nothing, Anakin. If I told you everything about my time as Qui-Gon's apprentice, you might still be well within your rights to tell me I understand nothing. You are different, Anakin. I know that. You come to the Jedi path from an entirely different background. It is what it is."

He felt—oddly angry, oddly ashamed; as if he wasn't supposed to feel that way, because Obi-Wan'd said flat-out that they weren't friends, and asking about each other, finding out about each other… Well. That was a thing friends did, wasn't it?

"The Jedi path does not change," Obi-Wan added. "We walk it all the same." And once again, there was the sense that there was something he was missing out on; unspoken—the weight, perhaps, of Obi-Wan's unknown history, hanging on both their shoulders.

"Maybe," Anakin said, "But isn't it different?"

"'Different, yet the same,' is how Master Vo-Tahal would put it," Obi-Wan said, dryly. "I've always
found that to be a particularly illuminating explication of the Jedi path."

"Doesn't seem very helpful to me," Anakin muttered, darkly. He hoped they wouldn't expect him to start spouting that sort of thing, when he became a Jedi. A treacherous part of him wondered if he really did want to become a Jedi, except what would he be if he didn't become a Jedi? His mum had told him not to look back. Wouldn't this turning away be looking back of a different sort?

"Our paths are different," Obi-Wan said. "Just as my path and Qui-Gon's were different. We are weighed down—" Anakin started, surprised at the similarity of metaphor, "—By our histories, like a turtle carrying its shell. By that alone, our paths cannot be the same. Yet, we are guided by the same Code. We are guided by the same Force. We are brothers in the Jedi Order, Anakin, and this means that however different they may seem, our path is the same."

"Like people," Anakin guessed, shrewdly. "Everyone's different, but we're all people."

Obi-Wan nodded. "Exactly so."

"What if it matters to me?" Anakin challenged. "I'm your apprentice, aren't I? What if your past affects both of us?"

"Anakin, if some long-dead figure from my past comes back seeking bloody vengeance, I promise you, you'll be the first to hear about it. In the absence of such revenants, however, I'd really rather not exchange sordid stories."

"Fine," Anakin huffed, because there was really nothing he could say to the firm denial there.

"What did you think of the restaurant?" Obi-Wan asked, after a long silence.

"It was…fine, I guess," Anakin said, hesitantly. He didn't want to mention how small it'd made him feel—not to Obi-Wan, who'd seemed perfectly at home in such opulent surroundings.

"Don't get used to it," Obi-Wan said, almost-cheerfully. "This is an extremely rare glance at how the elite and the rich dine. You've just had an experience that any number of Padawans would kill for."

"How do Jedi eat?" Anakin asked, curiously.

"Mostly," Obi-Wan replied, "They take meals in the refectory. But there's also a few other cafés within the Temple where Jedi may choose to eat. And of course, there are a variety of eateries on Coruscant itself, easily-accessed from the Temple." He looked at Anakin. "Mostly, Initiates and apprentices choose to eat at the Temple, because their stipend doesn't cover very much. But Knights are able to afford slightly more versatile options."

"Who're Initiates? And we get a stipend?" Anakin squeaked.

"The very lowest life-form at the Temple," Obi-Wan quipped, and then shook his head. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. It was something we said a lot back when I was an Initiate. Typically, children are accepted at the Temple around the age of three standard years, with five being the absolute upper bound. At that age, they're referred to as younglings, and they spend time in clans under the watchful eye of the Crèche Master—that's the Jedi Knight or Master in charge of the clan."

"Uh-huh."

"At the age of seven, they take the tests and are usually promoted to Initiates. That's the age at which they're expected to be independent—they still answer to their dormitory docent, of course, but they're given much more freedom, and their combat training begins in earnest."
"Oh. So they don't use lightsabers before that?" That was very important to Anakin.

"They do use training sabers," Obi-Wan explained. "Those are lightsabers with extremely low power-settings, mostly meant to get them used to the feel of an actual lightsaber. You can't cut off a hand or leg with it, so it's perfectly safe, although it does sting terribly."

"I'm going to get one of those training sabers, aren't I?" Anakin muttered.

"Of course," Obi-Wan said, firmly. "I'd really rather not have you get excited and cut off your own hands or legs, so you're starting off with a shohan."

"Wait, what?" Anakin absolutely did not expect that term to show up.

"A shohan," Obi-Wan repeated. "It's what the younglings use before they graduate to training sabers. A shohan is a length of wood, carved to mimic an activated lightsaber."

"Okay," Anakin said, "So let me get this straight—first, I've got to use a shohan, and then when I 'graduate', I get to use a training saber, and then when do I get to use a real lightsaber again?" It wasn't fair, Anakin thought, despondently. What had he signed up for? He wasn't even going to get his own lightsaber until… until…

Obi-Wan smiled. "Initiates are promoted to Senior Initiate at the age of eleven. This is the bare minimum at which they're allowed to become a Padawan. But there have been exceptions."

"Like me," Anakin said, proudly.

"Yes. I had a friend who became a Padawan at nine," Obi-Wan said, and Anakin deflated just a little. "She was exceptional with the lightsaber. Master Bondara had been badgering the Council for weeks until they finally gave in." He smiled, distantly. "Or that's how Qui-Gon always put it, anyway."

"What happened?"

Obi-Wan's expression turned grim. "She's dead," he said, quietly. "Killed in an explosion in the Undercity. I was actually just investigating that, before Qui-Gon and I were pulled and sent to Naboo instead."

"Oh," Anakin said. Words were inadequate, just then, so he reached out briefly to touch Obi-Wan's hand. "I'm sorry." He'd thought Jedi were invincible, and Kitster'd just laughed at him. Now he was beginning to realise just how little he'd known. Skywalker indeed, Kitster'd have said. And yet he was realising just how grounded Kitster was, how much they'd needed each other.

Obi-Wan acknowledged the gesture, and moved on. "Anyway," he said, returning to the matter at hand, "Usually, they construct their own lightsaber, after they become a Padawan. It's a special rite of passage. Otherwise…" he shrugged. "If their thirteenth birthday passes, then a Knight or Master is usually tasked to accompany them to Ilum. You'll learn about Ilum later on."

"But we're not going there?" There really was no justice, Anakin decided. He was a Padawan now, and he wasn't even going to get a lightsaber.

Obi-Wan shook his head, firmly. "Not until I'm convinced you can handle a lightsaber properly. Keep in mind that even a nine year old Padawan has spent years handling a training saber. That's years of training and experience you don't have. Until you demonstrate the ability to pass the Senior Initiate tests, I'm not going to suggest to the Council that you are ready for the trip to Ilum."
"When did you go to Ilum?" Anakin pressed, hoping that he could find some sort of loophole.

"When I was thirteen," Obi-Wan said, shortly.

"So Qui-Gon didn't take you there?" Anakin asked, remembering what Obi-Wan had said about a Knight or Master being assigned to a Senior Initiate going to Ilum.

"He did," Obi-Wan said. There was a note of finality to his voice; it brooked no further questions, and with an inward sigh, Anakin fell silent.

They walked the rest of the way back without another word.

After he had left Anakin at his room, Obi-Wan headed for the royal quarters. He was stopped and challenged a few times in the corridor—all things considered, a good sign that palace security was on its toes—but eventually, Sabé came out from an antechamber to see him, blinking sleep from her eyes.

"Her Majesty has retired," she said, eyeing him warily.

"It's all right," came Amidala's voice, from the main suite. "Send him in, Sabé."

Sabé looked as if she wanted to argue, but simply shook her head. "This way, Jedi Kenobi," she instructed. And then, as Obi-Wan followed, she stepped in close and whispered, "Don't tire her. It's been a long few days."

There were dark circles ringing her eyes, as well, he noticed. He bowed his head in a nod of acknowledgement. "I won't," he promised. "It must be extremely fatiguing for you and the other handmaidens as well."

"You have no idea," Sabé muttered, darkly. "The repeated assassination attempts have us all on edge, Jedi Kenobi."

"I can imagine," Obi-Wan said, with as much sympathy as he could muster. She flashed him a glance—quizzical? Challenging?—but opened the door and motioned to him.

"Remember your promise," Sabé said, before fading back into the corridor.

Amidala sat; in what looked like a squashy, cozy armchair, facing a crackling fireplace. Her hair was unbound, and she wore a maroon and gold nightrobe that looked not unlike the clothing she'd worn, when pretending to be a mere handmaiden. She held a data-reader in her hands.

"Your Majesty," Obi-Wan greeted, feeling a prickle of guilt. Perhaps he should not have come; perhaps it was not the best time.

"Jedi Kenobi," Padmé—it was easier to think of her that way, without the panoply or paints of her office—greeted, with a warm smile. "Thank you for your prompt action at the victory celebrations. I know I have you to thank for saving my life, and of course, I have expressed gratitude to Master Yoda over the exemplary actions of your Order."

Obi-Wan bowed. "You're too kind, your Majesty," he offered. "It is our sorrow that we could not save more."

Padmé sighed. "All of us feel the weight of this failure," she said. "The Jedi Order should not shoulder it alone."
"Naturally, your Majesty."

"Sabé also informs me that I have you to thank for uncovering dissension from among the Five," Padmé continued, setting aside her data-reader. She frowned. "I wish...I wish it had not come to that. I would have preferred to have been proven wrong."

"About treachery from the Five?"

Padmé nodded. "Especially so. And of all of them, Marc Erskine." She hesitated. "He's so young," she said, at last, all in a rush, and Obi-Wan wondered if she'd really meant to say that, at all.

"So are you, your Majesty," he said, meaningfully.

She laughed. "That's true, Jedi Kenobi. And sometimes, I feel woefully unprepared for this task. Which might have been one of the reasons why I was elected, of course: everyone wanted the candidate they thought they could manipulate."

"They saw the situation in terms of self-interest," Obi-Wan surmised.

Padmé laughed again, and nodded. "You sound like Instructor Adras. He was my tutor, back in the apprentice legislators programme...He always thought a situation was best framed in terms of power and self-interest. Beings think of themselves and their communities first, he always said. A canny legislator learns when they have to trade off a group's interests against another's."

He sensed the scepticism in her tone. "That is not a view you share, your Majesty, is it?"

"No," Padmé admitted, frankly. "I see politics as the task of building consensus. I wanted to get so many things done, back when I first stood for elections. I saw all the things that needed fixing: I've put in some of the reforms, but the Five and the isolationists are fighting me every step of the way."

"But you wish it would be otherwise."

"Don't we all?" Padmé asked. "The best of us, Jedi Kenobi, or so I believe—the best of us come into the office with a clear vision of the future we want to create. It's hardly surprising that many people on Naboo have their own differing visions of possible futures. The point of politics is to bridge these visions." There was a glint of firelight, in those dark eyes.

"I've never quite heard it put in those terms before, your Majesty. Mostly, politicians just talk about making life better for everyone."

Padmé smiled. "Oh, of course. But that's a given, isn't it?"

And there it was: the naivete, alongside the fierce intellect. Obi-Wan said, carefully, "I wish I could say so with as much certainty, your Majesty."

"I try not to be cynical," Padmé admitted. "I still have under four more years of my term to go. In any case, you didn't come to hear my views on politics. What is your concern, Jedi Kenobi?"

He laid it out for her: the path the investigation had taken thus far, Edaan Corp, and meeting with Jurité Velarra; the request, his impressions. When he had finished, Amidala said, slowly, "And your conclusion is that she is to be trusted?"

"That is what my instincts tell me, your Majesty. At this point, I believe you are better off securing thorough investigations of every single irregularity the Jedi have thus far uncovered." He had come
to this conclusion a while ago. The Queen had asked them to investigate the Five, to uncover possible treachery. They had uncovered what seemed to be a conspiracy, though half of it consisted in phantoms.

Obi-Wan's instincts told him the investigation was not over, but a decent amount of legwork, in particular, vetting individual members of the Five, could now be turned over to planetary security, who were, in any case, preoccupied with the assassination attempt. He'd determined that the Derriva, the Yvar, and the Velarra were most likely sound. He said as much to Amidala, who nodded slowly.

"And the Erksen?"

"It is possible individual members or branches have slipped past my scrutiny, your Majesty," Obi-Wan said, speaking not just of the Erksen, but of all the Five.

"I'll inform Sabé in the morning," Amidala said, thoughtfully. "You have not said anything of the Helukala."

"I haven't the opportunity to meet Nurié Helukala," Obi-Wan admitted. "I'm hoping to get the opportunity to do so before the state dinner."

"Good," Amidala said. "It will be—a relief, to put this matter behind us, as soon as possible. However, I do not wish to rush your investigations, Jedi Kenobi."

"The Jedi will be meticulous, your Majesty. Of that I can assure you. We take the matter very seriously." The matter. He didn't even know what to call it: this series of events that had unfolded, one after another, on Naboo. Assassination attempts, Edaan Corp—people collaborating with the Trade Federation.

And then, the lone Sith that had turned up in the middle of the mess…

The Sith was tangential, though. Wasn't he?

He realised he'd become distracted. Exhaustion, perhaps. His thoughts were drifting, He blinked, dragged his attention back to the present. "I beg your pardon, your Majesty?"

"I was expressing my concern," Amidala said. "You seem exhausted, Jedi Kenobi. Please don't run yourself down, attempting to cut through the thicket in a single day. Such a situation helps nobody, and you the least of all."

"Of course," he smiled, and bowed; made polite farewells, and withdrew for the night.

Chapter End Notes

We're nearing the end of the Palace arc by now. Don't expect everything to be wrapped up in a neat bow - that would be my advice/warning. Some of the mystery will be unravelled by the end but some canny readers may notice that not everything has been resolved. This is according to plan: know that there are elements seeded in this arc that will crop up again in later arcs. (Right now, IATW has always been four arcs long.)

I've been in the Star Wars fandom since around the time TPM was released in my childhood, and there are two other reasonably popular trends this fic has now bucked. One of them is more minor - some writers envision that Jedi utilise bokken prior to
training lightsabers. That makes sense, of course, but I've never really liked to use an explicit real-world term for it, and so I've simply created a word mildly consistent with some of the other terms the Jedi use (sai, sai-tok, shii-cho, etcetera.) Some of the Old Republic games and novels show Jedi students training with vibroswords and that sounds about right to me. Canon (at least the visual encyclopedias) have said it's hard for non-Force-sensitives to use lightsabers because of the gyroscopic effect of the blade and, probably more commonsensically, the fact the blade is weightless. In sum, I think it's perfectly reasonable that the absolutely youngest students train with glorified sticks, and ingrain some basic movements, and then move up to actual training sabers and burns once they have got enough skill with both basic movements and the Force to handle them. [Note: I square this with Yoda calling the children younglings in E2 by thinking that the training curriculum has actually changed from Obi-Wan's day - and presumably, Anakin's.]

On a tangential note, the bigger headache is how to settle when Jedi apprentices have their own lightsaber since they're normally taken to Ilum to build those. But Obi-Wan in Jedi Apprentice has his own - prior to having gone to Ilum to build it. How I resolved this will become apparent in the later arcs ;P

The less minor trend I've bucked is a tendency to make Bant a Jedi Healer. Here, Bant work with Archives, and her training with Kit Fitso comes in handy when she's out on extremely dangerous acquisition missions on her own. Whenever the friends get together and people think Bant has an easy time with Archives, Bant laughs and laughs. Only in Archives do you get caught in the middle of a five-way shootup over a possible Sith artefact before later discovering it's a hoax. (tl;dr; badass!Bant)

Finally: this fic tries to do justice to the Jedi - as much as is possible. In other words, the Jedi aren't going to obviously be hidebound fools who only exist to make Anakin's life difficult and enable his fall. They aren't infallible - far from it - but they aren't obviously incompetent either. Obi-Wan's stint of being an Offworld slave shows up here, as does the fact that Jedi are the thin glowy line - they show up a lot in hostile situations, and they don't say "well gee that sucks, I'm outta here." They put themselves between civilians and danger and even if we might put a question mark behind guardians of peace and justice, the canon Jedi alone have been through some pretty angst/brine-inducing situations, let alone in fandom. Treating them as living in their high, lofty towers, detached from the common experience, doesn't entirely do the Order justice, and so I'm not going to pull that generalisation here.

Cheers,
Ammar.
Chapter Nineteen: Loose Ends

In the morning, the palace became a frenzied hive of activity, preparing for the evening's state dinner. The number of dignitaries and notables present meant that security would have to be heightened. Adi Gallia had said that Depa Billaba was seeing to it, Obi-Wan recalled. The Chalacan Jedi Master was thorough, and he'd already seen signs of her handiwork the previous night, when he'd been stopped and challenged, for all he wore the distinctive robes of the Jedi.

Traveller's tunics, after all, were easy to come by, and mimicked the appearance of Jedi clothing. Obi-Wan found himself having to activate Qui-Gon's lightsaber several times, being allowed passage only when the verdant green blade signalled he was a Jedi.

The thought worried him. Did Depa Billaba expect the other Sith to be on-planet?

The second thought was more worrisome: why not?

What about Naboo had interested the Sith Lord? For, Obi-Wan realised, with chilling certainty, Jedi were not difficult to locate. Had the Sith, too, been searching for the Chosen One? Was this why Qui-Gon had fought the tattooed Zabrak on Tatooine?

But how did that explain the Sith Lord's presence on Naboo?

"What preoccupies you, Knight Kenobi?"

He realised he'd been leaning against a balcony, staring out into open space, lost with his own thoughts for an immeasurable amount of time. "Just thoughts, Master Windu," Obi-Wan said, cautiously.

The Korun Jedi Master regarded him with hooded eyes. "Credit for your thoughts, then."

Was it strange to still feel like a Padawan, beneath that steely regard? He felt as if he'd been caught with his tunic rumpled or something, and barely bit back the desire to adjust it.

"I was thinking about the Sith, Master," he said. Watched for Mace Windu's reaction. But Mace only nodded, as if he'd been expecting that.

"Good," he said, grimly. "Because it isn't over." Not until the other Sith was dead, Obi-Wan expected. And perhaps not even then. Would the other Sith be searching for another, now? Likely an apprentice, he mused. For a moment, he contemplated the dark humour of a Sith apprentice, similarly bereft of his Master, with no other recourse than to take some other Force-sensitive under his wing.

"I know, Master," Obi-Wan said. "What troubles me is why he was on Naboo."

"Good," Mace said, again, and this time, Obi-Wan detected an approving note. "You're thinking. What are your conclusions?"

"He was on the trail of the Chosen One," Obi-Wan offered. "Perhaps he wanted to beat the Jedi to discovering the Chosen One." But was Anakin the Chosen One? Obi-Wan confessed he did not
The boy was certainly strong. It was difficult for anyone remotely sensitive to the Force to miss that. Anakin radiated raw power and potential, as surely as an unshielded starfighter engine emitted heat. But even such strength as his—strength that exceeded Master Yoda's, even when untrained—that alone, surely, did not cry out that Anakin was the Chosen One.

It wasn't even clear the prophecy was a *prophecy*, rather than fancy metaphor. What made a written passage a prophecy, anyway? Some of the ancient Jedi were prone to write in extended allegories. But Qui-Gon had believed in Anakin, believed so fiercely that he had locked horns with the Jedi Council and put Obi-Wan up for his Trials, offhandedly, and it still hurt, even now, still ached so fiercely in that hollow within him where his heart should have been. Years under Qui-Gon's tutelage, and all of it was as dust in the wind in the face of this young boy who burnt like the desert sun in the Force.

But say it was a prophecy. Say; for he had to believe, he'd promised Qui-Gon, and Qui-Gon had believed, and it seemed to Obi-Wan then that it was his duty not just to train Anakin to the best of his ability, but to believe, as Qui-Gon had; to bear the torch of prophecy to illuminate the words of sages past with his dead Master's wisdom.

Say, then, that Anakin was the Chosen One. And what would the Sith want with a Jedi prophecy?

"And on Naboo?"

"He wanted Anakin," Obi-Wan tried. "The best way to do so was to slaughter Anakin's Jedi protectors."

Doubts, though. Had the Sith other plans with Naboo? Had the Jedi merely stumbled into one of them?

Mace Windu raised an eyebrow. "And the duel in the power core?"

Obi-Wan closed his eyes for a moment, recalling that urgent, frenzied duel. He opened them again. "He was maneuvering us," he said, at last. "He had control of the fight—we followed him into the power core. Still consistent with the hypothesis he wanted to kill us and abduct Anakin."

"Perhaps," Mace did not sound very convinced. "Or perhaps he meant to distract: some other accomplice would take Anakin. Or perhaps he simply wanted to rid himself of Jedi interference in Sith plans." His last words echoed the direction of Obi-Wan's thoughts.

"Master?"

"He lured you into the power core," Mace said, quietly. "From your accounts, the new terrain did not hamper him significantly. I grant he was a skilled warrior, but…"

And then, he understood. "You think it was an ambush: he knew what he was doing, he'd studied his ground beforehand."

Mace Windu raised an eyebrow again. "Don't you?"

Obi-Wan was forced to admit it made sense, of how the Zabrak had skillfully controlled the duel, employed the energy shielding against them, used it to isolate the Jedi and to kill Qui-Gon. It should have been the death of Qui-Gon's apprentice as well.

"If there was an accomplice in the hangar…" he trailed off, because Mace was already shaking his head.
"I checked the recordings," he said, flatly. "They were wiped."

"What?" Obi-Wan was shocked. "Who had—"

"—access?" Mace sighed. "Too many damned people, that's who," he said, bitterness shading his voice. "It was chaos, of course, what with the resistance and the droid army engaging across Theed and in the palace. By the time palace security took control of the systems again, it was too late to determine who could have had access."

"But the codes—surely the system requires certain levels of access…"

Mace shook his head again. "It's a good thought, Kenobi. I tried. But the Trade Federation sliced the security systems and welded in their own access infrastructure. Anyone with the Naboo access codes or the Federation access codes could've done it, and the Trade Federation are not—yet—inclined to be forthcoming."

And the trail was growing cold. He could sense the other Jedi's frustration, before Mace tamped down on it, breathed it out.

"Where does that leave us?" Obi-Wan asked, eventually.

Mace's expression might have been a smile, if there was any warmth in it. "With a tangle of dead ends, I'm certain. But dead ends we must scour nonetheless, in case our Sith grew careless. Once I'm back at the Temple, I'll start tasking Knights with this."

"Do you think…" Obi-Wan hesitated. "Do you think there was any connection between the Sith and the Trade Federation?"

Mace tipped his head to the side in a shrug. "How would I know, Kenobi?" he asked, wry. "Despite what Knights tell misbehaving Padawans, I'm not actually omniscient."

In spite of himself, Obi-Wan smiled. "I suppose not," he conceded. "Only a bit."

"Certainly," Mace continued, "I don't like how often the Trade Federation appears in this. Yet it certainly seems unavoidable. This entire—" his lips twitched. "This entire situation was created by the Trade Federation."

A thought occurred to Obi-Wan. "But the Sith and his accomplice, if there was one—they had a surprising amount of access. And if we assume they were on the trail of the Chosen One, what led them to Tatooine?"

Mace sighed. "Yes. You see the scope of the problem, Kenobi."

And he did. It was years and years of work, at the very least: Obi-Wan's mind shied away from the immensity of the investigation. This would not be something a single Jedi team could cover: it would be a great hunt, the most significant search the Jedi Order had ever run, and Obi-Wan's instincts were screaming that the future of the galaxy could very well hang on it.

"Yes," he said, his mouth very dry. "I do."

"In any case," Mace continued, smoothly. "This particular investigation will not be your worry. Life goes on: civil wars to stop, treaties to negotiate, elections to witness, and—" Obi-Wan was certain Mace Windu was smirking, and that did not agree with his nerves at all, absolutely not, "—Padawans to train."
"Yes," Obi-Wan said, again. "There is, at that. But, with all due respect, Master Windu, why tell me?"

"You're training someone who might just be the Chosen One of prophecy. But who is, in any case, a very, very powerful young boy with a great deal of fear and hate and anger in him," Mace said. "If one of our guesses is right, the Sith were in pursuit of Anakin, whether incidentally or because they truly believed—as Qui-Gon did—that he is the one the prophecies point to. You don't think this makes things a bit—" he raised an eyebrow."—dangerous?"

"Well," Obi-Wan was forced to concede. "I suppose so…I did make a promise to train Anakin, though, Master Windu. I'm not about to break my word."

Mace shook his head. "Oh, for the Force's sake," he said, dryly. "I'm not here to take your apprentice away from you, Kenobi. I was simply issuing you a warning: since you're training the boy, it's best you know and are prepared. After all, you were thinking about the issue yourself. And there are other reasons…"

"Such as?"

Mace let out a heavy sigh. "Such as that you and your apprentice will, of course, be confined to the Temple for the immediate future. I don't think this was something unexpected, in any case, but now you know there are other reasons we are reluctant to send a young team out into the field."

Obi-Wan bowed his head in acceptance. "Of course, Master."

"And," Mace said, "If the Trade Federation and the Sith are indeed connected…" his gaze went dark. "Then there is a good chance this current search for the mind behind the assassinations may lead us to the Sith."

Obi-Wan realised what he was talking about, in a sudden flash of understanding. The mercenaries had understood—only too well—how the Jedi worked.

"If it does, will my apprentice and I still be tasked with this?"

Mace shook his head, grimly. "If a Sith is indeed involved, Kenobi, you have to understand we can't risk Anakin. He's not ready. He's not trained." He looked over at Obi-Wan, searchingly. "This goes for any team with an apprentice who isn't a Senior Padawan. If I had my way, I'd set only Knight teams on anything to do with the hunt. Your trial was not a fair one, Kenobi. And in a fair world, no Senior Padawan would have survived that."

He knew that, of course. Obi-Wan offered the Master of the Order a crooked smile. "I know that, Master. I don't think Anakin will like it."

Mace shook his head. "If he wants to be a Jedi, he'll learn that there's more at stake than what he likes and doesn't."

It sounded, Obi-Wan would think, in retrospect, too much like a prophecy. There was too much weight attached to those words, and they both fell silent for a long while.

"Do I continue my investigations, then?" he asked, cautiously.

"For the moment, yes," Mace said, briskly; that sense of significance had been lost. "I've already contacted the Temple: Yaddle's sending two teams of Knights and Masters to take over the investigation. You'll want to make sure they're thoroughly briefed on what they need to know. We leave once the new teams arrive."
Anakin, as Obi-Wan predicted, did not take very well to the news at all.

"What do you mean we're going back to Coruscant?" he demanded, hands on his hips, glaring. "We didn't even do anything much at all!"

"Did we?" Obi-Wan countered. "We foiled several assassination attempts on the Queen. We discovered that Maric Ersken was involved in the assassination attempts. We also got to have a picnic, and see Marr Lake."

That last bit of humour did not placate his very young apprentice. "That didn't count," Anakin grumbled. "We still haven't found who's behind—behind all of this!"

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "Believe me, Anakin, I don't like the idea of giving up an investigation half-way. It feels a lot like failure."

"Then why are you letting them do this?" Anakin snapped.

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said, "I think we're going to take five minutes to breathe and calm down. Will you do this with me?"

Anakin scowled. "I don't want to."

"We are Jedi," Obi-Wan continued, ignoring Anakin's outburst. "And this means that while we may feel anger, irritation, annoyance…we cannot indulge in the emotion."

He knelt in the traditional meditation posture, and made Anakin assume the same position. Felt a painful prickle of familiarity; nostalgia, even, as he placed his hands on Anakin's shoulders and instructed him to breathe with the count.

He counted, inhaled. Anakin did so, sullenly. Shallowly.

"This is stupid," he muttered—quietly, but not quietly enough. But then, Obi-Wan suspected that Anakin had meant for him to hear it.

He did not indulge Anakin's flash of temper. "Breathe," Obi-Wan instructed, still holding the count in his own head. "Feel the Force, Padawan. The Force is our guide, our ally. The Force binds all things together—from the smallest algae to the largest star. It cannot, however, enter a heart clouded with anger. So breathe, and let go."

Anakin must have felt the Force move; whether within him, or through Obi-Wan, for his eyes widened for a moment, and the hard, angry set of his jaw softened.

"I felt it!" he exclaimed, springing to his feet. "I mean, it was there only for a moment, but I swear I felt it!"

Obi-Wan merely motioned to the floor in front of him. The five minutes were not yet up. Sighing, Anakin re-assumed the meditation posture; kneeling in kozun and trying once again to attune his breathing to Obi-Wan's.

At the end of the five minutes, the irritation had returned. He could read it in Anakin's body language: he'd lost that brief connection he'd made with the Force, early on. Yet, it was remarkable, Obi-Wan thought, that Anakin had done so at all, even for an instant, during his first guided meditation session.
"Did you feel that?" Obi-Wan asked, quietly.

"No," Anakin grumbled. "Not anymore."

"You felt it, for a moment," Obi-Wan said, ignoring Anakin's outbursts. "Hold on to that memory, that feeling. That is what all Jedi strive for: connection with the Force."

"Yeah, all right," Anakin muttered. "What does that have to do with being sent back to Coruscant?"

"Why are you angry?" Obi-Wan asked him.

Anakin bit his lip.

"I want you to be honest, Anakin," Obi-Wan coaxed. "Both with me, and with yourself."

Anakin looked him in the eye and said, slowly, "I don't like giving up. And Padmé's nice, and I'm worried for her. And—" he struggled with the next sentence. Obi-Wan simply waited, in silence, until Anakin wrested it out, word after painful word. "I don't need to be treated like I'm special, like I need extra protection or something."

"I don't like giving up, either," Obi-Wan said, frankly. "I've told you as much, Anakin. I'm not fighting this re-assignment because there's only so much a Jedi can do. We've done a great deal in the scant time we were assigned to investigating the Queen's assassination. Much of the clean-up work will have to be done by Queen Amidala's security forces, rather than the Jedi themselves. I cannot possibly screen every single member of the Ersken for treachery. Our mandate was to uncover possible collaboration between the Five and the Trade Federation; secondarily, to forestall further assassination attempts. As far as that is concerned, we've done a great deal."

"Still feels like running away," Anakin muttered, a defiant gleam in his eyes.

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "But set against that feeling what we know of the situation. And it's also true that you badly need training, and to stay on Naboo until things have been resolved to our satisfaction would be to severely deprive you of lessons you should be learning."

"I don't mind!" Anakin insisted.

"And if there's a Sith?" Obi-Wan wanted to know. "It's a possibility we can't dismiss, Anakin. I only killed one of them, and with great difficulty." Gently, he added, "And that was with the aid of Qui-Gon, Anakin. I can't count on you to help me fight off a Sith with a lightsaber, can I?"

"Not yet," Anakin said, seizing on the new challenge. "I'm going to become real good with the lightsaber, just you see!" He subsided, a few moments later. "You sure it's not 'cause I'm s'posed to be special?"

"I promise," Obi-Wan said. "The Council would have pulled another Master-Padawan team, if the apprentice wasn't even a Senior Padawan."

"I promise," Obi-Wan said. "The Council would have pulled another Master-Padawan team, if the apprentice wasn't even a Senior Padawan." He thought of what Mace Windu had said. "Perhaps not even then."

"Huh," Anakin thought about that. "Then why didn't they pull you? Because, you were a Senior Padawan, and there was a Sith, wasn't there?"

Obi-Wan let out a heavy sigh. "They made a mistake," he admitted. "And they paid a heavy price. Qui-Gon warned them he believed his attacker was a Sith Lord. The Council…was divided. Understand this, Anakin: as far as we know, the Sith had been extinct for millenia. The Council was therefore reluctant to accept Qui-Gon's claims that his attacker was a Sith, rather than some other
rogue Force-user."

"And now?" Anakin asked, shrewdly.

Obi-Wan shook his head. "They consider the evidence beyond doubt," he admitted. "Qui-Gon was an extremely respected Jedi Master. They do not expect that anyone but a Sith could have killed him."

"So they refuse to believe him, but suddenly he's dead so it's all different?" Anakin demanded.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, heavily. "That is one way of putting it. Anakin, what if I told you Tatooine was a part of the Republic?"

Anakin rolled his eyes. "But everyone knows Tatooine is ruled by the Hutts," he retorted. "It's in Hutt space. That's why Mum and I were slaves."

"Do you trust me, Anakin?"

Anakin said, evenly, warily, "I don't know."

"Thank you for your honesty, Anakin. Your mother, then," Obi-Wan said, because really, he should have known better. "Do you trust her?"

Anakin nodded, unhesitatingly. "Of course I do."

"What happened if your mother told you Tatooine was part of the Republic?"

"Does it matter? She wouldn't do that."

"We're entertaining a hypothetical, Anakin. What if she did?"

Anakin frowned. "Well, she'd be mistaken," he said, cautiously. "I suppose."

"Yes, but didn't you say you trust her?"

Anakin bit at his lip. "But everyone knows Tatooine is in Hutt space," he muttered, mutinously.

"But everyone knows the Sith are extinct for millenia, Anakin," Obi-Wan repeated, gently.

Anakin scowled at him. "They're not the same thing!" he exclaimed.

"Are they?" Obi-Wan realised he was giving his young apprentice the same raised eyebrow Mace Windu had given him, earlier. "You've only been a Jedi for several days, Anakin. The Jedi have had good reason to believe the Sith extinct. All apprentices are taught this. They know this, just like you know that Tatooine is in Hutt space."

"Maybe," Anakin conceded, warily. "Still seems a bit unfair to Qui-Gon to me."

"Yes," Obi-Wan smiled. "He had that effect on the Council a lot, it seems." He sighed. "In any case, the Council is now taking the Sith threat seriously. Master Windu has hand-picked two teams of Knights and Masters to assume the responsibility of the investigation."

"They're not you, though."

"No," Obi-Wan agreed readily. "They're not. They're better." He let Anakin mull over that for a long moment. "Get changed and ready, Anakin. We're going to see Androl Oden."
The signalling of Obi-Wan's comlink, in retrospect, should've been the warning. But it wasn't, and by the time they'd reached the building that hosted most of Naboo's legislators, the thick coil of smoke drifting lazily in the air spoke of bad news.

Really bad.

Anakin swallowed, forced down the fear and worry. Obi-Wan was looking at him, eyebrows creased. "Ready?" he asked. Just that.

Anakin nodded. "Guess I'm as ready as I'll ever be," he replied, and they walked forward. An officer of planetary security challenged them: Obi-Wan ignited his lightsaber as a response, and they were directed towards another officer, her lieutenant's badge glinting in the sunlight, her eyebrows furrowed as she listened to a reporting security officer.

"Jedi," she greeted, curtly, halting the reporting officer. "What can I do for you?"

"I think," Obi-Wan said, "The better question is what we can do for you, Lieutenant."

She frowned. "We've put up a security cordon and the first responders are already on-task. Unless your Jedi abilities allow you to pinpoint possible survivors under the wreckage, we're left with what I can do for you, Master Jedi. The dispatcher didn't say Jedi assistance was forthcoming."

"We're looking for Androl Oden," Obi-Wan said. "Is he…?"

Her wince told him everything. "Dead, and confirmed dead," the lieutenant said, with the bluntness of someone dealing with too much poodoo to want to be tactful. "My men pulled him out of the rubble but first-responders confirmed he was dead." She gestured in the direction of a white medical tent that had been set up at the next block. "Should you want confirmation, the medics are over there."

Anakin expected Obi-Wan to leave, but the Jedi remained where he was. "Do you yet have any information about the provenance of the explosion?" Obi-Wan asked, and Anakin belatedly realised that yes, the building was a smoking hulk, and mostly rubble, and if it wasn't an explosion, he didn't know what it was at all.

The lieutenant shook her head, wearily. "Not enough. We're trying to see if we can recover anything of the security footage. But I wouldn't hold my breath, Master Jedi."

Obi-Wan accepted that with a nod. "I'll help the search teams, then. But I need to comm the Jedi Council first."

"Very well," the lieutenant said. "Ask for Hyllam and tell him Lieutenant Sanaé sent you. Now, if you'll excuse me, Master Jedi…"

It was a swift dismissal, but Obi-Wan drew Anakin to the side. That crease of worry had not yet disappeared from his features. "Anakin. This is going to be crude, dangerous work…"

"I'm not going," Anakin said, even before Obi-Wan could finish. He thrust out his chin stubbornly. "And you can't make me."

"Actually," Obi-Wan said, "As your Ma—as your teacher, I certainly can. That's the point of being my apprentice, my very young Padawan. I know you've seen death before, Anakin, but not like this. And it's nothing to do with you—Qui-Gon would not have let me go with a search team. Not at this age."
Anakin chewed on that in discontented silence.

Obi-Wan must have taken that for acquiescence, for he produced his comlink and frowned as he realised he'd missed a comm. They listened to the recording—a hurried, "Jedi Kenobi. This is Androl Oden. We need to talk. Meet me at the legislator's office right away. This is urgent. I hope this doesn't reach you too late."—and Obi-Wan paled as he realised the significance of the recorded comm message. He commed Gallia without another instance's delay, and his frown only grew deeper as he made contact.

"Kenobi, where are you?" Adi Gallia demanded, almost instantly.

"At the site of the attack on the legislators' building—it looks like someone procured explosives, Master," Obi-Wan said, shortly. "I suspect it's to keep Androl Oden from talking: I've a missed comm message from him telling me we have to meet, and urgently."

Gallia was silent, but only for a heartbeat. "There's been another attack," she said. Anakin didn't need holos to tell him she wasn't happy about the situation. "Dr. Pallié Talein is in critical condition. It's not clear if she's going to wake up."

"Loose ends," Obi-Wan breathed, aghast. "I think they were complacent before, Master, but we seem to have startled them into action."

"Too right," Gallia said. "And at such a cost..." she trailed off into silence. "I've already put measures into place to secure Junaka and Maric Erksen. What will you be doing?"

"Aiding the search-and-rescue teams, Master. Lieutenant Sanaé fears more are still trapped in the rubble. If you could spare any more Jedi..."

"I can do better than that. Master Yoda will be headed your way shortly."

Anakin caught the flicker of surprise—then reassurance—that darted across Obi-Wan's features. "Understood. That's good to hear, Master."

"Anything else?"

"Is there anything Master Koon can do about any documents—especially digital—that Oden might have left behind?"

"Ah. I see what you're getting at, Kenobi...no, that's not a bad idea at all. I'll let him know."

"Thank you, Master Gallia."

"May the Force be with you."

"May it be with us all," Obi-Wan said, and switched off the comlink. He looked over at Anakin. "I have a task for you."

It was going to be make-work, things to keep Anakin from being underfoot, he was certain of it. He didn't like that. He stared sulkily at the ground. "What?" Anakin asked, when it become clear Obi-Wan was ready to outwait him.

"I need you to stay with Lieutenant Sanaé, as a liason. Master Yoda will be arriving shortly, accompanied, no doubt, by Master Koon. I need you to make sure they're aware of the situation. And, in particular, I would like you to work with Master Koon."
"Why?" Anakin wanted to know. "I mean, why do I have to go with him?"

"Because he's good with electronics," Obi-Wan said, matter-of-factly. "And because if there's anything left for us to salvage in Androl Oden's data, he'll be able to do that. You might learn some tricks from him. He might learn some tricks for you. I'm not coddling you, Anakin. I'm trying to apply your skills as best as I can. You can't sense trapped people, not yet. But you can help me sift through the information both Oden and the Lieutenant have."

"I guess," Anakin muttered. He wasn't particularly convinced, but it wasn't as if Obi-Wan was going to be talked out of this, he suspected.

"You want to become a Jedi," Obi-Wan said. "So be a Jedi. Will you do this, Padawan?"

Anakin blinked. It wasn't the first time Obi-Wan had called him that. But the word seemed...heavier, this time. More significant, somehow.

"I will, I guess. I'll try, anyway."

"Do or do not," Obi-Wan said. "There is no try."

"I'll do it, then," Anakin muttered. "Whyever not?"

There was little time for recriminations. Those would have to come later. Deliberately, Obi-Wan turned away from the young boy behind him, and went in search for Hyllam. He found the man, shouting orders at the various teams scattered across the site, attempting to clear the rubble.

*So much devastation,* Obi-Wan thought, and wondered what it had been for. To silence a single man, as he had suspected? Or was it aimed elsewhere: to distract the Jedi, to throw them off-balance…

For what?

"Jedi Pa—Knight Kenobi," he introduced himself, reading the name stencilled on Hyllam's nametag. "Lieutenant Sanaé sent me to help the search-and-rescue teams."

"Good," Hyllam said, briskly. If he'd noticed the slip, he didn't show it. "What do you need?"

"A map of the search grid, if you have any. Blueprints of the building. And someone to look for the various sites I've marked out." It would have been easier, with Qui-Gon: the Master to spot, the apprentice to mark the sites on the map. Now, Obi-Wan would need to perform both roles on his own. He could have asked Anakin to remain, he supposed, but he expected mangled bodies to be emerging from the rubble, even under starched-white tarp. Anakin did not need to see that, not yet.

"They're all digital. Will that be fine?" Hyllam wanted to know. Obi-Wan nodded.

"And a small space, to meditate and feel the Force. I'll need to go deep for this. Preferably on the edge of the rubble, so it's easier to sense for survivors." Again, if Anakin were not untrained, if Anakin were not so young...he could have used Anakin's raw strength in the Force, here. But there was no sense in dwelling on what he could not have. Obi-Wan drew a deep breath, to steel himself for the task.

"You can use that patch there," Hyllam gestured to a patch of cleared, blackened ground, just before most of the rubble. "We were going to put a power generator there, but then you showed up, and anyway, I expect we won't need the generator just yet. Give me a few moments, and I'll set up a
channel so the search-and-rescue teams get live updates on the positions you've marked on the map.”

He liked Hyllam, Obi-Wan decided, moments later, as he knelt on the cleared ground in kozun, and reached out to the Force. The search grid, overlaid with the blueprints, lay unravelled on a thin sheet of flexiplast. The man was efficient and knew how to take the initiative.

Breathe deep, release,

He centred himself in a few moments, allowing the Force to reach into him. Qui-Gon had been Taras-Rja: it had always been a bone of contention between them. He'd never managed Qui-Gon's effortless connection to the Living Force. To Obi-Wan, drawing on the Living Force came only with difficulty. But there was no sense in worrying, at this point in time. He had to let go, strand by strand, and reach out to the bonds that held the living, breathing, laughing, loving beings in Theed together, and then—

He sank into the Force, bit by bit, a slow surrender of who he was, of grief still-held, of worry, and of concern. Piece by piece, Obi-Wan Kenobi surrendered himself to the Force and allowed the nameless self left behind to drift lightly on the connections that bound him to Hyllam, to Lieutenant Sanaé, to the grousing Anakin, and to each and every being at the site. He allowed those threads to flare, bright with life and light and warmth.

He sank beneath those mere layers of molecules and compressed dirt, drifting along the various strands, until he sensed pain and fear and almost-panic.

A hand moved. His hand, he realised, distantly. A single presence within the Living Force, here: perhaps the pain was from—yes, a trapped leg, crushed. He added that note to the map pin and released.

He drifted, carried by the Force, content to go where the river flowed, touching mind after mind: anguished, panicked, in pain, lost, frightened, worried, calm acceptance—he sensed them all, each and every one of them, and pins flew up on the map, one after another.

Be a Jedi, Obi-Wan had said, as if it was so simple. And maybe it was, to him. After all, by his own admission, he'd never been anything else other than a Jedi.

Anakin had never been a Jedi, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to start. He went back in search of Lieutenant Sanaé, half-expecting her to tell him to go off and do something else. He was pleasantly surprised when she glanced down at him. "You're Jedi Kenobi's apprentice, aren't you?"

"I'm Anakin Skywalker," he said. "Obi-Wan sent me to talk to you. He said he needed me to stay with you, as a liason. More Jedi are coming. And then I'm supposed to help them retrieve Androl Oden's data. Whatever of it we can."

Lieutenant Sanaé didn't look sceptical. It struck Anakin, not for the first time, that this was not Tatooine. He wasn't little Ani the slave boy here, what Lieutenant Sanaé saw was a Jedi, albeit an apprentice. And she acted accordingly.

"Fine," she said, briskly. "I expect you not to interfere in operations, however."

"Wouldn't dream of doing so," Anakin muttered.

"I've got a team digging through the rubble in search of the security cameras," Lieutenant Sanaé added. "I'll notify you if they locate anything."
Anakin nodded, consciously trying to imitate how assured and calm Obi-Wan had been. "I'll let the other Jedi know, when they arrive." A thought struck him, however. Watto'd had him work on a few security systems before, and a dispute Watto'd had with a customer had taught Anakin a few standard features about security systems. "Shouldn't they have uploaded the recordings to a host? Couldn't we access that remotely?"

Lieutenant Sanaé grimaced. "Yes. Unfortunately, the server hosting the recordings and the backups are located in the lower levels of the same building, and attempts to access the recordings remotely have failed. Since there's no way we're clearing that much rubble before we account for all the missing, dead, and injured, they decided the next best thing was to see if the recordings in any of the cameras are useable."

She turned away from him, to deal with another waiting officer. Anakin thought, furiously, worrying at the problem. Obi-Wan suspected the building had been blown up to kill Androl Oden, to stop him from speaking. But how?

The missed comm message couldn't have been any later than around the time it'd taken for them to leave the palace. Anakin frowned, trying to picture the timeline. A bit before they'd left the palace, Androl Oden had commed Obi-Wan. How had he gotten Obi-Wan's comm codes? Another question to flag and set aside.

Lieutenant Sanaé had finished speaking to the officer. "Lieutenant," he called, loud enough to catch her attention.

"Jedi Skywalker?"

"When did the building blow up?"

Lieutenant Sanaé frowned, thinking. She named about the time Anakin had suspected: the building had blown up around the time they'd left the palace. "Why?"

He told her of what he'd suspected: of Androl Oden's missed comm message, and then the explosion. Obi-Wan's thought that the point of the explosion had been to silence Androl Oden, before he could pass whatever information he had to the Jedi.

Lieutenant Sanaé's expression grew even darker by the time he'd finished. "The timing is close," she remarked. "It means that Oden was likely closely-watched by whoever had him silenced."

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Anakin half-spun around at the rhythmic sound, to see Jedi Master Yoda, with Plo Koon following a step behind. He did not think it was deferential: Plo Koon was scanning the area about him, likely assessing the operation Lieutenant Sanaé had set up.

"Lieutenant…"

"Sanaé," Anakin supplied helpfully, and Yoda nodded.

"Lieutenant Sanaé. Sorrowed, we are, to hear of this. Here to lend our aid, the Jedi are."

"Much appreciated, Master Yoda," Lieutenant Sanaé replied. Anakin frowned; how was it she knew Yoda's name but not Obi-Wan's? In any case, it seemed Yoda was satisfied with that, for he continued.

"Help with the rubble, we will."
"Not you," Plo Koon said. Anakin almost jumped out of his skin; he'd forgotten the Kel Dor Jedi was there. "You will be helping me."

It was hard to gauge the Jedi's expression, beneath that breath mask. "Sir?" he asked, cautiously. He wasn't about to say Master, not here, not now.

"You're good with electronics, I know. Obi-Wan said as much. Let Yoda have all the heavy lifting. We need to secure any information Androl Oden has."

Anakin frowned dubiously at Yoda. He knew the Jedi deferred to him; had seen it, even on the day he'd been tested in the Council chamber. But all the same, it struck him that Yoda was one small, lone Jedi, and the amount of rubble was dauntingly huge.

"Will he be alright?" he said, quietly.

Plo Koon made a rasping sound that took Anakin a few moments to realise, was actually a chuckle. "He will be. Size matters not," he said. Cryptic, as far as Anakin was concerned, but Plo Koon didn't seem to realise that Anakin wasn't following. "Come," he said. "What can you tell me of the efforts to recover data?"

Anakin summarised what he knew—what Obi-Wan had surmised—about Androl Oden, and the information about the servers being buried under all that rubble.

Plo Koon nodded. "Good," he said. "We can't get access to those, then, not until Yoda moves all of that rubble."

"Moves?" Anakin squeaked. Wished his voice hadn't hit that high pitch right at the end.

"Of course," Plo Koon said, amused. "What did you expect?"

Anakin had to admit, he really wasn't sure what he would've expected. "I thought you'd use your lightsabers or something…"

"Ah," Plo Koon said. The amusement was gone; those dark goggles regarded him, steadily. "Would that all problems can be solved with a lightsaber, young Skywalker. It is better, I think, that Jedi do not keep their brains in their lightsaber hilts." He gestured at the pile of rubble beyond. "Lightsabers may be useful in breaking big chunks of duracrete into small chunks of duracrete, but what is called for here is not force but Force."

Anakin puzzled over it for a moment, before he realised that Plo Koon had meant the Force, with a capital-F. "Look at what Yoda is doing," Plo Koon prompted.

Anakin felt it, even as the diminutive Jedi Master confronted the rubble. A stirring, in…something. He didn't know how to describe it, only that it brushed against him, like breath, like air, and he didn't know what it was called, except…

Chunks of rubble, some of them huge fragments of duracrete began to rise in the air. Piece by piece, they joined the chunks that were already held aloft, apparently by nothing other than Master Yoda's will.

Yoda stood there, supremely confident, radiating serene power, as clawed hands gestured, and another chunk joined yet another chunk, all of them securely held overhead, and then carefully deposited elsewhere.

"They're…they're so much bigger than him," Anakin gaped. "And there's so many of them."
"Size matters not," Plo Koon said, again, both admonishment and reminder. "To the Force, there is no difference between the smallest pebble, the largest planet."

"You don't..." Anakin had to start, all over again. "You don't think one might be harder to move?"

"Why would they be?" Plo Koon asked. Now he was the one who sounded puzzled. He shook his head. "One needs more focus, yes. Harder? No."

Anakin decided that Plo Koon had an extremely strange definition of 'hard.'

"Until Yoda moves the rubble," Plo Koon took up the thread of the conversation again, "We cannot work on the buried servers. So it is better to go to Oden's apartment, see if there's anything there we can dig into. Come."

"You know where he lives?"

Plo Koon nodded. "I procured the information," he said, solemnly, and Anakin wondered if he'd just hacked the planetary database. "Time is fleeting, Padawan."

With a glance back to where Obi-Wan yet knelt, deeply immersed in meditation, Anakin followed the Kel Dor Jedi Master, to go see what they could do about Oden's data.

Immersed as he was in the Living Force, Obi-Wan could not but sense it, when Plo Koon and Yoda arrived. Plo Koon was a sharp, electric thrum within the river; Yoda was the deep, calm pool; the whirling eddy, the heady aftertaste of a hot cup of Koshudi green tea, and the comforting warmth of such a cup, cradled gently in both hands.

Every Jedi of Obi-Wan's generation knew Master Yoda: whereas an Initiate feared to encounter Mace Windu, Yoda was the one who took a special interest in the training and fostering of younglings. It was said Yoda knew the name of every single youngling to enter and leave the Temple's walls; he certainly never failed to recognise any youngling he'd met, along with their hobbies and tastes.

Obi-Wan felt the Force move through him one last time—a cool, tingling zephyr—and then he ascended reluctantly, step by step, towards the realm of crude matter and flesh and numb legs, using just a light touch of the Force to ease his physical discomfort.

Only a number of flags remained on the flexiplast map before him.

He stood—almost staggered to his feet—and regained his balance with catlike speed. Yoda was concentrating on the rubble: chunk after large chunk hovered and finally joined a waiting pile. They'd cleared some ground to the side of the site, and Yoda was redirecting large amounts of duracrete and shattered piping and transparisteel as if they were no more than tavok pebbles.

Even then, Yoda was moving carefully, Obi-Wan noticed, in order not to cause points of instability to give way, which might only lead to survivors being buried deeper. At times, the Jedi Master did indeed cause small collapses, but he shored those up with the Force.

Obi-Wan elected not to disrupt the Yoda's concentration, for he understood that Yoda's focus likely meant the difference between life and death for a number of the survivors.

Instead, he rolled up the flexiplast, which obediently shut off the digital display and headed over to Hyllam to return it with thanks.
Hyllam frowned at him as Obi-Wan handed him the flexiplast, but it wasn't an angry frown, more a puzzled one, as if he was trying to make sense of something. "You see those holodramas about the Jedi," Hyllam said, at last. "Or watch the news on the HoloNet, but something like this…"

Obi-Wan smiled. "Not what you expected?"

Hyllam just shook his head. "It never is, isn't it?" he said, almost-philosophically. "You might've just helped us save a few more lives that we would've, you know. And all by just kneeling there and using that Force of yours."

It was hard to tell what attitudes a being who was not a Jedi might have towards the Force. Some of them regarded the Force as a near-incomprehensible vestige of spirituality or religion that the Jedi Order had sadly tied itself to. Others revered the Force: the Aht Vorahl came to mind, as did the Cedri Näs. Others still, remained open-minded about the Force, having seen the remarkable feats that Force-sensitives were capable of. Others simply ignored it as irrelevant to their world-view.

It seemed Hyllam was one of those who thought little enough about the Force. Still, he adapted well enough, for he shrugged and said, "I'm glad you're helping us, Master Jedi."

"The Jedi serve," Obi-Wan replied. "Have you seen my apprentice? Or another Jedi—of middling height, a Kel Dor male?"

Hyllam shook his head, regretfully. "Talk to the Lieutenant," he said. "She'll know where he went."

Obi-Wan nodded his thanks and left. With Yoda at work, aiding efforts to shift the rubble, and the search-and-rescue teams going after the flagged survivors, he judged that he was better off locating Anakin and seeing what they could make of the latest turn of events.

Androl Oden's apartment was street-level, a few blocks away. Anakin felt—he didn't know how to put it. Nervous. Uneasy.

Plo Koon looked over at him. "I sense it too," the other Jedi said, which didn't make Anakin feel any more reassured.

"Sense what?" Anakin wanted to know.

Plo Koon merely shrugged. "The Force. It's warning us of danger. What danger, I don't know. But there is danger here." He reached down for his belt and switched on his lightsaber, holding it before him in a stance that seemed fairly different from Obi-Wan's.

And the blade was blue fire.

"Stay behind me," Plo Koon instructed, and he moved; up the stairs, towards the door lock. He must have done something with the Force, Anakin wasn't quite sure what, for he made a quick gesture with his free hand, and the plasteel door slid open.

He stepped in behind the Kel Dor Jedi as Plo Koon swiftly scanned the insides of the apartment. But there was no one there: not that Anakin could make out. Still, the unease remained, and Anakin didn't know why.

"I still sense it," Plo Koon agreed, although Anakin hadn't said anything. His voice was grim. "Let's take a look around, shall we?"

It wasn't as if Anakin could say no, Anakin groused, but in the end, the thought of action, of doing
something rather than sitting back and being coddled and waiting appealed to him. He followed Plo Koon as the Jedi Master drifted across the living room, the blue blade of his lightsaber casting blue-tinted shadows in odd places.

Finally, Plo Koon palmed the lights on, and Anakin blinked.

Androl Oden seemed…messy. Flimsiplast notes and durasheets scattered everywhere; some of them caf-stained. There was a plasteel mug of caf on the low table—Anakin scooted over and glanced at it. The caf had long gone cold. How long had it been since Oden had spent time here?

A few paintings hung on the walls. The wallpaper was a very pale green, tinged with the barest shade of blue. For some reason, it annoyed Anakin. It seemed so…sterile, so dead, as a colour. Colours should be bright, vivid, lively; not insipid.

Plo Koon said, again, "Follow me." He peered cautiously into the adjoining rooms. The feeling of danger never abated, Anakin thought. They checked the kitchen: ceramic and glass dishes remained in the sonic dishwasher. They'd never been removed. The fridge wasn't full, but it wasn't empty either.

For seemingly no reason, Plo Koon picked up a bottle of milk that had been resting on the counter and glanced at it. He handed it to Anakin. "Have a taste," he instructed.

Bemused, Anakin did so. It wasn't fresh, but it wasn't stale either. He told Plo Koon that, and he nodded. "Then it hasn't been so long since Oden left this house," he determined, and allowed Anakin to leave the milk back on the counter. "Milk spoils, fast, even in the relative breezy clime of Theed. Oden has not been gone long enough for the milk to turn."

"Oh," Anakin said, understanding. It was strange milk, anyway, he reflected, absently. It hadn't been blue. Milk on Tatooine was normally bantha-milk, and bantha-milk was the merciless blue of the skies on a clear day.

They moved on, past the bedroom, with a nightstand and a bed which had been neatly-made, past the 'fresher, where soap and shampoo and even a toothbrush and toothpaste were neatly kept away, and a freshly-laundered towel hung on the rack, to what was clearly a designated study: sleek, with rows of bookshelves and a computer terminal.

It wasn't blinking, Anakin realised. It had been switched off.

Unthinking, he moved towards it—"No, Skywalker!" Plo Koon called out, his voice like the lash of a whip, and Anakin recoiled.

"What?" he wanted to know.

"The danger," Plo Koon said, more calmly, now. "Didn't you sense it, just now? It intensified as you approached the terminal."

"Oh," Anakin said. "So, uh, what do I do?"

"Don't move," Plo Koon said. He switched off his lightsaber and clipped it back to his belt. "I don't sense a presence here, so I assume the danger isn't direct—most likely it's a trap: a sawn-off panel or something." He approached Anakin cautiously, checking both the panels overhead and the wooden flooring beneath their feet. Having gauged it was not tampered with, he finally examined the terminal.

"I suspect this has been tampered with," Plo Koon grunted, and produced a set of tools from one of
the many leather pouches on his utility belt. "You can move now, Anakin. Ah yes, see this?"

Anakin frowned. "The screw is loose."

"Yes. I doubt Oden's the sort to tamper with his own electronics. They've done something to the computer—help me get the panel off." They worked open the access panel, and then Plo Koon let out a low whistle. "Look at this. I haven't seen something like this in years."

"What is it?" Anakin asked, curious. The sense of...of urgency, of unease, only seemed to grow stronger as Plo Koon had pried open the access panel to reveal this strange, blinking device, mag-clamped to the innards of the computer.

"Oh, it's a bomb," Plo Koon said, almost-cheerfully.

Anakin swallowed and tried to fight the urge to take one very big step back. He'd seen what the bomb had done to the legislators' building earlier. "A very careful one too," continued Plo Koon. "I imagine it's set to go off as soon as someone boots up the computer—nicely incinerating any evidence, and killing a putative investigator into the bargain."

"Are you sure?"

"Scared?" Plo Koon asked.

"No," Anakin said, reflexively. And then, looking into those inscrutable dark goggles, "Well, yes," he admitted. All his life, he'd learned to hide fear. Fear got you killed; fear was how a master dominated his slave. He'd resolved to make it his weapon, to hide weakness, and now, he had to learn to let it go, to admit to it, and it wasn't easy at all.

He wondered what Obi-Wan would think.

"Good," Plo Koon said. "You should be. It's a cunning device."

"But we can disable it, can't we?"

Anakin had the impression that Plo Koon was smiling, he just couldn't see it, beneath the breath mask. "Of course we can," Plo Koon said. "I could do it in my sleep. It's an elegant device, because it isn't sophisticated, but it's tricky to deal with. The best way to deal with a sleeper is to kill it with electricity, or to use a mag-wrench to unclamp it. Don't ever try to cut it open and disable it—it's meant to go off if you do something like that. Same goes for frying it with a lightsaber—don't."

"But if you use a mag-wrench, you run the risk of killing what's on the computer," Anakin said, slowly. He didn't suppose whoever had affixed the bomb to the computer had cared very much about that. "Same problem with electricity."

"Good," Plo Koon said, again, approving. "But we have something they don't."

"What?" Anakin asked.

"The Force," Plo Koon said, as if it should have been perfectly obvious. He bent over the innards of the computer, frowned, and Anakin felt a sharp twitch, somewhere in his head, and then Plo Koon was holding lightning.

It wasn't quite lightning, Anakin corrected himself: more a bright golden spark, dancing between his fingers. Plo Koon bent and touched his fingers to the device. "There," he said, after a moment. "That should do the trick. I've fried it, and hopefully not the computer into the bargain. That's why control
is important." A thin column of smoke twisted up into the air from the device, and Anakin let out the breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

He looked over at Anakin. "You can switch it on now, if you want."

Anakin pressed the power button. Once. And then again.

"Boom," Plo Koon said, deadpan. The computer powered up.

"That was wizard," Anakin said, brushing aside faint annoyance. "Can you teach it to me?"

"This?" Plo Koon held up a sparking hand. He shrugged; the sparks extinguished. "I don't know, Skywalker. I suppose I could. I've never really tried to teach it to anyone, or to figure out how I do it, to tell you the truth. Gave both myself and the Council quite a scare, when I first did it."

"I wouldn't be scared," Anakin said. "I'd think I was pretty awesome. You killed that bomb with your awesome!"

Plo Koon gave that raspy, harsh laugh again. "I suppose," he agreed. "I've never quite heard it put that way before."

By the time Obi-Wan discovered where Plo Koon and Anakin had gone, it was getting late in the afternoon. He moved past the door—left ajar—to Androl Oden's apartment, wary, even though he could sense both Plo Koon's and Anakin's presences.

"There was a bomb," Anakin announced, almost immediately, as Obi-Wan entered the study. "It's all good now, though. He fried it with his awesome."

"Master Koon?" Obi-Wan asked, quite nonplussed.

Plo Koon grunted from where he had been entering things into the computer terminal, with Anakin peering at the screen over his shoulder, and if Obi-Wan knew anything about the boy at all, likely offering suggestions. "Electric judgement," he said, merely.

Obi-Wan understood. It was one of the rarer abilities that a Jedi could demonstrate with the Force, and—as far as Obi-Wan was concerned, he had thankfully never displayed a penchant for it. "What of Oden's data?"

Plo Koon shook his head, wearily. "It's a mess. I'm recovering what I can, but whoever mag-clamped the bomb to the circuitry of the computer clearly didn't care about what damage they might do to Oden's data. We'd be lucky to get something like a big smoking gun."

"Some things can still be reasoned," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Let's say Androl Oden was killed in order to prevent him from revealing critical information. The timing of the blast was too close to the original comm from Oden. Either we panicked them into action—killing Oden, to cover loose ends, in which case the timing was strictly incidental—or they only moved after Oden demonstrated a willingness to defect, which tells us that he was being monitored, or that they were in close contact."

"How does that help us, Kenobi?"

"The matching attack on Dr. Talein," Obi-Wan said. "Likely they both had useful information. Both were silenced: one more effectively than the other. I've spoken further to Master Gallia—it seems Dr. Talein was discovered by a student who'd come early for a consultation." He shook his head. "The student startled the assassin. She'd the sense to stay put and to call for security."
Plo Koon said, "Why not silence the eyewitness?"

It was a good question, one that had bothered Obi-Wan as well. Surely killing a troublesome student and finishing the job was not a difficult thing for a professional to manage. That itself spoke volumes. "I don't know," he admitted. "Do you think that's worth pursuing?"

"Certainly," Plo Koon said. "It isn't as if Androl Oden is going to speak from the dead, anytime soon. Not until I'm done salvaging what I can."

Obi-Wan nodded. "May the Force be with you, Master."

"May it be with us all," Plo Koon said.

Obi-Wan was shaking his head, as they emerged from Androl Oden's apartments. He checked his chrono and let out a sharp whistle at the time. "We'll have to move quickly, Anakin."

"I thought we were giving over the investigation," Anakin said, trying his hardest to bite back on the sense of frustration that still welled up in him.

"Yes. But until the relief teams arrive, this is still our investigation. But the state dinner is in a few more hours from now, and if we don't wrap things up soon, we'll be late for the dinner." He grinned at Anakin. "I wouldn't normally say that's a bad thing, but this is your last opportunity to taste how the rich and elite of the galaxy dine, before you're sentenced to refectory food."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Force, no. If it were, a number of Masters would have long left the Order by now."

Obi-Wan coughed lightly, as he seemed to realise that whatever he was saying was sailing over Anakin's head. "Anyway, what's more important is that as the Hero of Naboo, you can't miss the dinner. Master Koon will probably be preoccupied for a while, and I don't think Master Tiin will want to leave Dr. Talein unaccompanied, which is just as well. But we don't get to skip the dinner, I'm afraid."

Anakin thought about that. "So what can we do, before the dinner?"

"We prioritise," Obi-Wan said. "Especially because we'll need time to head back to the palace and freshen up. And clean those robes." He stared at Anakin's clothing and then his own as if they'd personally offended him. Anakin couldn't really see why. Sure, there were smears of grass and dirt and soot, but it wasn't as if their robes weren't wearable. "I think I'll ask Master Gallia if she knows the identity of our eyewitness. Probably she's already tried to put them under protection. And then we're going to talk to Master Koth."

Anakin felt like his head was spinning, just trying to catch up with everywhere Obi-Wan was darting off to. "Why?" he asked, pummelling his brain to recall just who this 'Master Koth' might be.

"Master Tiin and Master Koth were pursuing the Youngblood angle," Obi-Wan said, slowly. "I'd have expected them to have tried Dr. Talein and Androl Oden as well. In fact, it's interesting that Oden tried to contact me instead of Eeth Koth—why? I'm certain Eeth Koth wouldn't have minded giving him his contact number."

"Maybe he liked you more," Anakin offered.

Obi-Wan was shaking his head. "We've never met, so why would Androl Oden contact me of his own accord? Unless Eeth Koth gave him my contact, or…" he paled.
"What is it?" Anakin asked, but Obi-Wan had clammed up on that revelation and refused to share it with Anakin.

"If I'm right, knowing it doesn't help you," he said, firmly. "And if I'm wrong, knowing about it will only worry you."

So instead, they wound up sitting on the neighbouring flight of steps, even as Obi-Wan put in a series of calls to the various Jedi Masters involved in the investigation. From Tiin, they learned that Dr. Talein had not been any more forthcoming when Tiin and Koth had spoken to her; indeed, the Jedi Master murmured that as far as he could tell, Dr. Talein currently wasn't likely to come around any time soon.

A Jedi healer would have been helpful, Obi-Wan explained to Anakin, but the talents of the Councillors on Naboo did not run strongly to healing: Saesee Tiin was probably the best the Council could offer.

"Jedi can heal?" Anakin wondered at the thought.

"There are many different things Jedi can do, with the aid of the Force," Obi-Wan explained to him. "You've just seen Master Koon demonstrate one of the rarer abilities. And Master Windu can shatter a Corusca gem with a touch."

"So, don't let him touch you?" Anakin offered, and Obi-Wan laughed.

"Yes, that might be one conclusion to draw. I've never actually seen him employ the shatterpoint that way, though. Not against a living being." He entered in the next set of comm codes. Piell wasn't answering his comlink, so Obi-Wan simply left him a voice message and moved on to the next.

"I did not expect this," Obi-Wan said, eventually, after he'd talked to Gallia, and Gallia'd said the eyewitness in question was a Irmé Piraka, who had, it seemed, once been intimate with Maric Ersken. Eeth Koth did not answer his comlink either.

"What's 'this'?'" Anakin wanted to know.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Another connection to Maric Ersken," he said, thoughtfully. "But Maric hasn't been willing to testify without access to a lawyer. In the presence of the Ersken-retained lawyer, Maric claims to have been tricked by Ciré Perola into establishing a contract with Edaan Corp. He claims to never have seen Ciré Perola in person; their communications have always been through a secure commline. He might be just that naïve and a dupe, or…" He hesitated. "I don't like the number of times something goes back to Maric Ersken."

Anakin frowned. "Can't you just, I don't know..." he wriggled his fingers. "Do Jedi stuff. Get it out of him."

Obi-Wan frowned severely at him. "How?"

"Use Jedi magic," Anakin suggested, struggling for the words. "Get him to say it. Pull it out of his head." They could, couldn't they? In stories, Jedi did that. They knew what you were thinking, what you didn't want to say, and they could worm it out of you, or just reach into your head and take it, like plucking vaasba candy from a kid.

Obi-Wan's frown deepened. "It's not magic, Anakin," he said, as if Anakin had severely disappointed him, somehow, and it wasn't quite fair, because Anakin didn't even know why, and it was just words, wasn't it? "And I've told you before: minds aren't books to be read. And just because you can do something doesn't mean we should."
"Well, why not?" Anakin demanded, petulantly. He found himself annoyed with Obi-Wan; sure, Obi-Wan's words had reminded him of something the older Jedi had said about telepathy or whatever it was, but how was Anakin supposed to remember everything that Obi-Wan had ever said? And if you could do something like this and save lives, keep Padmé safe, part of his mind whispered, then why wouldn't you?

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow and folded his arms across his chest. "Why should we?"

"You'd know if he was lying," Anakin said. "And maybe he knows things but he's not helping. Things that could mean the difference between life or death."

"How do you know that?"

Anakin scowled. Now he was certain Obi-Wan was playing with him, somehow, even though he couldn't see how the Jedi was doing it. "You said it yourself; he's not talking to you without… without a lawyer." Gardulla the Hutt had a few, he vaguely recalled, and their main purpose seemed to be allowing Gardulla to get away with practically anything, weasling her way out of bargains and deals. "He's not being helpful and he's saying that he doesn't know anything. I call bantha poodoo."

Shmi would've made him wash his mouth out with soap for that word. Obi-Wan merely looked upwards as if beseeching the skies to give him patience. Anakin wasn't sure how that made him feel.

"In many parts of the galaxy," said Obi-Wan, "It is common for sentient beings to expect access to legal counsel and representation." And he was doing that again, Anakin thought bitterly, reverting to those big, stiff, formal words in his Coruscanti accent, and he couldn't help but feel small, couldn't help but feel as though Obi-Wan was thinking less of him, somehow.

He hated that feeling.

"That alone is no sign of guilt," Obi-Wan continued. "And if Maric Ersken is genuinely innocent, we would in fact expect him to know nothing."

"But then he'd help you," Anakin countered. "He's not being helpful."

Obi-Wan sighed. "Remember Tala Altarie?"

"What about her?" Anakin asked, suspiciously.

"Many people in the galaxy distrust the Jedi. They have their reasons. I do not always agree with them, but they do. It…saddens me, I suppose, that Maric Ersken is among their number, or that the ranks of those suspicious of the Jedi have grown on Naboo. But it is what it is. Maric Ersken may have other reasons to be cagey of helping the Jedi."

Anakin frowned. "What reasons could those be?"

"That," Obi-Wan said, "is a good question." He sighed again. "Anakin, even if we could read minds—to simply pluck the thoughts out of someone's head is a profound violation. We would need very good reason to do that. Some would say there is never a good reason for this at all. Every single thought you've ever had—every single bad, unworthy thought, along with the good, to be revealed to someone else. Your deepest, darkest secrets, your most private fears and hopes and dreams—all of them revealed in a single, damning moment and stripped away from you."

Anakin thought about what it was like, being sold. About the endless inspections, about being stripped and every crevice of his body being measured and poked at as if he was mere meat. Thought he understood, even a little, even though he didn't like it.
"Still," he grumbled. "What if he knows something?"

"What if he doesn't?" Obi-Wan countered.

"That's just...you're going in circles!" Anakin accused.

"You haven't answered my question satisfactorily," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"Well, why should I have to?"

He wondered if the question might have made Obi-Wan angry—Watto would most certainly have complained, maybe even raised a callused fist to him and cuffed him hard, but Obi-Wan simply said, "Exactly. Why should you have to?"

Anakin's scowl deepened. He hated this, hated the way Obi-Wan had turned the question back on him, just like that. "It's not fair," he accused. "You're...you're using some Jedi trick on me, aren't you?"

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow at him. "Perhaps," he said. "From a certain point of view, I am. But why exactly is it unfair? Think about it, Anakin." He stood up, pushing off the steps and absently dusting off his knees. "Let's head back to the palace and see if we can get hold of our missing Helukala."

Anakin seethed as he followed Obi-Wan, running through the words in his head, wondering when he'd lost control of the conversation. Wondered if he had ever been in control in the first place. (He didn't like that idea, that he didn't have control. Slaves didn't have control. But he was free now, so why did it feel like he was a lumbering bantha?)

He wondered why there had been disappointment on Obi-Wan's face—if that expression had indeed been disappointment, and why it bothered him so.

Chapter End Notes

More talking and the investigation continues to be derailed. For those of you who might want a coherent scorecard/recap:

This started with an assassin using the palace security system to shut down movement across the palace and to lure both Obi-Wan and Captain Panaka into a room with a bomb. It seems that there is an assassination attempt on Queen Amidala (though Obi-Wan isn't 100% certain about this) and one of the remaining infiltrators, a notorious assassin by the name of Arvol Resnik, takes Anakin hostage in an attempt to negotiate his escape. This goes badly and Arvol Resnik dies during the rescue.

Obi-Wan is tasked to investigate matters further. Meanwhile, Plo Koon attempts to crack the encryption on Resnik's comlink. Whoever hired Resnik seems to have extremely deep pockets, and Queen Amidala is suspicious of the Five, a loose group of commercial families/clans which have wide-ranging interests and are extremely rich and influential in Naboo politics. After talking to the Derriva (one of the Five), Obi-Wan is pointed in the direction of the Perdaë, a group of dissidents who want Naboo to become a full Republic (rather than a monarchy.) In particular, he's directed to a legislator named Androl Oden and a lecturer by the name of Pallié Talein.
While investigating Pallié Talein, Obi-Wan is shot at by a sniper. While the sniper gets away, they leave behind a distinctive boot print of red soil. Meanwhile, the other shooter is apprehended and turns out to be one of Dr. Talein's students. Dr. Talein admits that the Perdaé are not a coherent group but there has been a group of extremely disaffected youth and young adults mobilising on Naboo, and they are: A. generally hostile to the Republic and the Jedi, and B. generally enamoured of Dr. Talein's writings. This extreme splinter-group of the Perdaé call themselves the Youngbloods.

Obi-Wan and Anakin return to Plo Koon informing them that there appears to be more than one interest at stake in what seemed to be a simple assassination: Arvol Resnik was supposed to wait for his employer to dispatch someone to the palace. Obi-Wan wonders if this has any connection with the ransacking of the palace library during the security lockdown but can't see what anyone would want with historical Naboo manuscripts. During the victory parade, mercenaries hidden in the crowd open fire, and Junaka, Ren Yvar's head of security, is caught attempting to assassinate Queen Amidala, and is identified as the missing sniper.

The Jedi are disturbed at the nature of this attack, as it seems to display familiarity with the vulnerabilities of the Jedi. Junaka claims to have been motivated by the Youngbloods but Obi-Wan is unconvinced. He's not certain that idealism fits Junaka's background. It turns out that Junaka has worked for the Senator for Naboo, currently Falce Valarin, who cannot remember anything unusual about Junaka. Further investigations reveal a connection between the Trade Federation, a shell company by the name of Edaan Corp, and Maric Ersken.

By now, Androl Oden has contacted Obi-Wan, claiming the matter is urgent, but has been silenced in an immense attack on Naboo's legislator's offices. Meanwhile, Dr. Talein has been attacked, though she has thankfully been spared due to a timely intervention on the part of a student and is now unconscious.

Whoosh. That was more involved than I expect it to be. Do feel free to drop by with any questions or comments, if you have any!

On a final note: Anakin does not (yet) know what the Chosen One is, but he's got the idea that the Jedi think he is special and are treating him so. Whether he is the Chosen One is something that's up for grabs (as far as the Jedi are currently concerned.) Since we've watched the prequels, the Jedi speculation is hilariously off-target. But keep in mind that up to this point, they don't (yet) know that there's a link between the Trade Federation and the Sith. As far as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon are concerned, this Sith just mysteriously pops up on Tatooine and then waltzes through an entire blockade and attacks Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan, incidentally while they have Anakin with them. As far as Obi-Wan is concerned, the common link is Anakin. It's not exactly water-tight, as he acknowledges, but it's what he's working on for the moment.

Cheers,
Ammar.
Chapter Twenty: Uprising

Obi-Wan could sense Anakin's simmering resentment during the long walk back to the palace. He made no move to assuage it. Obi-Wan needed time alone, with his thoughts. And—Obi-Wan remembered, Qui-Gon had done this, too. It had been one of the best gifts his former Master had given him, in retrospect. Time to consider his actions and to gather his thoughts.

Should Anakin's words have surprised him? He did not know.

Anakin had grown up a slave, on Tatooine, in the Outer Rim. In Hutt territory. He was surprisingly educated in some ways and Obi-Wan thought to himself that part of the task when they returned to the Temple was to begin to identify what Anakin knew, and where his education had been lacking.

His mind, however, quickly shifted off the seemingly endless task of training Anakin, and back to the problem at hand. Androl Oden had tried to contact Obi-Wan. How had he gotten ahold of Obi-Wan's comlink? And why had he been killed?

The Jedi had been naïve, perhaps, to assume that they were closing in on the conspiracy. It seemed that whoever was behind the attacks was more than ready to leave a trail of bodies in their wake.

Had Androl Oden known something, then? Had he been a loose end caught up in the rush to prune the overgrown mess that was this conspiracy?

Or had it been a trap?

Either way, Obi-Wan thought, it was strange that the assassin had hesitated to kill Pallié Talein when confronted by the student. Irmé Piraka, Adi Gallia had said. Extremely close to Maric Ersken.

Something about that picture bothered him, but Obi-Wan could not say what it was.

*Patience*, he imagined his former Master saying. *Answers will present themselves in time.* Qui-Gon was always sharp, always adept at identifying beings and their motives. Obi-Wan wondered if the ease with which Qui-Gon did that stemmed from his powerful connection to the Living Force.

Perhaps it was why they'd made such a good team.

Obi-Wan favoured the mysticism of the Unifying Force, the heady sensation of glimpsing at all the little things from the perspective of eternity. Insight wasn't found in details but in the larger, glorious tapestry in which all wove and all were woven into.

In a critical way, he thought, they'd balanced each other's weaknesses, respected each other's strengths. This was as it should be.

How could he do that for Anakin?

The wind was soft and cool, and Obi-Wan enjoyed the sensation as it tugged at him; tugged at the unaccustomed lightness (still!) that was his missing Padawan braid. No longer a Padawan; he'd dreamed of this day, back when he had been young, and now he did not see what the fuss and
excitement had really been about.

They returned to the palace, nodding to the guards that stood on duty.

A few inquiries got Obi-Wan the contact details of Nurié Helukala, but when he attempted to arrange for an appointment, he was told that the Helukala representative was busy preparing for the state dinner later this evening.

"I understand," Obi-Wan replied, politely, and the secretary hung up.

He looked at Anakin. Anakin just looked back at him blankly.

"What?" The boy finally demanded.

"Nurié Helukala is otherwise engaged," Obi-Wan said, thoughtfully, putting away his comlink. "We probably won't get the chance to talk with her before the state dinner, though I'll see if I can get ahold of her there."

Anakin looked at him.

"Get changed," Obi-Wan said, making a shooing motion with his hands. "Get dressed. The state dinner is very soon, and a little extra time to freshen up never hurt anybody."

"We're not…investigating more?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Most of the useful lines of inquiry are currently being pursued by the other Jedi." He raised an eyebrow. "You also have one thing to do that they can't do."

"What?" Anakin frowned, no doubt trying to figure out what it was.

"Be the Hero of Naboo. Get honoured, and, if I'm to be perfectly honest, likely cooed over and spoiled rotten, at least for a couple of hours. It'll be a nice way to conclude your first unofficial mission before we return to the Temple, so your mission will be to enjoy it as much as you can."

Anakin made a face. "So long as they're feeding me," he muttered, warily, and trudged off to get himself cleaned up.

It bothered him.

Anakin scrubbed at himself and glared at the 'fresher controls. Just as the tailor had promised, his clothes—his last connection to Tatooine, really—had been taken and disposed of, and he found new, fine-fitted clothing that looked somewhat like Obi-Wan's Jedi robes folded up and waiting for him in his room.

It bothered him, like sand in his shoes, like the taste of dust at the bottom of a cup of blue milk, because the dust got everywhere on Tatooine. (He liked that idea. Even Gardulla the Hutt had to deal with dust. Dust was the true equaliser, on Tatooine.)

Obi-Wan giving him the silent treatment, as if he'd done something wrong, as if Anakin just needed to think about whatever it was and then apologise. Anakin stuck his jaw out firmly and glared at the reflection in the 'fresher tiles.

He wasn't.

He hadn't said anything wrong, and he wasn't about to let Obi-Wan stonewall him into changing his
mind. If he had real Jedi powers, he'd make that Maric Ersken admit everything wrong, everything bad he'd ever done. He'd save lives. He'd find out who was trying to kill Padmé or Obi-Wan and he'd stop them.

Whatever it took.

There was a series of knocks on the door of his room.

"Coming!" Anakin yelped, as he hastily dunked himself under the 'fresher spray once more and quickly switched off the 'fresher. There was a bit of guilt there; on Tatooine, water was expensive and a luxury. They washed in a tub, in the same water Shmi used to clean her vegetables, the same water she used on their clothes, because you couldn't afford to throw away perfectly useable water, even if you couldn't drink it.

The Hutts raised the water taxes every year, and you had to pay it, even if you were a slave.

And here he was, feeling guilty for enjoying the sensation of cool, clean water against his skin, and not needing to worry about what every single spilled drop was going to cost them. (Shmi deserved this; deserved a life with soft fine things, and water as plentiful as the food. Water that was clear and clean and that flowed on your skin and down your throat without any of the thick dust, without being contaminated by sand. He vowed to make sure she would get it.)

Qui-Gon had showed him how to use the sonic 'fresher on the ship. Apparently, this one hadn't been all that different. Anakin thought it made sense: after all, the ship had come from Naboo after all. The fittings were probably the same.

He liked the water, though. Liked it so much more than a sonic cleansing. Water just felt different. It felt luxurious, reminding him that he was no longer on Tatooine. No longer a slave.

It felt right.

He hastily yanked on the Jedi clothing, realising it was harder to get the tunic right than it looked, and palmed open the door.

"I'm coming, I'm comin—ulp!"

He darted out and right smack into an extremely tall and extremely imposing Jedi. Anakin was sure the Jedi had a name, but it wasn't coming to mind right now, and especially not when the Jedi in question had a stare that seemed to say he knew everything remotely questionable that Anakin had ever done in his entire life.

And the Jedi was bald. So there was that, too.

"Uh. Where's Obi-Wan?"

The extremely imposing Jedi looked even more imposing, now that Anakin had mentioned Obi-Wan's name, and Anakin wondered if it had been a big mistake, if maybe this guy hated Obi-Wan's guts, and maybe for all Obi-Wan had—but no, Obi-Wan had said Jedi didn't hate, so maybe this guy just passive-aggressively disliked Obi-Wan's guts. Jedi were allowed to dislike things, right?

"Left on an errand," the Jedi said, which Anakin thought was just plain unfair. Hadn't Obi-Wan said he'd take Anakin along? Hadn't Obi-Wan said that Anakin was supposed to be his apprentice? How was Anakin supposed to do that if Obi-Wan wasn't going to let him come along?

Maybe he was baggage, Anakin thought darkly. Or maybe Obi-Wan really was taking out his
displeasure with Anakin from earlier. He hadn't liked the idea of rifling through Maric Ersken's head, and Anakin still thought that was fairly ridiculous.

Why did he have to answer Obi-Wan's questions?

_Because you're his student, bantha brains!_ He snapped at himself. If he were still Watto's slave, he owed the man nothing. He wouldn't have to answer Obi-Wan's questions at all.

"Are you quite finished?" the Jedi asked.

Anakin blinked up at him.

The Jedi raised an eyebrow and immediately became at least five-hundred-and-twenty-nine percent more intimidating and stern. "You're radiating resentment and anxiety, Skywalker."

Anakin glared at him. "Stay out of my head!"

_So now you want privacy_, said a reasonable part of Anakin's mind, which seemed to be unable to let go of his argument with Obi-Wan from earlier. _But you don't think Maric Ersken should have his privacy._

Anakin thought crossly that it wasn't the same thing at all.

The Jedi folded his arms across his chest and looked as though he was—in whatever serene, passive-aggressive Jedi way—considering how easy it would be to break Anakin in two like a twig.

"Jedi do not read minds, Skywalker," the Jedi intoned. "Minds are not—"

"—books to be read," Anakin muttered. So Obi-Wan had told him, time and again.

"Yes," said the Jedi, severely. "You already know this. I can't read your mind, but you, Skywalker, are not hiding your feelings. You're screaming them into the void for anyone with the slightest measure of Force sensitivity to know about."

Anakin winced.

He had not expected…Well, he just had not.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, and tried to do what Obi-Wan had told him to, that trick with the breathing and the counting where he'd felt the Force move. But there was no response this time; not from the Force, and all he could feel was that uncomfortable morass of emotions sloshing about in the pit of his stomach.

The Jedi sighed. "You have a long way to go," he said, which only irritated Anakin more. Of _course_ he did; he was new, wasn't he? Did they expect him to get those things, right off the bat?

Anakin yelped in surprise as the Jedi bent over and tugged at his tunic, and then shook his head. "You put the belt on first," the Jedi murmured, "No wonder it's in a mess." And then he tugged off the synthleather belt that Anakin had been given, and began stripping him off. "Do you mind? I'm going to have to teach you how to deal with your clothing."

"Of course I do," Anakin groused, even as the Jedi swiftly stripped off layer after layer until he was left shivering in his underthings.

The Jedi raised an eyebrow. "I won't look," he said, though it was poor consolation. "First, the undertunic." He looked away even as tossed what had seemed like a thin white tunic to Anakin, and
told him to put it on. Anakin shrugged into it, and then the Jedi seemed to perform some sort of trick, because the other, beige tunic separated into two pieces. "You attached the tabards to the overtunic," the Jedi stated, calmly. "They are separate. Overtunic first."

Anakin pulled on the overtunic next, thinking to himself that the Jedi were extremely, extremely particular, and wondering why Obi-Wan hadn't been here, hadn't walked him through it. It'd been pretty much the same get-up at the parade, only Obi-Wan hadn't fussed at him, had just adjusted things until they looked just right.

Now, though: the overtunic was a little more tricky, and he struggled to align it right, until finally the Jedi took pity on him and showed him how the tunic was done; with one half aligned at an angle over the other, and then the tabards went on over that, with another tug to ensure they aligned just right with the tunic, and then the belt, and then you had to tug the tabards so they lay just right, without being particularly crinkled or crooked.

"Slovenliness," explained the very intimidating bald Jedi, after that arcane sequence of steps had been completed, "Is ill-becoming of a Jedi, and most particularly a Padawan."

He added several degrees of disapproval to each word, and stared hard at Anakin as if he was already judging him for the wrinkles Anakin had managed to add to his tunic. Anakin privately thought that he was lucky he wasn't that Jedi's Padawan.

"What's….What's slov-slovenliness?" Anakin tried, sounding out each syllable.

"Being messy," the Jedi said, briefly. "Sloppy. The Jedi is disciplined, rather than sloppy, Skywalker. You would do well to keep that in mind. Let's go."

"What about Obi-Wan?" Anakin wanted to know, standing his ground. Surely Obi-Wan had promised Anakin was going to be his Padawan, he wasn't going to abandon his charge just like that, right?

Sure, he was upset with Anakin and Anakin was upset with him but he wasn't going to think that Anakin was just baggage and deposit him with someone else like this Jedi who really, really disliked him, right?

"He'll be along," the Jedi said, curtly. "Come. The state dinner will begin soon." He turned on his heel and simply started walking out of Anakin's room.

Anakin found himself trailing along in the Jedi's wake. Baggage, he thought. He didn't like that feeling, at all.

He wondered what Obi-Wan was up to, and if Obi-Wan was really going to miss that dinner after all. Hadn't Obi-Wan said they both couldn't miss the dinner?

Obi-Wan really hadn't intended to miss the dinner at all, but one thing lead to another and snowballed into a gigantic fiasco that was about to blow up in his face.

He really hoped that Anakin was going to be understanding. But he'd told Master Windu, and Mace —Force, was it awkward referring even in the relative privacy of his mind to the man by his first name—had promised to take Anakin well in hand.

For this reason, Obi-Wan had swallowed his misgivings about leaving Anakin behind, even as he found himself wedged onto a narrow ledge—part of a maze of rusted pipes—high in the eaves of a nondescript warehouse. If someone had told him this morning that he would have been crawling
along a series of pipes, trying to be as quiet as possible, with—of all people!—the rather surprising Ren Yvar, Obi-Wan would have…

Well, he wouldn't have quite *laughed* at it; he knew enough now to be able to surmise that the most astonishing things happened during missions, but this would have been a twist that Obi-Wan would have assigned a low credence to.

Yet here was Ren Yvar, scurrying along the ducts with an agility that belied his short, powerful frame.

Murmurs drifted up from below; murmurs and raised voices. The Perdaé—or the Youngbloods, Obi-Wan thought to himself—were arguing, and it seemed that they could not decide on what was to be done with their captive.

Eeth Koth.

_How_ exactly Master Koth had gotten himself captured was something Obi-Wan wondered about, and then laughed at himself for the naïveté implied by that question. For as he had told Anakin only a day ago—Jedi were not impervious to capture, to torture, or to death. Master Yaddle herself had endured centuries of imprisonment on Mawan.

He called on the Force to steady himself, to lend himself balance and sureness of foot. Even here, humming with tension, the Force answered his call. Felt, too, an answering surge in the Force from the captive below, which meant that Master Koth had sensed his presence, and knew he was here.

Obi-Wan pulled up short as he drew closer to where the Youngbloods gathered, and listened in as the arguments reached a new level of urgency. Behind him, Ren Yvar halted.

*Wait,* Obi-Wan signalled, using Mercenary's Guild handsigns that he'd dredged up from memory. *Listen.*

Ren Yvar raised an eyebrow—a more universal signal for disbelief, or incredulity, but he nodded and waited, perched precariously on the pipe. He began checking the cable launcher at his belt.

"You can't just kill a Jedi like that, Mharié!" someone snapped. A young man, probably militia. He wore a flight jacket over simple trousers and combat boots, and carried an E-5 blaster rifle slung over a shoulder.

Wait.

An *E-5* blaster rifle?

Obi-Wan frowned. He relented and whispered into Ren Yvar's ear, pitching his voice low enough so it wouldn't carry, "What weapons do the Naboo militia use?"

Thank the Force he was with Ren Yvar. Iben Derriva would probably have shrugged, Sirdaé Erskén would probably have issued a categorical denial, and Jurité Velarra would have probably have told him point-blank that she had no idea.


Obi-Wan gestured to the blaster rifle, and Ren Yvar's eyes narrowed.

"Not standard armament."
"Didn't think so," Obi-Wan hissed, quietly. He thought he made out the familiar shape of a module on this E-5 as well. Modified, just like Tala Altarie's had been. They hadn't managed to find out where the modifications had come from, but Obi-Wan had suspected a connection to Junaka.

Someone had been scavenging weapons from the Trade Federation's droid army. And they had been doing so with remarkable efficiency.

"Why not, Ernan? Give me one good reason not to. His being here puts us all in a difficult position, and you know it." That must've been Mharié. Her own blaster rifle was slung over her shoulder, and Obi-Wan relaxed a hair. Master Koth was not in danger—yet.

"Plan?" Ren Yvar said, quietly, into Obi-Wan's ear.

Obi-Wan started and almost dropped from the pipe, a move that might have been disastrous. Qui-Gon would've chided him for letting his awareness of his environment slip—"It does not do to become so focused on a single blade of grass that we miss the field before us, Padawan," and Obi-Wan would've made a smart retort about adherents of the Living Force and especially Taras-Rja being one to talk, and the familiar pang of loss welled up in him again, even here, even now, sharp and singing like the blade of a lightsaber.

He sized up the situation, as fast as he could. He counted twenty-six shapes below, not including Eeth Koth, or anyone else who might be affiliated with the Youngbloods. Hardly enough, Obi-Wan thought wryly, for insurrection.

And yet here they were.

One Jedi and the heir to the Yvar weren't going to stop them.

Not unless they played their cards right.


Ren Yvar frowned. "For this? The repercussions—"

"Damn the repercussions," Obi-Wan hissed. They could worry about the legalities later on; if they didn't act quickly and decisively, this situation could potentially explode in Queen Amidala's face.

In all their faces, rather.

"Get security, if you can," Obi-Wan told him. "Get those you trust, if you can't." Who knew how many among planetary security were sympathetic to the Perdaé or the Youngbloods?

Ren Yvar must have realised that, for Obi-Wan read the decision that crystallised in his dark eyes, even as he nodded and sucked in a deep breath, and began making his way back along the pipes, brave, and perhaps just a bit foolish for crawling into this situation in the first place, anyway.

Obi-Wan crouched on the pipes, and watched the young revolutionaries below plot rebellion, and the removal of a Queen.

It had not begun like this.

Obi-Wan had left Anakin in his room to get cleaned up and get changed, for the state dinner. He'd have to teach Anakin how to put on his Jedi garments eventually, Obi-Wan found himself thinking. He could not be continuously helping Anakin neaten himself up.
He made his way back to his room. Time enough for a shower in the 'fresher, and to clean up. And
then, there would be the state dinner, and he’d hopefully catch Nurié Helukala there, and…

Something still bothered him and he found himself thinking about it as water sprayed against the
‘fresher tiles in a comforting murmur. The assassin. Why had the assassin abandoned the task of
silencing Dr. Pallié Talein the moment Irmé Piraka had entered the picture?

The answer came to him, then.

Because it was too neat. Too convenient. Everything pointed back to Maric Ersken.

Because beings did not hire assassins and then present to them an entire list of people they were close
to and people the assassins should avoid killing, if, by chance, they should encounter said people in
the course of carrying out the contract.

And the only evidence they’d had of an assassin…

…Was Irmé Piraka's word.

Obi-Wan cursed, quietly but fervently, using language that Qui-Gon would've had him wash his
mouth out with soap for, since it was language unbecoming a Jedi Knight. And then, having
thoroughly violated propriety, he forced himself to exhale, acknowledging the frustration warring
with urgency within him, and releasing both emotions to the Force.

He stopped, quickly flung a towel over himself, and charged out of the ‘fresher.

He tugged on his clothing—tunic and tabards and utility belt, and thumbed open the comlink pouch
to contact Adi Gallia. No response. He tried Eeth Koth. Definitely no response. Finally, at a loss, he
tried Mace Windu.

There was still no response, so he left a recorded comm message, briefly relaying his suspicions
about Irmé Piraka and asking the Jedi Master to take Anakin in his charge for the state dinner.

Anakin. Obi-Wan couldn't in good conscience take the boy along with him—not when Anakin was
young, impetuous, and very most certainly untrained. Nevermind that the boy was technically
supposed to be his Padawan Learner.

Obi-Wan scooped up his Jedi robes, slipped into them, and went out by the balcony to catch a liar,
an assassin, and a member of what appeared to be an active conspiracy on Naboo.

He commandeered a swoop bike and was probably breaking several planetary traffic regulations as
he gunned the swoop, pushing its engines past the legal limit on the way to the Arjuna University of
Free Theed.

Although members of planetary security were on the streets, his Jedi garb won him some measure of
grudging tolerance from them. And in any case, Obi-Wan was more than capable of outflying them on
a swoop, much less one that bore the seal of the Naboo Monarchy.

He parked the swoop by the entrance to the university and made his way onto the campus, to the
grassy courtyard with the fountain. He didn't know where the registrar’s office was, but that was fine.
He had other resources at his disposal.

He flagged down a student wandering across the courtyard, her book satchel hanging open at her
side. "Excuse me," he said, politely. "I'm a member of the Jedi Order conducting an investigation.
Do you know Irmé Piraka?"

She looked up at him and shook her head and scurried off, but Obi-Wan's dogged persistence bore fruit. The third student he asked: a young man with dark, jagged eyebrows so thick they looked like they'd been scrawled on with marker ink nodded and mentioned that they took the same Advanced Materials Science class, and that he hadn't seen her around lately.

"You can try Valenti Hall, though," he suggested, after a moment's thought. "I think she's staying on campus."

Obi-Wan thanked him and obtained directions to Valenti Hall—named, of course, for Dasca Valenti, the painter—which was on the other side of the courtyard: a tall building painted in cheerful shades of tahdiq's egg blue, with occasional shutters and curtains that were the bright red-orange of ripe muja fruit.

The administrator there was much less helpful. No, she had not seem Irmé Piraka in at least three days, which made it only so much stranger than Irmé Piraka had happened upon the attempted assassination of Dr. Pallié Talein. She refused to confirm any details of Irmé Piraka's home address or contact details, citing Naboo's strict privacy laws, though she reluctantly allowed him access to Irmé Piraka's room in Valenti Hall. Even the knowledge that the Queen supported the Jedi investigation was not sufficient to move her.

He could have attempted to coax her into a more helpful frame of mind with the use of the Force, but Obi-Wan firmly declined that possibility, thanked her as well, and strode up to the room in question, taking the stairs two at a time.

The electronic lock opened easily with a swipe of the key card, and Obi-Wan found himself staring at an empty dormitory room. Small, as most student rooms tended to be, but most decidedly empty. Irmé Piraka had known, somehow, or she'd simply decided against taking chances. The bunk bed was neatly made, blankets folded and smoothed out. There was a small desk and a chair, with a few dark rings on the scratched surface of the desk that indicated where a student might have left a stimcaf mug to rest for too long, but the mug itself was nowhere to be found. The small closet set into the near wall held a few changes of clothing, and an unused toiletries kit, but all in all, Irmé Piraka's room reminded Obi-Wan more of a traveller's hotel than somewhere a student was staying for the course of the semester. Even the tahdiq's egg blue walls were bare, with no sign of adornment at all.

The window was slightly ajar, and when Obi-Wan peered out, he noticed what might have been the slightest indentation on the grass, in the rough outline of booted footprints. The room was not very high up, which at least explained the mystery of Irmé Piraka's comings and goings. The grass itself, however, was springy and lush; only the markings from where Irmé had landed as she made her exit from the window bore mute testimony to her preferred route.

There was no sign of where Irmé Piraka had gone, no clue that might have helped him, though he did a quick but thorough canvass of the room. Obi-Wan made himself breathe out his frustration. A wild nerf chase, then, but to what end?

Something caught his eye and he bent over and moved the chair and reached under the table to pick it up. A simple mag-screw, Obi-Wan thought, frowning to himself. It bore a coat of black spray-paint, and was itself unremarkable.

The mag-screw must have fallen off while Irmé Piraka was disassembling something, and then rolled under the table. Why did it seem familiar?

_Breathe, Padawan_, he thought he heard Qui-Gon say. The Jedi way was not to chase at the thought,
but to let it go and to expand their focus, to allow the mind to drift freely, for the thought to float gently into view.

The answer came to him, then. Mag-screws were not common in sensitive electronic devices like desktops or datapads because the process of sealing or unsealing such devices could damage the fragile electronics within. It was a fast way to losing the consumer's data.

But there were certain devices for which mag-screws came in handy…

…Such as the E-5 blaster rifle used by the Trade Federation’s battle droids.

Obi-Wan frowned down at the flattened head of the mag-screw he held in his palm. "Irmé Piraka," he said, aloud. His voice was quiet. "You have a lot of explaining to do."

There was no point in further investigation right now, so Obi-Wan strode back out of the university, the mag-screw tucked safely away in one of the several pouches on his utility belt. He had just returned to the swoop when his comlink signalled.

He recognised the incoming code. It was from Ren Yvar.

"Kenobi," he greeted, curtly. "What is it?"

"Fierfek," Ren Yvar cursed, almost at once. A far cry from the arrogant, composed young heir that Obi-Wan had traded careful, wary jabs with, at the very beginning. "Thank the stars, I've been trying to get ahold of you, Jedi Kenobi."

Obi-Wan swung a leg over the speeder bike. "Well, you seem to have succeeded," he replied, dryly. "What's happened?"

A long pause, as if Ren Yvar was trying to determine the best way to say whatever it was. Or perhaps there was no good ways. "Junaka. He's dead."

"What?" Obi-Wan demanded, stunned. "How?"

There should have been heightened security. There was heightened security, in light of the existing attempts to silence Dr. Pallié Talein, and Androl Oden. And yet. And yet Junaka was still dead. And there it was again, that nagging thought that something wasn't quite right.

He filed it away for now, allowed it to ripen, and focused his attention on Ren Yvar's words. "That's the thing, Kenobi, it's a kriffing mess here and I don't think anyone has any answers just yet. We could use a Jedi presence here right now."

Obi-Wan sighed quietly. No doubt they could indeed. "Alright, I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Good. Yvar out."

Obi-Wan checked his chrono and winced. It was getting far too late to make it back in time to head for the state dinner with Anakin. He palmed his comlink and entered the code for Mace Windu's comm and was greeted by the stern, grave voice of the Jedi Master in question.

"Report, Kenobi."

"Irmé Piraka seems to have successfully disappeared, Master," Obi-Wan reported. "I've made an attempt to search the university campus but no one's seen her in three days."
"Except for Adi," Mace Windu mused. "And Dr. Talein."

"At the very least," Obi-Wan agreed. He supposed a secretary or campus security officer might have seen Irmé Piraka as well, but the last he had heard from Adi Gallia, Irmé Piraka had been debriefed by the responding campus security officer, and then released.

"I take it you are returning to the palace, then. You'll barely be in time for the state dinner."

Obi-Wan coughed. "Actually, Master, I have more news. None of it is good."

"Of course," Mace Windu muttered and sighed. "Well? What is it then?"

"Junaka is dead, Master. Ren Yvar commed me and seemed rather disturbed. I was under the impression we had put into place precautions but the security station seems to have been compromised. Whoever they are, Master, they're getting rid of loose ends with surprising speed."

"I know," Mace Windu agreed. "I don't like this, Kenobi."

"Respectfully, Master, neither do I. I'm en route to the security station to discover how Junaka was iced and what Ren Yvar knows."

"Good. Be careful of the man," Mace Windu murmured, darkly. "I know Adi's cleared him, but even so. I would be very wary of how he's managed to turn up in the right place at exactly the right time."

"I understand, Master. Will you be supervising Anakin?" The 'in my absence' was left mostly unspoken, but Obi-Wan knew that the words hung in the air between them, anyway.

"Of course," Mace Windu promised, immediately. "I'll watch over him as if he were my own Padawan."

"Thank you, Master."

"May the Force be with you, Kenobi."

"May the Force be with you, Master Windu."

Obi-Wan ended the comm call and tucked his comlink away and revved up the swoop bike, the engines roaring to life.

Whoever was in charge of hardware acquisitions in the palace had a good eye. The swoop bike was amazingly responsive; he kicked it off from the ground and gunned the engine. Some of the older models Obi-Wan had handled on farflung worlds had a tendency to veer to one side, or to cut out in the middle of dives, and the swoop itself responded only sluggishly to the controls.

This one, however, was almost like an extension of himself, and while Obi-Wan had never been one for the latest, novahot technology, he knew that Garen Muln would've given his left arm to be able to fly a swoop bike like this.

Just another thing to taunt Garen with when they finally returned to Coruscant, he supposed. He banked hard to the right in order to avoid an onrushing building, and then jinked left to dodge a power-line, and headed swiftly for the Theed security station where Orm Junaka had—until recently—been held in custody.

To the credit of Naboo's planetary security, the security station was not so much in chaos as it was a hive of bustling activity. A frazzled-looking security officer challenged Obi-Wan, the moment he
parked the swoop bike in front of the station, but upon seeing his lightsaber, chivvied him swiftly into a meeting room within the security station.

Ren Yvar nursed a steaming mug of stimcaf. That arrogant poise was gone now; shattered. In its place was a terrible, shocked numbness. "Jedi Kenobi," Ren Yvar greeted, the moment he saw Obi-Wan, and Obi-Wan read relief, plainly-displayed, on the man's features.

"What happened here?" Obi-Wan wanted to know. "For that matter, why were you here?"

"Stimcaf?" Ren Yvar offered, but Obi-Wan declined. He shrugged and downed the rest of his mug. "I was doing some reading that I found interesting."

"And the state dinner?"

Ren Yvar shrugged carelessly. "I notice you aren't there either, Kenobi. You want to skip the dancing and the game of I-trust-you-but-I-don't and get to the point?"

Obi-Wan drew in a deep breath and reminded himself that Adi Gallia had vetted Ren Yvar, he thought he trusted the man, and that Mace Windu had urged caution. "What reading?"

Ren Yvar smiled, slightly. "Thought you'd never ask. Here, take a look." He slid a series of flimsiplast files across the battered surface of the meeting room table to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan reached over and picked up the files, leafing through them one by one. He read as quickly as he dared, but they were all on a common point: Orm Junaka's service records in the Naboo militia and then the Republic's airborne infantry, and finally as the Senator's security detail. All of them spoke well to Junaka's scruplousness and discipline and professionalism, as Obi-Wan had already known.

As Ren Yvar surely already knew.

He let a degree of ice creep into his voice. "I don't see anything that we haven't already mentioned."

Ren Yvar shook his head, chidingly. "Look at some of the redactions on his records. Even with what's left—Ydani. That civil war? Serious chizk went down there, Kenobi. And then there was that frak-up on Vai Ferrayw. I've listened to the reports, Kenobi. Most of the military got shot up there, just trying to break that illegal siege. Hrothvak. Ilu-Seilu. Opahn. So many worlds."

"He's good, I'll give you that," Obi-Wan said impatiently, bundling the files back together. He slipped them back onto the meeting table. "What of it?"

He was familiar with a number of the worlds and crises Ren Yvar had mentioned, had discussed some of them in seminars and tutorials within the Jedi Temple. The Temple, at times, seemed like a microcosm of the larger galaxy, but their teachers had always taken great pains to remind them that they were not—and could not afford to be—separate from the greater galaxy without, and encouraged discussion of current affairs and crises unfolding.

"He's not just very good," Ren Yvar replied. "He's a survivor. Luck matters, as does skill, but you don't deal with being deployed to that many engagements and conflicts where people die and walk back out without being extremely resilient."

"I'll grant that."

"But that's not what we saw," Ren Yvar pointed out, a note of triumph entering his voice. "We didn't talk to a survivor, that day. For one, his approach was strange. He tried to knife the Queen. It's hard
to claim that he avoided energy weapons for fear of a Jedi deflection: if he truly wanted to assassinate
the Queen, he was better off doing it without Jedi protection altogether. He could've laid low until
your Order inevitably returned to Coruscant, and then struck. And there are better ways to tackle Jedi
protection without resorting to blasters or melee weapons. He could've equipped himself with a
slugthrower. Flechettes. A grenade launcher."

"That's true," Obi-Wan conceded, warily. Was that what had seemed wrong about Junaka's attack?
For the attack had demonstrated subtlety; it had played intimately on the weaknesses of the Jedi. So
why had Junaka not been armed with better weaponry?

"For another," Ren Yvar continued, "The man we spoke to that day in the holding cell was a
fantastic. He had been caught in the act of attempted treason: the strictest permissible punishment
would be life imprisonment, since King Arjuna first did away with the death penalty on Naboo. But
the Junaka there," he nodded to the files, "is neither a bleeding heart nor a fantastic, nor incompetent."

"I see the conundrum," Obi-Wan agreed. There it was: the discrepancy that had repeatedly galled
him about how Junaka had acted and behaved that day in the holding cell. Junaka was not a
revolutionary. He did not seem like a revolutionary. So why did he behave as one, when the stakes
—the consequences for him—were so high?

Ren Yvar's mouth twisted in a smirk. "Thought so. The only natural conclusion is that man does not
exist."

"But why?" Obi-Wan wanted to know. "If Junaka was playing the revolutionary, and holding silent
and refusing to tell on his employers—while facing life imprisonment—what could there be for him
to gain? He is, as you have noted, a survivor. Professionalism only goes so far."

"More logic," Ren Yvar said, quietly, "Would lead to the conclusion that Junaka expected to be
taken care of. To be set free, discreetly, illicitly, or otherwise."

Which implied a benefactor with resources, and now they were once more circling back to the ranks
of the Five, for all the good that would do them.

Obi-Wan gazed directly at Ren Yvar and raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

Ren Yvar shook his head. "He was already dead by the time I arrived."

"Why come, then?" Obi-Wan pressed. "What did you hope to achieve?"

Ren Yvar shrugged. "I don't know," he said, honestly. "I think I felt a sense of responsibility, both
for him, and for his actions, since he was in my employ when all this happened. He siphoned Yvar
funds to pay for some of his activities, and I'm still doing my best to discover the extent of his plans.
If he was going to be freed, what better place or time to stage a breakout than during the state dinner,
when attention and security resources would be focused on the palace?"

It wasn't quite rational, Obi-Wan thought, and yet there was Qui-Gon's voice again, reminding him
that sometimes, that was how the world worked.

"Beware of beings that have thorough and clever reasons for all that they do, Padawan," Qui-Gon
was saying, even as he thrust the hilt of his lightsaber back into his utility belt. "It was the one flaw in
Menzekis's alibi, all things considered. All of his reasons were too precise... too perfect."

"But Master," Obi-Wan had said, astounded. "What of Luyin? Surely beings aren't completely
random either. They make decisions that are in their eyes rational, meant to advance their own ends
and desires."
Qui-Gon chuckled and rested his hand on Obi-Wan's shoulder. "Yes, they do. But it is rare that beings are completely and utterly rational. Menzekis had a reason for everything: every step was utterly and completely accounted for and planned out. There was no room for chance at all; for whims or fancy or randomness. No room for the fallibility of memory, and there was too much physical evidence supporting him. There is such a thing as the alibi that is too perfect, Padawan."

Obi-Wan made a face. "I don't know," he groused. "What about the Padawan that's too perfect, Master?"

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow. "I have no idea what you are talking about, my very young apprentice," he said, placidly. "I am very familiar with a most imperfect Padawan."

The thing was, Obi-Wan thought, Ren Yvar could have lied. Could have made something up; could have, ultimately, given him a reason that was far better, far cleverer, and far more put-together than 'I felt a sense of responsibility so I headed down personally to the security station.' He could have lied convincingly, and that realisation made Obi-Wan realise that he did, in fact, trust Ren Yvar.

He nodded to the man. "Fine. What happened with Junaka, then?"

Ren Yvar sighed. "Maybe you should see for yourself. I'll take you there."

The security camera footage was less than helpful. As Obi-Wan watched for the fifth time, Junaka's death was not at all spectacular. It was barely even noticeable; the security officers had simply thought that Junaka was drowsy and was taking a nap.

Junaka was lying down on the bunk in the holding cell, and at some point, sleep had shifted to death. He might have seemed unusually groggy, but Obi-Wan doubted that planetary security had cottoned on at that point. Beings very rarely saw what was in front of them, and perhaps it was only apparent now because he was watching the recordings over and over again with the benefit of hindsight.

"Drugged?" he asked Ren Yvar. The man shrugged.

"How would I know? Captain Vhani had Junaka removed from the station and sent to the medical examiner in order to get an autopsy. The toxicology results won't be back anytime soon."

"Of course not," Obi-Wan muttered. Even with forensics droids, it was often a matter of weeks for toxicology reports to be produced; on a city-planet with the population density of Coruscant, the delay sometimes even stretched out to months. No doubt Junaka's report was high-priority, but even then, there was a limit to how much these things could be rushed. "No one else seems to have access to him, though."

"No," Ren Yvar agreed. "That just raises more questions—such as how the poison was administered."

"Through food, probably," Obi-Wan said, thinking aloud. "It's the one thing that's guaranteed to reach Junaka. The security recordings had at least shown that no one else had been close enough to have contact with Junaka, and security at the station had been increased since the attacks on Androl Oden and Dr. Pallié Talein, so unless the security officers had been suborned, the only likely approach Obi-Wan could think of involved poison in food or water. "Let's check out the kitchens."

He noticed that Ren Yvar did not dispute being pulled into the orbit of the investigation, even as they headed out of the security room and towards the small kitchen unit of the station.

Obi-Wan's experience on missions had taught him that one main point of vulnerability in most
security installations was the kitchen. Where there was food, there was waste, and where there was waste, there was commonly another point of egress. But exits were points of weakness: they were potential ingress points; places where security could be breached.

The officer at the small kitchen unit, Deidré Altomar, quickly put paid to that thought. "I'm afraid it's simply not possible, Master Jedi," she remarked. "There is in fact a back door and it's usually left unlocked, but in light of the attacks on various persons associated with your investigation, Captain Vhani gave the order to keep all exits and entrances locked."

She showed him the door in question, which was a sturdy construction of durasteel. There was a large, heavy bolt which could be drawn across the door, though the door itself bore an electronic lock. Leaving and entering the station through this door, while the lock was active, required an authorised key card—commonly the officer's identification card—to be scanned. The system itself kept an updated list of security personnel with access to this station, and the records showed only that Deidré Altomar had used the exit twice today.

"Twice?" Obi-Wan queried.

Deidré gave him a faint smile. "I had to get back in, after taking out the trash," she reminded him, gently.

Ren Yvar just barely managed to keep his amusement to himself. Obi-Wan shot him an unimpressed glare.

"Could the food have been poisoned by the time it entered the station?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

"Unlikely," Deidré said, immediately. "As you can see, the kitchen here is very small—we use food synthesisers rather than cook, which means we only need food-grade synthgel. The synthgel we were using was brought in last month. There was no opportunity to poison it."

"Is everyone else in the station fine?"

"Yes. Whatever the poison was, it was administered directly to Junaka, rather than anyone else."

Which also meant that their poisoner needed access to the station, and had to know what food was going to Junaka, rather than anyone else in the station.

"Does—Did Junaka have any special dietary requirements?"

Deidré shook her head again. "They all ate the same meals. Made food delivery easy, at least."

Another idea blown out of the water, Obi-Wan thought. He was starting to wonder if it had been wrongheaded to assume that Junaka had ingested poison. Could someone had co-opted the ventilation system of the station in order to deliver poison to Junaka's holding cell? Or could Junaka have been administered a contact poison?

"Unlikely," Deidré said, and Obi-Wan realised he'd voiced his thoughts aloud. "Junaka didn't have contact with anyone. He had a visitor earlier today, but they were separated by a transparisteel barrier, as per normal procedure. And the visit was monitored given existing security concerns."

Obi-Wan frowned. "Ren Yvar?" He glanced over at the man, but Ren Yvar was already shaking his head.

"No," Deidré responded. "Falce Valarin."
The state dinner was a huge, lavish affair, and Anakin felt small and positively overwhelmed. The Jedi—Mace Windu, he’d learned his name was—seemed to spend most of the time looming by Anakin’s side and staring disapprovingly at everyone who approached them.

Almost everyone seemed to want to talk to Anakin. He thought he recognised Sirdaé Erksen, who offered him a cool nod. Jurité Velarra was more friendly, smiling at him and coming over to ask him if he was enjoying his exposure to how Naboo celebrated.

"Of course," Anakin said, and smiled, even though he still felt annoyed that Obi-Wan wasn’t here. She spoke a little with Mace Windu—something about Obi-Wan and the missing ionite, and Anakin tried to pay attention, but some of the words were flying over his head and he supposed it wasn’t important since Mace Windu wasn’t explaining anything to him.

He discreetly took a few steps away from Mace Windu. The Jedi had explained that they were expected to mingle, as servers stepped around with intricate glasses of colourful drinks. He wasn’t supposed to touch any of those, apparently, so Anakin snuck off and made a beeline for the table laden with tiny sandwiches and pastries and began to help himself.

They were good, so very very good. The tarts crumbled into his mouth; they were buttery goodness, with a hint of a rich sweetness, and Anakin would have no objections to eating all of that for dinner.

"You quite like the muja tarts, don't you?"

Anakin started, and wondered if he was supposed to bow or something. "Your Excellency," he greeted the Supreme Chancellor. He remembered that, at the very least. "They're good. You want some?"

"I would, thank you," Supreme Chancellor Palpatine said, solemnly, accepting the muja tarts that Anakin offered him. "Honestly, if there's something I miss about Naboo, it's the food."

"They don't have good food on Coruscant?" Anakin wanted to know. Qui-Gon had promised to take Anakin to a café in CoCoTown sometime, with greasy sliders and Corellian fritters, but then he'd died, and there hadn't even been enough time. He remembered eating at the Temple while on Coruscant; the serving droids had been dishing out a herbed fish stew with mashed grain that had seemed underwhelming at first but was unexpectedly flavoursome.

"Oh, of course they do," Chancellor Palpatine chuckled. "Unfortunately, Senators are often busy, and I've had less time to savour the various sorts of cuisine available than I would like. And the food somehow just tastes better, here. Maybe it's what they say—there's no place like home."

Anakin wondered what it would be like, to think of home with such fondness. Home for him was Shmi; not Tatooine, never Tatooine. The dustball planet could get itself blown up for all he cared. He couldn't imagine what it might be like to miss bantha milk, or pallies fried in dough and sold on a stick.

"I guess," he muttered.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" the Chancellor asked, his voice kind. Anakin wondered why Obi-Wan had asked him to be wary; the Chancellor seemed friendly and nice, but part of him wondered why the man was so interested in a kid from Tatooine.

"Pretty much," Anakin replied. "The food's good."

The Chancellor laughed. "So I can tell. I'm very glad to meet you, my boy. I'll stop inflicting you with the company of an old man, but I just wanted to see how the hero who saved my planet was
doing." He patted Anakin's hand lightly. "Thank you once again, Anakin. I am deeply in your debt. I'll tell you what: if you're on Coruscant and you find yourself with nothing to do...my office will always be open to you, young hero."

He winked again, and strode off to claim a drink from a passing server. Across the ballroom, Queen Amidala, poised and regal, was talking to Falce Valarin.

Anakin blinked. Had the Supreme Chancellor just offered to let him come by anytime? The generosity of the gesture floored him. It was somehow comforting, to know that the older man seemed so supportive.

"Hmhm," said Mace Windu. He looked down at Anakin. "I trust you will not abuse his trust lightly."

"Hey!" Anakin started. He hadn't realised that the Jedi Master was standing there. "Do you always creep up on someone like that?"

Mace Windu raised an unsympathetic eyebrow. "Are you always so unaware of your surroundings?" he countered.

"I'm still learning," Anakin retorted, struggling to control his irritation. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a flash of movement.

"As is extremely apparent," Mace Windu said, coolly. His expression shifted though, as his hand went down to the lightsaber clipped to his utility belt. "Wait. Do you sense it?"

Anakin whirled about, trying to figure where he'd seen that person move.

A slender, compact, woman, her curling dark hair tied up soberly at the nape of her neck moved out from the crowd, her gait unsteady. She reminded Anakin, for some reason, of the spacers at the cantina when they'd too much to drink. Or when they were chewing spice.

"You!" She shouted. "You thought you could silence us? You thought you could keep using us?"

She produced a holdout blaster pistol from her purse. Pointed it right at the Queen. The barrel of the blaster pistol wavered in her grasp.

"It ends tonight," she growled. Some of the words were slurred. "No more."

Falce Valarin's eyes were wide.

Mace Windu cursed and he was moving, ready to put himself between the Queen and the would-be assassin, but he was too late, Anakin knew he was too late, because any second, the woman was going to squeeze the trigger, and Padmé would be dead, dead, dead, and he didn't want that, but he couldn't do anything at all, and Obi-Wan wasn't here, and he was helpless and frustrated and as far from calm as he could be.

Anakin screamed.

All Obi-Wan had learned was that Falce Valarin had visited Junaka earlier that day. They had spoken briefly; Falce had spent more time talking to Captain Vhani over existing security arrangements for Naboo's legislature and Senatorial representatives.

Captain Vhani confirmed this. "He was extremely busy, of course," he explained. "Lots of administrative backlog to clear, and he's due to get confirmed as Senator of Naboo tonight by the
Queen. Our next Senatorial elections aren't due to be called until at least two years from now." He peered wearily at Obi-Wan. "Honestly, Master Jedi, all Junaka had was the usual synthgel gloop—though Officer Deidré had the food synthesisers today, and she's the best of all of us at making it look and taste appetising. And a slice of shuura cake."

"Wait," Obi-Wan interrupted, frowning. "Shuura cake? Where did this shuura cake come from?"

"Falce Valarin kept it from his lunch, and Junaka asked for it. He decided to oblige," Captain Vhani said. "All things being equal, I suspect it was the shuura cake that did him in. You don't think someone tried to poison the Senator?"

Obi-Wan chewed on that thought for a while. "I don't know," he admitted. It felt like he'd been chasing nerfs all evening.

"Enough people have reason to want Falce Valarin dead," Ren Yvar murmured. "I know he was meeting Nurié Helukala earlier today for a working lunch…" He stopped short. "Nurié Helukala? Surely not."

"I didn't get the chance to speak with her," Obi-Wan said. "What are the chances that more than just the Erskens are up to their necks in this?"

Ren Yvar frowned. "I don't know Nurié Helukala well enough to say, but she always had a reputation of being careful—reasonable, even. She couldn't ever do something so reckless."

"As trying to poison Senator Valarin?" Obi-Wan wanted to know.

"As any of this," Ren Yvar muttered. "So Junaka was collateral damage?" He laughed, though it was clear he didn't quite find any of this funny at all. "What a mess."

Obi-Wan frowned. "Perhaps. And yet…so many of those involved in this conspiracy have turned up dead. I'm finding it difficult to believe that Junaka died because of an utter accident. That's awfully convenient." He would have said more, but his comlink signalled and he answered it.

"…trade him in for access to the Queen," someone was saying, and Obi-Wan understood at once and pressed a finger to his lips.

Captain Vhani stared, wide-eyed. Ren Yvar appeared to have been taken aback.

"You think the Jedi will trade one of their own? You're a fool, Irmé. They're fanatics. They'd probably invite you to cut his throat."

Irmé. Irmé Piraka? Obi-Wan didn't know, and yet he wondered if it was her.

"Look, Solris, I don't see you coming up with anything better. It has to happen tonight. This is our one best shot at taking down the damned Republic. An independent Naboo—that's what we want, isn't it? You going to chicken out on me now?"

He checked the code. It was from Eeth Koth's comlink. Eeth Koth, who'd been silent, who'd been investigating the Youngbloods. Eeth Koth, who was apparently in very big trouble right now. The Youngbloods had captured a member of the Jedi Council.

But Eeth Koth had been resourceful enough, and now Obi-Wan knew, and Obi-Wan was going to have to act.

Obi-Wan mouthed at Captain Vhani, making sure to exaggerate each word. "Can you trace this?"
Captain Vhani's eyes were hard. He nodded.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the delays - got the flu of hell and was fighting it off, and then had to not-Internet until substantial chunks of my thesis were completed thanks to the flu pushing my plans back. And this one's annoying so I'm still sleepy with the medications. In any case, I was delayed for this installment but decided it was better late than to not post at all, so here you go.

The events here are not exactly linear: the attempted assassination at state dinner takes place at around the same time Obi-Wan is watching and trying to figure out how to rescue Eeth Koth all by himself. How the two timelines match up isn't extremely significant at this point (if at all.) At this point, Maric Ersken has been more or less revealed to be somewhat a dupe, Nurié Helukala appears to not be firing on all thrusters, and Falce Valarin might have just become yet another victim of an assassination attempt. Ren Yvar has also ended up committing squarely to Team Jedi, which might not be the wisest career move.

Since this is meant to be compliant with movie-canon, you have at least the reassurance that Obi-Wan survives this ;P

Also, Mace Windu. As mentioned before - I lean heavily towards how Jude Watson presents the Jedi. I like the idea that the Jedi Council is really about enforcing discipline, especially in Padawans and younger Jedi. I also generally do see Mace Windu as being the Order's discipline guy (canon-beyond-the-movies has him in the rank of Master of the Order, though what is meant by that beyond 'elected head of the Jedi Council' is unclear.) Anakin, here, takes a lot of what Mace Windu says and does personally - "This guy doesn't like me, he doesn't trust me, he's always hating on me," and this continues all the way through to Episode 3. Really though, Mace Windu's the 'tough love dad' of the Jedi Order here. If he doesn't say anything about you (you being a Padawan or younger), then you're doing well. He's not here to be nice or to praise you - that's what teachers and Masters are here for. He's here to test young Jedi, and to always push them to be better. (The Council spends a lot of time being hard on Obi-Wan in Jedi Apprentice.) Obi-Wan essentially has kind of got that, but Obi-Wan's general response to being told he screwed up is to figure how to do better. Anakin, and we'll see this more later, has an extremely bad reaction to criticism - he takes it as a personal failure, as an attack/dislike of him, and it gets worse as he goes along and does well in classes, because on top of this fear/dislike of failure is this sense that he's special, he's the best, and he's not supposed to screw things up and if he does, Bad Things Happen. [Note: this is not a growth mindset.]

He does not get along with Mace Windu.

Cheers,
-Ammar
Chapter Twenty-One: Blooded

Obi-Wan scurried along the pipes as the Youngbloods below argued. His first priority was to get to Eeth Koth. From the answering surge in the Force, Obi-Wan knew that Eeth Koth was, at the very least, conscious and unhurt enough to be able to access the Force.

That was some consolation.

Ernan seemed to be more indecisive. Mharié was pushing for getting rid of the Zabrak Jedi Master, claiming that they were wasting time deliberating on what was to be done with him.

"That's not how this works, Mharié," said a third Youngblood, coldly. "If we do something, we do something as a group, because that's what we've decided together. Democracy starts from the very bottom. You can't scream and shout and expect us to go along with you."

"D'you see me putting a bolt right into the Jedi's head right now?" Mharié countered. "No. That's the whole point of me trying to talk you into doing what we've got to do. We know what the plan is. This Jedi? He wasn't part of the plan, and he's become a big stumbling block. We're better off getting rid of him."

Obi-Wan made himself move swiftly but surely. The Force guided him, helping him shift his footing just right, allowing him to keep his balance and to recover from small slips that might have doomed someone who wasn't Force-sensitive.

Captain Vhani had been as good as his word, and planetary security had tracked the source of the comm signal to an old warehouse in the outskirts of Theed.

"Who owns the warehouse?" Obi-Wan asked, on a hunch, frowning at the holographic display. Despite being the capital, Theed was below-average in size—for a Naboo city. Naboo was not an extremely well-populated planet in the first place, and had only a few cities. Most of them were rather small.

Captain Vhani smiled, though there was little warmth in that expression. "I thought you'd never ask, Master Jedi," he murmured. "Edaan Corp."

"Is that so," Obi-Wan said, quietly, eyes narrowed. "What a coincidence."

"There's no such thing as coincidence. Isn't that what you Jedi like to say?" Captain Vhani pointed out.

"No," Obi-Wan murmured. "No such thing as coincidence, indeed." There are no coincidences, Master Ulri Uja-Thaliz had once said in her Thousand Discourses; an aphorism that had become a touchstone within the deep wellspring of Jedi wisdom. There is only the Force.

"I'll start rounding up planetary security," Captain Vhani promised, briskly turning to the matter at hand. "We can close in on them and establish a security perimetre, at the very least." He frowned
down at the warehouse, indicated with a glowing red dot on the holographic display. "I'm concerned that they believe they have a shot at the Queen. Palace security tonight is supposed to be hardened because of the state dinner."

Obi-Wan nodded. "That concerns me too," he admitted. Still, the conspirators had spoken of trading Eeth Koth for access to the Queen. That seemed to imply that there had been something unexpected: something that had stymied their plans and best attempts to penetrate palace security on this night.

Why, though? Why did the Youngbloods think that they had to move tonight?

Because, part of Obi-Wan's brain suggested, if you wanted to institute a popular uprising—or a hostile takeover of Naboo's government and secede from the Republic, what better time to do so than when a sizeable chunk of Naboo's legislature, prominent families, the Queen herself, along with the Supreme Chancellor of the Republic were all gathered in one place?

And then he got it.

In a radiant, scintillating moment—like the bright slash of a lightsaber blade—he got it.

"No," he murmured. "They don't need to kill them. I don't think that's their endgame at all." He'd thought of that repeatedly because of Junaka's attempts at the Queen. But discard the faulty assumption: ignore Junaka, who seemed to be compromised, in any case, who didn't make sense, and who was vocally declaring his allegiance to the Youngbloods at every possible opportunity.

Ignore the assumption that the attack on himself and Captain Panaka was meant to make Queen Amidala vulnerable—for hadn't he fallen into the same trap he'd warned Anakin about? He'd made assumptions and hadn't revised them; for all he'd mentioned the attacks might not have been directed against Queen Amidala at all, he'd let Junaka lull him into thinking there was a conspiracy against the Monarchy of Naboo.

There wasn't at all.

Instead, there was what had been staring him in the face all along: the Youngbloods and their distrust of the Republic. The Youngbloods didn't want or need Queen Amidala dead: they wanted Naboo free of the Republic.

And on this night, when all of the movers and shakers and lynchpins of Naboo politics were safely gathered into one place: they had exactly what they needed to set their plan in motion. Leverage to achieve their desires: a Naboo cut free—forcibly—from the many ties that bound it to the Republic.

"They're not going for the Queen," Obi-Wan whispered, understanding.

"With all due respect, Master Jedi, Orm Junaka tried to kill the Queen," Captain Vhani said, firmly. He just barely managed to conceal the incredulity in his voice.

Obi-Wan was shaking his head. "Yes. But since when has anything that Junaka did made sense?" He was looking over at Ren Yvar and saw the gleam of understanding in the other man's eyes. "Junaka was a distraction. He never fit with any of the other information we'd had from the very beginning…but he was bait. Meant to throw us off the original trail because we got distracted by the shiny new piece of evidence."

"They talked about trading the Jedi Master in for access to the Queen," Captain Vhani said, dubiously.

"Exactly," countered Obi-Wan. "That's not the act of revolutionaries who already have some way of
penetrating palace security. And if we ignore Junaka, what we know of the Youngbloods is that they believe Queen Amidala has conceded far too much to the Republic. Minimally, they'd want to renegotiate Naboo's relationship with the Republic. If any of the isolationist elements in the Youngbloods have become dominant, then they want to force Naboo to secede from the Republic."

"They don't need her alive," Ren Yvar said, slowly. "But they don't need her dead, either."

Obi-Wan nodded. "So if you were the Youngbloods, what would you do?"

Ren Yvar furrowed his eyebrows. "I'd need to move tonight," he said, working out the same thread of logic that Obi-Wan had already followed. "And I'd need to find a way to strongarm my agenda past the legislature and the Queen." His eyes narrowed, then. "And they're all in one place. Awfully convenient, isn't it?"

Convenient was one way of putting it.

"They're not trying to break through palace security," Obi-Wan explained to Captain Vhani. "At least, not all of it. They're trying to besiege the palace, to cut off the palace from the rest of Naboo. They're holding everyone at the state dinner hostage."

Captain Vhani's mouth worked futilely as he struggled to say something—anything—and came up short.

"Planetary security isn't the militia. If a number of them are with the militia, then this could be a problem breaking the siege," Ren Yvar said. He nodded to Captain Vhani. "No offense to your men, Captain."

"None taken," Captain Vhani growled, running a frustrated hand through his hair. "We're peacekeepers and investigators, not militia."

"It isn't even that difficult," Ren Yvar said, wonderingly. "If your objective is to besiege the palace rather than actually assault anyone at the state dinner..." He shook his head, as if with disbelief. "All you need to do is to slip a small group past the hardened security lines. The first line won't be that difficult. The palace was never meant to be completely inaccessible. So, you break into the palace and trigger a security lockdown, isolating palace security and trapping everyone inside the ballroom."

"Not the first security lockdown that has been triggered recently," Obi-Wan murmured, agreeing with the plan that Ren Yvar had sketched out. Had the previous attack been a dry run, then?

"Without a cohesive militia and with Naboo's pilots attending the state dinner, it's easy to hold the government hostage for long enough to apply political pressure."

It was an audacious plan, and one that might just have a good chance of succeeding.

"They're already moving, in fact," Obi-Wan realised. "The disagreement we heard must've been because Master Koth fell into their hands. Some of them must've wanted to use Master Koth as a bargaining piece in negotiations instead." It would be a bad move, if that were true, however. The Republic did not often prioritise the status and wellbeing of Jedi in negotiations, and the Youngbloods were better off besieging the palace first and then using Eeth Koth as a further bargaining piece.

But this was Eeth Koth, Master on the Jedi Council, and Queen Amidala respected the Jedi.

Which meant that Obi-Wan's path was clear. He had to deny them access to a Jedi hostage.

They looked at each other. Jedi Knight, to privileged family heir, to planetary security captain,
understanding, realising that things had come to a critical turning point, that they were stones in the path of an avalanche.

You got swept up, or you diverted the avalanche. That was all.

"What do you need from me, Master Jedi?" Captain Vhani asked, snapping to attention.

"Gather your forces, Captain," Obi-Wan said, calmly. "See if you can shut off access to the palace."

"What?"

Ren Yvar blinked.

"First," Obi-Wan continued, "Ren Yvar and I are going to head down to that warehouse and see what can be done about Master Eeth Koth. At the same time, we need you to shut down access to the palace with your security forces. Do so as discreetly as possible—utilise only those you trust. Thin your parameter if there's not enough of you."

"But what good will that do?" Captain Vhani asked, bewildered. "You're asking us to besiege the palace too?"

"No," Obi-Wan said. "Well, yes. I'm assuming they'll already have made a move. I'm asking you to cut off their escape routes."


Anakin screamed.

The Force moved.

It had answered him once—deep down in that cistern, when he had called on it to slip free the power-pack of Arvol Resnik's Enforcer DT-17.

Now, though, he did not have the calm that Obi-Wan had spoken to him of. The Force raged in him, like the powerful blasts of one of the sandstorms that scoured Mos Espa, and hot and blazing like the twin suns.

He would be scoured, swept clean to the bone and blasted aside.

No, something in Anakin growled, as it clawed to the surface. No!

It was the Force.

But it was only the Force that raged through him and he was special, and he was Anakin Skywalker and he was not going to stand there helpless while Padmé died. Fear and desperation and frustration made him weak. They were what a slave felt.

He wasn't a slave anymore, though. He was special, and he would be a Jedi. He would be strong, and no one would ever put chains on him again, and no one would ever stand in his way.

And one day, he would return to Tatooine, dark cloak flaring out behind him like the wings of an angel of Iego and lightsaber blazing the clear, unwatered blue of the Tatooine sky in his right hand.

He would burn away their chains and the slaves—and Shmi—would go free.
He was Anakin Skywalker, and the Force answered him.

He grasped it firmly with claws of fury and indignation and determination and the Force quaked in his grip but submitted.

He was the infernal heat of the twin suns, the roar of the sandstorm sweeping through Mos Espa. The Force swept through him, bearing him with it, as he thrust out a hand, directing it.

The woman went flying, even as she squeezed off a bright-red blaster bolt that careened wildly askew, scorching the ceiling of the ballroom. The would-be assassin herself hit the far wall with a sickening crack that Anakin understood at once—bone-deep—and then went limp and still.

The blaster pistol skittered free of her grasp and clattered on the polished marble flooring.

Her head lolled on her neck in a disjointed manner.

Suddenly, the Force fled from him, and Anakin could breathe again, could think again through the scarlet haze soaking into his brain.

She was dead, and it was his fault, and a part of him didn't care, didn't care that Mace Windu was staring at him as though he was a particularly poisonous viper, that Falce Valarin simply looked stunned, that Padmé—that Padmé looked as if she wasn't sure how to react at all, but she was safe, and that was what mattered, that was what was important, and that was what mattered.

A hand rested on his shoulder.

"Well done, my boy," breathed the Supreme Chancellor, and he smiled down at Anakin, fondly, and something tight in Anakin's chest uncurled, then. "It's over, now. You saved the Queen. I'm especially indebted to you. We all are."

He was supposed to feel good, buoyed on the approval and the admiration he saw in that man's guileless eyes, but all Anakin could feel was tired and—and now this was coming to the fore—sick.

Sometimes, people needed killing.

Anakin wasn't in any illusions about that. You never had those illusions, as a slave.

But he'd killed her, just like swatting a fly, only easier, and in that moment, he'd felt powerful and unstoppable and that bothered him so much, how easy it was, and how Padmé was looking at him, how he thought she looked afraid, even though she shouldn't be afraid, shouldn't need to be afraid anymore at all, because he'd saved her life, and he'd used the Jedi Force to do it.

And the way the assassin looked, that crack of her neck snapping—

Anakin flinched and found himself on his knees, emptying out the tarts from earlier. The palace guardsmen were swarming the Queen now, escorting her away. More guardsmen swarmed the assassin's corpse.

Some of them looked at him and quickly averted their gazes.

A hand rubbed soothing circles into his back.

"There, there," murmured a voice that Anakin had only heard as a stern rebuke before. He didn't know that Mace Windu could be kind. That surprised him. "Killing isn't easy, Skywalker. And it isn't supposed to be. How do you feel?"
"Thought you said I was screaming my emotions for anyone to feel..." Anakin muttered, too weary and drained to dredge up very much resentment at all.

Mace Windu raised an eyebrow and offered Anakin a cup of juice. Anakin sipped it and winced slightly at how cloyingly sweet it was, but at least it washed clear the taste of bile in his mouth.

"Better?"

"Yeah. I guess."

Mace Windu nodded. "Good," he said, though he did not look pleased at all. "We need to talk about what you just did right there."

Anakin wasn't sure he could. And what was there to be said?

It spilled all about in him: this complicating, terrifying emotional mess, and he wasn't sure what at all he could say about it, how to make this tall, terrifying, intimidating Jedi Master understand.

And if the Jedi saw right through him, as though he was water, then why did he even need to struggle with the words?

"Afterwards," Mace Windu said, firmly. "Right now, we need to—"

Someone cleared his throat.

Mace Windu and Anakin both looked over. It was the Supreme Chancellor, looming over them, a polite but friendly smile on his face. "Could this wait, Master Windu?" he beamed over at Anakin. "I couldn't help but overhear, and—why, it seems to me the Jedi should appreciate just how well young Anakin here reacted today."

"Perhaps," said Mace Windu. "With all due respect, your Excellency, the Jedi see to our own." To Anakin's ear, it sounded like a thank you, your Excellency, now kriff off and mind your own business. It probably was meant to be that dismissive, too. Only nicer.

"Of course," smiled the Supreme Chancellor. "Still, I'm understandably concerned that he receives the right encouragement. At his young age, what he's done is truly incredible..."

Anakin felt a glowing warmth sink into the pit of his stomach at the Supreme Chancellor's words. Obi-Wan had promised him he was going to be a Jedi, but now, for the first time, Anakin had faith that he was going to be a good Jedi.

He'd be so good the Council would have to admit they were wrong about him.

It would feel good.

"Of course," echoed Mace Windu. "Your Excellency. We will need to ensure that the area is secure." He looked over at Anakin and gestured.

Anakin fell into step behind the Jedi Master as they moved off to inspect the area and make sure that no other assassins had slipped in. But the memory of the Supreme Chancellor's smile—warm and genuine and friendly—was something he would hold on to, and treasure in the days to come.

Obi-Wan accessed the Force and sprang.

He caught the edge of a towering pile of crates and scrambled atop them with an easy dexterity that
had been learned and trained through numerous obstacle courses at the Jedi Temple.

Below, the Youngbloods argued, shifted positions, and generally waited.

Obi-Wan nodded to himself. He had been right. They'd either splintered off from the main group, or they'd been left behind to guard the captured Jedi Master but had seen no reason not to try to utilise the bargaining chip they'd gotten their hands on.

But how had they successfully captured Eeth Koth? That question nagged at him.

He snuck from one stack of crates to another, rolling to absorb the impact as he leapfrogged his way closer and closer to where Eeth Koth was restrained. He kicked off from a pile of crates, leaping upwards and drawing on the Force so his outstretched hands grazed the durasteel edges of a skeletal girder and closed around it. He pulled himself up and scrambled onto the girder, and scurried along it until he finally perched atop it, positioned right where Eeth Koth was bound.

Obi-Wan drew on the Force again, willing Eeth Koth to look slightly to his right. Another surge in the Force told him that Eeth Koth had sensed it, and the Jedi Master obliged him, glancing over to where Obi-Wan crouched. Obi-Wan gestured to his lightsaber, supposing that his meaning was clear enough. *I'm here to free you.*

Eeth Koth shook his head, marginally.

Obi-Wan frowned, and then a subtle nod of Eeth Koth's head showed that his utility belt was intact. He'd likely managed to use the Force to redirect his captors' attention, so they had left him with his comlink and his lightsaber.

But why, then, was Eeth Koth still a captive? He had his lightsaber, and he'd managed to discreetly comm Obi-Wan. Furthermore, he'd been bound at the wrist with zip-ties, and any Jedi worth their salt knew how to break zip-ties.

Obi-Wan sat back on his haunches as the answer came to him, then.

Eeth Koth had *wanted* to be caught. Had wanted to remain caught. Why? What did getting caught by the Youngbloods accomplish?

He had split their forces, hadn't he? Some of them had had to remain behind to guard the Jedi, and the remaining Youngbloods were even more divided about what to do about their Jedi captive.

He'd forced them to weaken their position by giving them a valuable bargaining piece.

But why remain, then?

Because if he wasn't captured, then the rest of the Youngbloods had no reason to remain. They'd be free to join their comrades in laying siege to the palace. Because his very presence fostered division, even among the remaining Youngbloods.

Which meant that Eeth Koth was perfectly in command of the situation here. Well. Wasn't *that* mildly embarrassing.

Obi-Wan considered his options carefully. Ren Yvar was likely still headed back here, with reinforcements. Was he needed? Should he attempt to aid Captain Vhani at the palace? But Mace Windu and a number of the Council would be at the palace.

Almost as if Obi-Wan's thought had summoned the teaching, Obi-Wan could all but hear Qui-Gon's
voice, admonishing him. *Trust the Force, Padawan.* And, almost at the same time: *if your plan is good, there is no reason to abandon it.*

It wasn't—*quite*—his plan, but he had no reason to abandon Eeth Koth, here and now.

Obi-Wan reached out to the Force, and let the Force reach into him.

*Wait,* it said. Merely that.

And so Obi-Wan waited.

When the actual moment came—when disagreement gave way to action, when Mharié took those quick, fatal steps forward and flicked the safety off and her fingers squeezed the trigger of her blaster rifle—Obi-Wan was not surprised, for he was with the Force, and the Force was with him, and in the Force, there were no surprises.

The Force flung him off the girder; tumbling forward in a controlled somersault. He landed lightly and rolled past Eeth Koth, his lightsaber whipping up before him in a guard position, lazily snapping left, then right to deflect two blaster bolts that were supposed to have hit the captive Jedi Master centre-mass.

The bright packets of plasma energy screamed upwards into the warehouse ceiling.

At the same time, Eeth Koth moved *into* Obi-Wan's roll, tugging his wrists apart, baring the zip-tie that bound him so it was yanked taut, so that it was in *exactly* the right position for the verdant green blade of Obi-Wan's lightsaber to burn through, even as Obi-Wan rolled past him and came up to deflect two killing shots away from him.

"Master Koth?" Obi-Wan asked, and the Force tugged Eeth Koth's lightsaber to his waiting grasp and they stood there, back-to-back, staring down the gaping Youngbloods, activated lightsabers blazing green and blue.

"I'd prefer to avoid any loss of life," Eeth Koth murmured, but Obi-Wan could sense the concern leaking past the Zabrak Jedi Master's tight control.

"Then we hold them," he offered. Two Jedi against twenty six was doable, only just, if their goal was to tie up the Youngbloods until arrests could be made. Odds Obi-Wan would have preferred to avoid, but being a Jedi was never about taking the *easy* path. "Reinforcements are coming."

Eeth Koth acknowledged that with a nod and raised his voice. "You have been found conspiring against the Queen of Naboo!" he called out to the Youngbloods. "Lay down your weapons and you will not be harmed."

"And what happens when the Queen of Naboo conspires with the Republic against her citizens?" sneered one of the Youngbloods. "So much for the Jedi reputation of being guardians of peace and justice. Peace is purchased always on the blood and silence of the oppressed."

"This is false," said Eeth Koth, calmly. "I will not repeat myself."

"Mharié," said Ernan, tentatively, indecision in his voice. He took one step forward. And then another. His blaster rifle was lowered. "Mharié, maybe we should—"

He should have been faster. Should have anticipated this. The Force screamed a warning and Obi-Wan moved, but as fast as he was, he was too late.
Mharié squeezed the trigger and red light flashed and Ernan fell, mouth open in what might have been a scream. Or a quiet sigh.

Her eyes were hard. Obi-Wan came down—hard—on a knee, separated from Eeth Koth, out of position. Ernan's fingers curled inwards and then stopped and Obi-Wan felt it, the moment the tiny spark of his life winked out forever.

Obi-Wan was out of position, and Eeth Koth was vulnerable.

The remaining Youngbloods opened fire.

Whispers.

Anakin tried to tune them out, trailing after Mace Windu. People looking at him, and whispering. The festive air of the dinner had been shattered and hastily patched back together, and the cracks were showing in so many places.

"They're all so frightened," Anakin breathed, quietly. He didn't know how he knew, only that he did. Their fear was a constant, humming undercurrent in the room, and—

—and what would it be like, a part of Anakin wondered, to command such fear? To be able to cause an entire room to fall—almost—silent in his wake? To be able to cast a huge stone and to watch the ripples of his actions carry across the rest of the water? Wasn't that very much like power?

For a while, he thought Mace Windu wasn't going to say anything at all. That the tall, intimidating Jedi Master was perfectly happy stalking along the edges of the room like an avenging being of light and flame and dragging Anakin along behind him.

But Mace Windu unbent enough to say, "Beings often are. Fear is natural. We fear what we do not understand. And sometimes we fear because we understand."

Anakin struggled to wrap his head around that. "Then why don't the Jedi like fear?"

Mace Windu's mouth twisted. "We don't 'dislike' fear," he said, and the bite in his voice added the quotation marks to the word. "Fear is what comes naturally. It does not mean that we should remain fearful. Fear is the path to the Dark Side."

And there it was again, the Dark Side and everything that Obi-Wan and the Council had said, even though it blurred together in Anakin's head. There was the Sith Lord in the hangar and he'd burned like the sun and felt like—like a krayt dragon, Anakin supposed. You didn't stop a krayt, not if you were anyone short of a pilot of a battle cruiser in the pale skies above Tatooine. You got out of the way fast and hoped for the best. He'd never even seen a krayt dragon in his life and yet the Sith Lord had made Anakin think of one.


—and would it be so bad, to be powerful?

Instinct told him that the Jedi had the secrets to power in their cold hands and now that Obi-Wan had taken him under his wing, now that he was supposed to be Obi-Wan's student, he was going to learn it, and one day, he would wrap his hands around the krayt dragon and tear out its beating heart and partake of it, like the Krayt Riders of old, like the legendary robber-bandits or freedom fighters of Tatooine, depending on who you asked.
"Pay attention, Skywalker," said Mace Windu, brusquely, jerking his attention back to the situation at hand. "Where there is one assassin, there may be more."

Anakin had thought as much earlier. "So what are we doing?"

"Securing the area," Mace Windu repeated. So it really wasn't something he'd just thrown out to get rid of the Supreme Chancellor, Anakin had supposed. "Palace security was supposed to be comprehensive. Depa saw to it. We need to make sure nothing else has slipped past the security screens."

Anakin wasn't sure he remembered who Depa was. The past few days had been a blur of faces and Jedi and people from Naboo.

They left the room, nodding to the palace guardsmen and guardswomen who stood on duty, and crossed the courtyard.

They all but ran smack-bang into a group of—well, Anakin wasn't sure exactly what they were, but they were dressed in dark, heavy body armour and carried blaster rifles which probably meant bad things.

Mace Windu cursed and yanked Anakin behind him. The violet blade of his lightsaber sprang to life and whirled about before him, forming a shield of spinning light. "Stay back," Mace Windu snapped. Anakin didn't bother telling him that he hadn't woken up this morning deciding that he'd really, really, really love to get shot at.

The first few brilliant bolts of red blaster fire rebounded from Mace Windu's blade and shot up—

—No, Anakin realised. They'd taken the armed group by surprise, which meant the blaster bolts had come from above. "They've got people up there!"

"I know," Mace Windu growled. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Stop them?" Anakin offered, helpfully.

"How?"

He had to admit he was short on ideas, there. "I'm working on it!"

"Identify yourselves," Mace Windu barked, but the armed group seemed to have recovered and lances of bright scarlet blaster fire crisscrossed in various directions, all heading for them.

Mace Windu fended them off somehow. Anakin didn't know how. He was pretty sure it some of the ways in which the Jedi Master moved were either anatomically impossible or should've caused even Anakin to sprain his back if he'd tried.

Mace Windu did not miss a single shot.

But there was something else, too, Anakin thought. Something—

Mace Windu opened his eyes. Anakin hadn't realised he'd closed them, while concentrating, and for a moment, they gleamed golden in the light.

Mace Windu was a krayt dragon too.

A blaster bolt drilled a lance of fire and pain through the meat of Obi-Wan's thigh as he attempted to
rise, and his leg gave way beneath him and he crumpled to the ground, rolling to try to move away from the shooting, somehow managing to hold on to his lightsaber so he supposed Qui-Gon would be very proud of him both for not losing the lightsaber and for not actually managing to turn himself into Obi-Wan Kebabi while he was at it.

The rest did not make contact at all. It was a strange reversal, now; Eeth Koth crouched in front of him, lightsaber flashing in all directions, eyebrows drawn together in fierce concentration, redirecting the blaster bolts back at the Youngbloods.

He did not return fire; not directly. Even now, Eeth Koth wished to avoid civilian casualties, though the Youngbloods probably counted as an armed militia by this point. Obi-Wan couldn't blame him. How many times had Qui-Gon drilled into him that if a plan was good, there was no reason to abandon it?

The blaster bolts, while aimed harmlessly at the duracrete beneath their feet, did, however, force the Youngbloods to start diving and dodging in panic. They were not used to getting shot at. That made a difference.

Eeth Koth said, "Can you stand?"

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth together, shoved the pain into the Force, and pushed past the pain, into pure, icy resolve, and somehow managed to rise. Qui-Gon's lightsaber came up again, ready to guard. He was trying not to put too much weight on that leg. It would probably betray him at some point.

It was, after all, only flesh and bone.

But right now, he had the Force, and it would have to be enough.

Some of the Youngbloods were wavering, Obi-Wan noticed. They were backing away—further away—and they weren't going for their blaster rifles, and if they weren't outright running for fear of being shot, as Ernan had been, they still weren't eager to engage the Jedi. That turned the odds in their favour, even without having to wait for Ren Yvar and the promised reinforcements.

The rest of the Youngbloods weren't relenting, though. They dove behind stacks of crates and took potshots at the Jedi and dispersed and made themselves difficult targets and tried to create an environment where the Jedi were continuously in the crossfire.

Eeth Koth calmly deflected the blaster fire, and this time, he was less precise about it. Shots careened upwards into the ceiling. Having studied extensively under Qui-Gon's tutelage, Obi-Wan was definitely not much of a Shien practitioner, and it was all he could do to simply deflect blaster bolts in relatively safe directions.

They were caught in a relative impasse, and as much as Obi-Wan had read the epics—had had Bant read them to him and Garen and Reeft and Siri over study-nights—some of the stories were just stories. Jedi Masters had fended off armies with nothing but the Force to hold their battered bodies together, crumpling only once the battle had ended. But Obi-Wan was not a Jedi Master and he knew that it was a race between how long he could fend off the pain and trick his body into functioning as if he had never been injured, and the resolve of the Youngbloods, and Ren Yvar's reinforcements.

He had to hold. It would go worse for Eeth Koth if he had to defend a fallen comrade.

But then Obi-Wan heard it: what might have been the most welcome sound of the day.
The sound of a door being slammed open.

Ren Yvar burst into the room, at the head of an armed contingent of guards. Not planetary security forces; Obi-Wan could tell as much. Private security, all professionals, in MilSpec armour and armed to the teeth and spoiling for a fight.

"In the name of the Queen," Ren Yvar called out, loudly, "I am performing a citizen's arrest. Stand down."

The Youngbloods may have fancied themselves revolutionaries but they were not fanatics, to throw themselves between the Jedi anvil and the hammer of Yvar guards. Most of them reluctantly discarded blaster rifles and kicked them away with the toes of their boots, joining the Youngbloods who had abandoned the confrontation after Eeth Koth had started redirecting blaster bolts with greater precision.

But there was Mharié and a cadre of the Youngbloods who refused to give up, and who shot at Ren Yvar and his guards. Coolly, Ren Yvar plucked something from his belt and tossed it to the ground —Obi-Wan did not get a chance to see what it was, but figured it out a few moments later when a curtain of shimmering magenta light sprouted from the ground up, enveloping the Yvar contingent and swallowing the blaster bolts.

Gungan technology, Obi-Wan realised, amazed. He'd seen that curtain of shimmering light before, when the Gungan generals were explaining the battle plan to Captain Panaka and the Jedi. How had Ren Yvar gotten his hands on that?

The problem with Gungan shielding was that it was crude, imprecise. While Gungan shielding was far better than most kinds of personal shielding technology, the user had to stay put. Organic beings attempting to pass through a Gungan shield were fried, or at the very least, stunned into unconsciousness.

Which meant the Jedi had to take the lead.

Eeth Koth had worked that out for himself; he sprang into motion, and Obi-Wan followed him. The Force surged between the two of them, resonating, growing stronger and stronger until it was the thunderous roar of a mighty river.

Blaster fire.

Ren Yvar had his forces shove the tips of their blaster rifles outside the Gungan shield and fire. He wasn't directing fire anywhere in particular and his forces had been well-briefed; they were not so much attempting to kill as providing the Jedi with cover.

Obi-Wan leaped.

He should not have; his leg threatened to buckle beneath him as he came down and pain flared but he was moving all the same, the Force sweeping him along, and a measured swing of his lightsaber sliced the Youngblood's blaster rifle into two glowing-hot pieces.

And then he was moving on, because the Force was with him, and Ataru was about movement and grace and momentum, water flowing into the container of their attack, and he dove and rolled and came up by a stack of crates and it would be the easiest thing to just shove with the Force and send the stacked crates flying and bury the Youngblood taking cover there, but it would be wrong, and so instead, Obi-Wan flipped over a smaller stack of crates and let his momentum carry him on as he slid onwards.
He came up right before the Youngblood, and another weapon and trigger-finger went flying as the lightsaber blade burned and burned.

And then there were no more.

He stumbled to a halt, his leg protesting the demands he had made on it. The Force bled out of him, until he was just Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Knight, and he was tired, and hurting. Between him and Eeth Koth, they had disarmed the remaining Youngbloods and Ren Yvar dismissed the Gungan shield and his security forces were taking the rest of the Youngbloods into custody.

Ren Yvar came up to them. "Master Jedi," he greeted, his eyes flicking from Eeth Koth to Obi-Wan. "Jedi Kenobi. You're well?"

"I'm unhurt," Eeth Koth said, "But Knight Kenobi here has taken some injury. Unfortunately, we do not have time to waste—the Youngbloods are attempting to surround the palace as we speak—"

"We know this," Ren Yvar interjected. "Captain Vhani has sent the planetary security forces to intercept them at the palace."

Eeth Koth considered this. "They may stand a chance," he murmured, thoughtfully, and moved into Obi-Wan's space, supporting him, allowing Obi-Wan to take the weight off his bad leg. "The Youngbloods will be hard-pressed to take and hold the palace since they've split their forces."

"Captain Vhani's forces are establishing a security cordon around the palace," Obi-Wan explained, leaning into Eeth Koth. "They are not engaging the Youngbloods. The initial plan was to rescue you and to apprehend the Youngbloods here before joining up with Captain Vhani." His smile was shaky and awkward. "As it turns out, I was the one in need of rescuing, Master."

Eeth Koth waved that off. "It was a good decision. Little point in secondguessing it now. We will join up with the security forces at the palace, then." He turned to Ren Yvar. "You have my thanks. Will you take charge of them and see them to a security station?" he indicated the Youngbloods.

Ren Yvar nodded, warily. "I will do that. Jedi Kenobi—do you need to be evacuated to a hospital? I don't think you should be straining that leg."

Obi-Wan didn't think so, either, but Anakin was trapped in the palace and he was not going to feel reassured until his very young Padawan was safe. "Just put some bacta on it and bandage it," he muttered. "I'll manage."

Eeth Koth raised an eyebrow. "Are you certain?"

It wasn't the wisest decision, perhaps, but Obi-Wan had had worse injuries, and he couldn't sit in a hospital or a medical clinic and fret himself senseless until he knew for sure that Anakin was safe.

He's a Master now, and he's responsible for Anakin, and even the knowledge that Anakin was in the charge of Mace Windu was still—worrisome.

_Do not focus on your anxieties, Padawan_, he could all but hear Qui-Gon chide. But Qui-Gon was gone now, and there's just Obi-Wan left, and he's so alone, so very lost.

Gentle hands on his thigh. Eeth Koth, applying the bacta and deftly bandaging up the blaster wound. He murmured his thanks. No. Not alone; not quite. The Jedi was never truly alone, and for that, Obi-Wan was grateful.
Smoke drifted lazily across the courtyard.

The first thing Mace Windu did was to send a few blaster bolts flying smack into the courtyard lights—which, when Anakin thought about it—was a pretty smart move. The moon was a thin crescent this night, and mobbed by dark clouds. He'd bet they needed great lighting to shoot, too. Not everyone had those hi-tech nightscopes. He'd seen one, once, when working in Watto's shop. A scavenger in from the Jundland Wastes had come to get her nightscope recalibrated.

Without the courtyard lighting to illuminate them, the shooters were having a harder time pinning down Mace Windu and Anakin.

Which, as far as Anakin was concerned, was a good thing. The snipers positioned on some higher level of the palace were particularly annoying, and he hadn't had anything to do at all except to crouch down—Mace Windu had unceremoniously stuffed him behind the pillar like a sack of junkyard scraps—and then a high-powered blaster bolt had burned part-way through the duracrete, terrifying him.

Anakin really, really wished he had a lightsaber, or that Obi-Wan had thought to leave one with him, nevermind all that talk about how he'd have to show them he could use a stick first.

A lightsaber would really come in handy right now. He wouldn't need to be constantly protected. He would be more than capable of defending himself. Protecting Padmé. Freeing the slaves, as he'd so often dreamed. No one could shackle him, then. No one would ever shackle Shmi again.

The brilliant violet glow of Mace Windu's lightsaber proved an easy target, though, even as the blaster bolts splashed off it. No matter how the shooters fired, Mace Windu's lightsaber was there, deflecting everything with a fluid ease that seemed somehow—different from Obi-Wan.

He was more focused, Anakin realised. More precise. He sent the blaster bolts back but at an angle, designed specifically to avoid contact, in the scarlet glare, Anakin saw their attackers diving behind pillars or obstacles in order to attack from cover.

He felt like the Sith Lord, only different, and Anakin couldn't put his finger exactly on how or why. And there was the gleam of his eyes just now, though Anakin could've sworn that the Korun Jedi Master's eyes were dark, not the bright amber-gold of an optical focusing crystal.

"I need you to go back," Mace Windu murmured, his voice pitched to carry through the whine of blaster fire.

Anakin stared at him. "What? Are you crazy? They have people up there. They'll shoot me!"

"Not if I keep them busy," countered the Jedi Master. He whipped his lightsaber about in a cockscrewing twirl that sent a flurry of blaster bolts flying back at their attackers. "Tell Captain Panaka to tighten the security cordon. Tell Master Billaba that I need back-up."

Anakin frowned. "Who is Billaba?" He racked his memory but he had absolutely no recollection of who that Jedi Master might be,

"Middling height, woman, tan-skinned, with the markings of a Chalactan Adept—two beads fixed to the frontal bone. Forehead," Mace Windu supplied. "Just ask for her."

"Right," Anakin muttered, still half-convinced he was going to get shot.

"You are a Jedi," said Mace Windu. "Are you afraid?"
Anakin bit at his lip. "Well, yeah. Those are blaster bolts and they're shooting kriffing well!"

He could've sworn that Mace Windu was smiling and that was even more terrifying than getting shot at.

"Good," replied Mace Windu. He gestured with his lightsaber. "So go. Go now."

Anakin went.

It was terrifying. He admitted this. He sprinted, as fast as he could. He'd been in some terrifying situations before—some of the scavengers who went to Watto's shop were the sort that didn't think much of beating up or killing a wayward slave.

There were the mercenaries—Hutt-hired thugs, mostly—that frequented Mos Eisley. And then there were the slave raiders and the Tusken Raiders, and all the various horrors of life as a slave on Tatooine.

And then there was the Sith Lord, the swoop bike whipping over his head in the desert, the knowledge that he had come so very close to death, but death followed as a shadow on Tatooine. That was how it was.

He sprinted and tried to make himself a difficult target and heard the whine of blaster fire and the Force surged, warning him, driving him left, and then right again, and the sound of blaster bolts splashing off the glowing plasma of Mace Windu's lightsaber.

It did not take as long as he'd feared for the guards came running to meet him. "You! You're the Hero of Naboo, aren't you? We heard the sound of blaster fire. What's happening?"

Anakin tried to catch his breath. "Mace Windu says…find Captain Panaka and Jedi Billaba…there's trouble. Armed trouble. Trying to break in…establish security cordon…send Billaba as back-up."

"I knew this would be trouble," muttered one of the guards, darkly. "Come with us, now," she said, gently, wrapping an arm about Anakin and nudging him along. "We'll contact the Captain and have Master Billaba out in a moment."

"Hurry," Anakin begged. Mace Windu was a Jedi, but—

—but so was Qui-Gon, and hadn't Qui-Gon died?

"Master Jedi," greeted Captain Vhani, as both Obi-Wan and Eeth Koth joined the security forces present at the cordon that had been established around the palace. "It's been quiet out here, so far. None of the palace guardsmen report having made contact with hostiles."

"They wouldn't," Obi-Wan guessed. "It'd just raise the alarm. They slipped past or weapons were hidden elsewhere on the grounds." Again, a startling level of access, he thought.

"Some of the posts haven't reported in," Captain Vhani continued, "So I've sent squads to go check them out. They may have breached security there. Nevertheless, as per your instructions, we've been sitting tight for the moment."

"Thank you, Captain," Obi-Wan said. Planetary security was not so numerous, so Captain Vhani had taken to setting up overlapping surveillance posts instead, along with press-ganging members of Naboo's militia into action.
"Ren Yvar has taken members of the Youngbloods into custody," Eeth Koth said. "He will be taking them to a security station."

"Good," Captain Vhani said, clearly relieved that half the problem had been solved. "Plans, Master Jedi?"

"We move on in," Eeth Koth replied. "We take the rest of the Youngbloods into custody." He shrugged. "Simple enough."

Obi-Wan hid a smile as he caught sight of Captain Vhani's expression. Clearly, the planetary security officer did not consider the issue to be as simple. "I suggest we keep the cordon in place," he murmured. "If the Youngbloods wish to escape, they'll run straight into Captain Vhani's forces."

Eeth Koth nodded. "If we keep going, we'll run into their perimeter eventually. I imagine Mace Windu will have something to say about Youngblood demands."

Obi-Wan did not doubt that.

They moved; through the entrances and courtyards of the palace towards the particular annexe where the state dinner was being held. Obi-Wan had briefly familiarised himself with Depa Billaba's improvements to security but he saw little of the palace guardsmen on the grounds themselves and he wondered why.

Had they been drawn off? Or merely misdirected? Or was there something darker at play?

They moved swiftly but cautiously, keeping to the cover of shadows, opening themselves to the Force and letting the Force guide them.

They were perhaps halfway to the annexe when they both heard it.

Obi-Wan started as he heard the staccato reports of blaster fire, and the familiar hum and whine of a lightsaber. Eeth Koth tensed up, hand going to his lightsaber hilt. "Come," said the Zabrak Jedi Master, and they ran.

And then the sound of blaster fire grew louder, as did the thrumming snarling song of the lightsaber, and then Obi-Wan made out the bright violet flash of Mace Windu's lightsaber and felt the Force swirling around the Korun, tainted with darkness, tempered by the Jedi Master's iron will.

Mace Windu was fighting. What of Anakin?

Obi-Wan's blood ran cold and his lightsaber was in his hand, and he squeezed the activation button and a lance of green plasma blazed forth, illuminating him, and even then—oh, Obi-Wan thought, with a distant flare of pain. How easy it was to forget that Qui-Gon was dead; how easy, even now, to expect the comforting sky blue of his own lightsaber.

Next to him, Eeth Koth ignited his lightsaber and leaped into battle.

They swept in and the remnants of the Youngbloods fell. The courtyard was dark, with only scant moon for lighting, and in the flare of the lightsaber blades and the blaster bolts, it was obvious that Mace Windu had not been taking particular care to disarm the Youngbloods. He deflected blaster bolts with the killing precision of a practitioner of Vaapad, burning holes through pillars and ornamental statues.

Mace Windu did not commonly spar other Jedi. Obi-Wan had only watched Mace Windu fight once, in an exhibition match against Qui-Gon, and the lethal ferocity that Vaapad had brought to bear had
been more than a match for the aggressive fluidity of Qui-Gon's favoured Ataru.

"There is no shame in losing to a better opponent," Qui-Gon had said, solemnly to Obi-Wan, afterwards, nursing his pride and his burns.

Obi-Wan smirked but said, dutifully, "Yes Master."

"However, if I had been two decades younger..." Qui-Gon trailed off, meaningfully.

Obi-Wan feigned surprise. "Merely two decades, Master?"

Qui-Gon swatted at him lightly. "Insolent apprentice," he said. "I see you must be taught to respect your betters at the point of a lightsaber."

Obi-Wan had lost the ensuing spar, of course, but he'd fought harder and better than he'd usually had and he thought he'd put up a good fight of it. He'd only been seventeen, then.

The arrival of two more Jedi and Depa Billaba from the other side changed the tide. Depa sprang immediately into action, honing in on the snipers the Youngbloods had placed on structures that overlooked the courtyards and taking them down.

Obi-Wan, meanwhile, batted away blaster bolts and burned through blaster rifles, just as he had at the warehouse. The Youngbloods must have realised that the game was up now, that there was no pressing on, no laying siege to everyone at the state dinner.

Initially, they surrendered, one at a time, and then an entire flood of them were laying down their weapons and throwing up their empty hands. A few of them sprinted away, desperately trying to flee. Obi-Wan let them. They would simply encounter Captain Vhani's forces and be taken into custody.

The attempted insurrection was at an end.

Obi-Wan limped over to where Mace Windu was staring gimlet-eyed at the erstwhile leader of the Youngbloods. He wondered idly if Irmé Piraka was among this group, instead.

"Master Windu?"


"Where's Anakin?"

Mace Windu jerked the thumb of his free hand in the direction of the dinner annexe. "Safe," he said, simply. "I sent him to go for help the moment we ran into another group of assassins. One attempted to assassinate Queen Amidala."

Obi-Wan blinked. He had not expected that at all. He briefly offered his report to Mace Windu, outlining the sequence of events that had led him to Eeth Koth and the Youngbloods, and his conclusions.

Mace Windu sighed after he'd finished and passed a weary hand over his eyes. "I see," he said, gravely. "So Nurié Helukala and the Youngbloods may not even be connected at all."

"Perhaps," hedged Obi-Wan. "And perhaps not. Perhaps their interests simply diverged as the Jedi took interest in the investigation."

"Perhaps," echoed Mace Windu. "Well, Kenobi—we have things sufficiently under control here."
He thawed enough to offer Obi-Wan the barest hint of a smile; a faint upturn of the corners of his mouth. "Go see to your Padawan."

Obi-Wan went.

Anakin sat on a chair and moodily ate a tart. It was supposed to taste good, but right now, all he could think about was Captain Panaka rushing off to make sure Padmé was okay, and then he'd been given back into the charge of Gallia, who at least did not seem to mind letting him stuff his face even though he just wanted to know that everyone was okay.

The doors opened and Obi-Wan came in, looking tired and worried too, and he looked around the crowded room and though Anakin had meant to make Obi-Wan grovel and admit he'd done something mean, he couldn't help that sudden rush of happiness in his lungs even as he stood on his chair and waved and yelled, "Obi-Wan! Here! Over here!"

Obi-Wan's eyes locked on Anakin then and a look of what was unmistakeably relief passed between them, even as Obi-Wan strode—no, limped, Anakin realised—across the room to him.

"You left me behind!" Anakin yelled. Okay. He hadn't meant to yell but it had been an extremely stressful evening and he practically threw himself at Obi-Wan, wrapping his arms tightly around a rather startled and taken aback Jedi Knight.

Gallia was all but cackling and not even bothering to hide it. Maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

"Yes," Obi-Wan said, managing to disentangle himself from Anakin. "Yes I did, Anakin, and I am very sorry but it was for your safety—"

"And you're hurt," Anakin added, worried. He'd noticed the shift in Obi-Wan's gait and the white bandage wrapped about his thigh. "So I guess I wouldn't have been much good if I'd tagged along, huh?"

Obi-Wan managed a tight smile. "Probably not. I'm glad to know that you're safe, and that you and Master Windu got along—"

"—like a pair of izkak birds," Anakin muttered, mutinously. You couldn't keep a pair of izkak birds together—everyone on Tatooine knew that. They'd peck and claw at each other until one or the both of them were dead. The only time izkak birds tolerated each other's presence was during mating, and breeding pairs separated soon after, leaving the father to incubate the tests and tend to the fledgings.

Obi-Wan raised an admonishing eyebrow. "Should I be expecting a sternly-worded letter from Master Windu, then?"

"Well," said Anakin, thinking of how Mace Windu had said that they needed to talk. "Maybe."

Obi-Wan's forehead creased in a frown.

"I'm not really sure what happened," Anakin added, hastily. Felt the need to clarify that statement so he went on. "It was like back when I dropped the power-pack of Arvol Resnik's Enforcer DT-17, but different, and now everyone's staring at me and whispering like I threw up a bunch of sand-scorpions or something even though I saved Padmé's life."

"Queen Amidala's life," Obi-Wan corrected, absently. "What did you do?"

Anakin winced. "I killed her," he admitted, bluntly. "I killed the woman who tried to shoot Padmé
and I'm not sorry and I killed her with the Force and—" he swallowed hard, past the lump in his throat, looking down at Obi-Wan's boots. They were charred and scuffed. Anakin guessed some of the fighting must've done a real number on the nerfhide.

With surprising gentleness, Obi-Wan knelt before him, and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Will you talk to me, Anakin?"

"I don't know how," Anakin whispered, and his eyes blurred and he shut them against the sharp prickle of tears. "She needed to be stopped, so why does it feel like I just—made a mess of things?"

"Oh, my Padawan," Obi-Wan whispered, and Anakin didn't know what to make of that tone, whether it was pity or compassion or horror or sorrow or a combination of all of those, perhaps, and then Obi-Wan hesitantly pulled Anakin close into a soothing hug. Anakin buried his face into Obi-Wan's shoulder and fought a losing battle to keep the tears back as Obi-Wan just held him, and said nothing at all.

Chapter End Notes

(Previously) 20th October 2018:

Sorry to have vanished on you, guys. I don't want to go into the painful details but I've just lost someone very close to me a few weeks back. Life's still supposed to go on, I get it, but it's really hard to focus and I've been dropping all sorts of RL balls left right and centre to just do stuff like cry and not do anything for a while. And writing, I suppose, but of the journaling sort.

The point being, grief is weird. And I have the chapters written out, but I was supposed to polish them before posting, and I have pretty much no mood to do so right now. I need a little more time to just deal with this, and to find the sort of mental energy/whatever it's called to just...carry on, I guess. It's not fair to you all since I was supposed to pick up a weekly updating schedule and all my ducks were about to be lined up to let me do that.

So here's what I'm going to do. When I feel better, enough to get my ass into gear, I'll post every single chapter (and replace this one) that is left in Part/Arc 1. You guys deserve that much, if not more. I'll figure out where I'm going with the other stuff and how my posting will be like for the later arcs sometime when stuff works out. Know that my bottom line is still an unwillingness to abandon this fic. Star Wars and the prequel era have pretty much been a huge part of my childhood and I'm excited to do this. I just need to be able to remember what it's like to feel things that aren't grey and hollow.

Cheers,
Ammar.

P.S. Same for those who've kindly commented on this fic - I promise I'll get back to you and appreciate you! Just not right now.
Chapter Twenty-Two: Meetings and Farewells

After the events surrounding the state dinner, the conspiracy—though it was in some respects more than a mere conspiracy, and in some respects, much less a conspiracy than a series of somewhat independent events clustered together—fell apart like soaking wet mawaa pulp paper.

Anakin found it almost anti-climactic. All that chasing and digging and hunting, only for everything to collapse in on itself just like that.

"Be careful of what you wish for," said Obi-Wan, dryly. He was busy composing something on his datapad—what, Anakin wasn't sure, but he'd been at it for nearly the past two hours, while Anakin fidgeted and generally tried to preoccupy himself with poking about the room and badgering Obi-Wan with questions.

He could've gone off to explore the palace—Padmé'd mentioned that the palace had their own in-house technicians and he'd bet the techs'd be more than willing to field questions from the Hero of Naboo, but he wasn't sure he was so ready to let Obi-Wan out of his site again. The last time 'round, Obi-Wan'd promised and he'd come back late with a bandaged thigh and having missed most of the dinner. Who knew what Obi-Wan'd manage this time if Anakin wasn't around?

"Queen Amidala is currently as safe as a head of state can ever be," Obi-Wan continued, serenly typing away on his datapad. "And as we speak, a Jedi team is en-route to Naboo to monitor the last of the investigation. Wrapping up loose ends, really. They don't need us here. And you, my very young Padawan, are long overdue for the Jedi Temple."

The thought of leaving Naboo for that looming, magnificent structure filled him with both excitement and a strange, inexplicable dread.

"I guess," Anakin muttered. He scuffed the heel of a boot against the other.

Obi-Wan must have sensed his ambivalence somehow, for he stopped typing and looked over at him, eyebrows drawn together. "It will come alright," he said, not unkindly. "It will take time, Anakin. Do not be afraid—I will be with you at each step of the way."

"Like you were at the state dinner?"

He hadn't meant to say it; it'd just spilled out of his mouth, but alright, Anakin had thought it and part of him had meant to say it, had wanted to see just the slightest stab of pain flicker across Obi-Wan's calm expression. Had wanted it to matter to Obi-Wan, like it had somehow mattered to Anakin that Obi-Wan had said he would be there, had said he would be with Anakin at the dinner and hadn't.

He'd lost Shmi. He'd been forced to leave her behind. Qui-Gon had left him, and he'd left Kitster and Amee and all those other childhood friends back on dusty, sandy, detestful Tatooine and his life had been marked by entrances but also, prominently, by departures and leavetakings and he wanted, irrationally, for Obi-Wan to promise him that he was never going to leave because Anakin did not think he could bear yet another farewell.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "This is unworthy, Anakin," he said, calmly, with just that hint of
disappointment. Not like Shmi, Anakin thought. Shmi never hid her disappointment. But that was how he knew she cared. You weren't disappointed in womp rats when they chewed your cables and ruined your converters because that was what womp rats did, and anyway, nobody cared about womp rats.

That was all he said. He went back to his typing.

Anakin went back to brooding.

All missions—from the most routine and straightforward and boring to the most pulse-poundingly exciting adrenaline-rides had a few things in common. The most prominent point of similarity was the much-dreaded mission report which had to be produced by both members of a Jedi team and signed off by the ranking member.

Obi-Wan would normally have had to produce a report on the events of the very last mission—the negotiations surrounding the Trade Federation blockade of Naboo—but the Jedi Council had decided that that report could wait, having been satisfied with his oral report, and in any case, he'd found himself too preoccupied with Anakin and their assignment to be concerned with producing a mission report.

The same was not true of the Naboo investigation, as Obi-Wan found himself typing out the same paragraph five times and repeatedly editing his sentences. He growled quietly to himself with frustration. They'd taught a compulsory class in writing comprehensible mission reports but Obi-Wan had never taken it, owing to an emergency when three star systems in the Mid-Rim had decided they were going to go to war with each other and then the Jedi team that had initially been assigned to that mission had come down with the zaiophen flu, and the Jedi Council in its infinite wisdom had decided that Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn and his dutiful apprentice would do very well indeed, and somehow the subsequent chain of scheduling conflicts had meant he'd never gotten to take that all-important mission reports class.

Which meant he was sitting cross-legged and staring at the glowing screen of his datapad and wondering if he should say, "It was discovered that the Youngbloods were planning to take the Queen and the Supreme Chancellor hostage," or "I discovered that the Youngbloods were planning to take the Queen and the Supreme Chancellor hostage." Qui-Gon had always favoured the use of the active voice, but this was Qui-Gon Jinn, infamous maverick. For all Obi-Wan knew, Mace Windu vomitted blood when reading Qui-Gon's mission reports, and wasn't that going to be a terrible mental image?

Sure, he'd written his share of mission reports before, but it was somehow different when he was the actual ranking member of the team and there was apparently another form he had to fill in about the content of his own report and sign off on, and the only reason Obi-Wan had been spared a third form was that Anakin Skywalker was not yet officially his Padawan Learner and so did not require a duly signed waiver from the task of writing a mission report.

Last night, as an exhausted Anakin had fallen fast asleep and curled up in bed, Mace Windu had taken Obi-Wan aside and solemnly dumped every single bit of pending paperwork onto his lap. And they'd had a talk as well; the sort of talk that Obi-Wan hadn't wanted to have but knew he'd be having the moment Anakin'd said he'd killed Nurié Helukala.

"He killed her with the Force, Kenobi," Mace Windu said. Mace Windu had never been one to sugarcoat or to hold back. Obi-Wan had taken his share of reprimands from the stern Korun Master and did his best to work with them.
"He said as much."

"It was a Force push," Mace Windu continued, answering the unasked question. You could choke the life out of someone with the Force, or stop their hearts, except that it was such a terribly intimate and personal way of killing that the technique was known to be used almost-exclusively by Sith Lords and fallen Jedi. Given more humane methods of killing, it took a certain kind of person to be able to hold a Force choke and to keep that grip on a person's heart or throat even as they writhed and gurgled and finally died.

It was a small comfort at best.

"He screamed. He flung her against the wall. Her neck snapped. And he was fast, faster than I was. If he hadn't acted, Queen Amidala would likely be dead. Helukala had her in her sights and it was hard to miss at that sort of range."

"But," Obi-Wan said, because it was there, of course, in Mace Windu's voice and demeanour, because being a Jedi demanded right action, not just right results, right character, not just right words.

"But," concurred Mace Windu. "He didn't think. He acted. And I worry about the kind of roots his action might stem from. I did not feel the Force last night in the room—not as it should be. It was clouded; far too clouded. You know the Council's reservations when it comes to this boy. No, stop bristling, Kenobi—you took this boy as your Padawan and this means you need to do right by him. You cannot train him by willfully ignoring anything of concern about him."

"With all due respect, Master, Anakin hasn't even been trained yet."

Mace Windu regarded him for a very long time, hooded eyes dark and inscrutable. "I know," replied Mace Windu. "That is exactly what is troubling."

"He will learn," said Obi-Wan, and he was not certain if that was a statement or a promise.

"Perhaps," Mace Windu conceded, with a sharp exhaled sigh. "In any case, the new Jedi team is en route to Naboo despite…a troubling development that led to a delay. We return to the Temple once they have arrived and been briefed."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I understand, Master."

"And Kenobi?"

"Master?"

"Everything about this has been highly irregular," Mace Windu said, with some distaste. "When we return to the Temple, expect to have to go through formal channels—including evaluations—in order for Skywalker to be made your Padawan."

Obi-Wan should not have been surprised. But he was. "The Council gave me permission to train him!" he exclaimed. And he'd promised Qui-Gon. And the formal channels and the right processes meant Obi-Wan had to ask.

And a terrible, terrible, selfish thought struck him: what if, after months at the Temple, Anakin decided that he didn't want to be taught by Obi-Wan Kenobi after all? Could Obi-Wan blame him? He'd promised Qui-Gon, but it was surely understandable if Anakin was dazzled by some offer or other and decided he'd much rather be trained by someone like the esteemable Master Anoon Bondara instead.
Mace Windu shot him an exasperated look. "Yes, Kenobi. We did. When he is ready."

And Obi-Wan had to be content with that.

Obi-Wan stopped the typing in time to take a call from his comlink. After a brief conversation, he turned to Anakin, who was really beginning to be bored out of his skull. There was only so much he could do to occupy himself before he started chewing up the wallpaper out of restlessness.

"Senator Falce Valarin commed. He wants to meet briefly—probably to thank you personally."

"Are we going, then?" Anakin asked, hopefully. Seeing the Senator had to be better than being cooped up in Obi-Wan's room all day. He had no idea how long more Obi-Wan would spend typing away on his datapad.

He wondered if it was a Jedi thing and shuddered.

"As a matter of fact, yes—"

Anakin whooped and darted for the door.

Obi-Wan sighed and followed.

Senator Falce Valarin—for Queen Amidala had confirmed him in the role of Senator until the next planetary elections—presided over an office that was mostly empty. The bookshelves were all but bare now, though Obi-Wan noticed, to his surprise, a dog-eared copy of *Meditations in Exile*, and the sculpture by Zoltan Gavarie, the one that had spoken to Jedi Master Visas Marr's self-imposed exile on Naboo, was wrapped in layers and layers of tape and bubble-wrap, presumably for eventually transport to Valarin's new office on Coruscant.

"Ah, come in, come in!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically shaking their hands and waving the Jedi in. "I was glad you accepted my invitation, Jedi Kenobi and Jedi Skywalker." He smiled down at Anakin. "I took the liberty of ordering refreshments—ah, there they are, thank you Ashté, I have no idea how I am going to manage on Coruscant without you."

"You'll do just fine," Ashté pronounced, rolling her eyes, though that tiny bit of flattery had won Valarin a pleased smile. "Mind you remember to actually *eat*, not only when you have visitors."

The turnovers were warm and flaky, with sweet chunks of shuura fruit inside, and Anakin's eyes widened as he quickly inhaled his turnover and moved on to the next one.

Shuura. Something about that niggled at Obi-Wan's mind.

Shuura cake. Shuura turnovers.

"Do you like shuura fruit, Senator?"

Falce offered him a furtive smile. "As much as the next Naboo, I'm afraid. When it's shuura season, I can easily expect to put on a few kilograms. The bakeries do the most wonderful things with shuura—shuura cake, shuura tarts, shuura brownies, even, and I didn't expect that to taste as good as it did. Please, have some more, Jedi Kenobi, or I'm afraid I'll finish them all by myself, even with Jedi Skywalker's valiant assistance."

Shuura cake, Obi-Wan thought. A convenient way to have silenced Senator Falce Valarin, by
poisoning him with the one dessert he was known to have a fondness for. The one thing he could not, by his own accounts, resist.

Falce expertly nudged Anakin into a third turnover, while savouring his own. He poured a pale herbal tea that tasted lightly of flowers into their cups and urged refreshment on them.

Except that Nurié Helukala hadn't been aiming for Queen Amidala, had she? She'd been aiming for Senator Falce Valarin, had tried to kill him once before, with the poisoned shuura cake, and Obi-Wan hadn't the faintest idea why.

"I wanted to thank you for saving my life," Falce Valarin said at last, to Anakin. "Or the Queen's life, either way you slice it."

"S'okay," Anakin mumbled, to Obi-Wan's horror, but then he swallowed, and tried again. "I mean, I'm glad to, Senator. I wouldn't have liked anyone to die at all, really, but I'm glad she didn't get to kill you or Padmé."

"Yes, well," Falce sighed. "I can definitely attest to the fact I'd much rather prefer no one died, but all things considered, I can't complain. I'm rather fond of being alive—if only because the dead can't taste the shuura harvest."

Obi-Wan chuckled politely.

"Will you miss the shuura, on Coruscant, then?"

Falce's expression shifted several points towards being outright dejected. "Of course I will," he agreed. "But duty calls, and I'm determined to make sure Naboo's interests are best represented in the Senate. Having Soren in the position of Supreme Chancellor makes that a little more convenient for us, but I'm determined to push for punitive action against the Trade Federation, and we'll need the right people in the investigative committee that Soren's going to call together."

He looked over at Anakin and smiled, just a little. "I hope I haven't ruined the Senate for you, young Skywalker. Most of it is bickering and politics and getting to know the right people, and getting the right people to owe you favours or put a word for you in the right places. But if I play the game well enough, the people of Naboo will get what they want."

Obi-Wan would have believed this a little more if he hadn't heard some variant of 'that's just how the Senate works' and 'don't hate the player, hate the game' from the various Senators and senatorial aides he'd encountered over the course of his time as a Jedi. Falce Valarin simply had the charisma and the charm to make that spiel seem a little more authentic than most.

Still, he carefully hid his distaste and remarked, "Then Queen Amidala will have chosen her Senator well."

Falce Valarin inclined his head in a brief nod. "I can only hope so. Certainly, the Youngbloods likely don't see things this way, though I must admit to feeling a sort of admiration for them."

"Why?" Anakin piped up.

"Because they're angry and young and hotblooded," Falce Valarin replied, with a shrug. "And they think they can change the world." He popped an entire turnover into his mouth and chewed and swallowed.

"The Jedi don't like anger," Anakin said. He stared almost-defiantly at the Senator, and reached for another turnover.
"No," Falce Valarin agreed. "They don't hold with it at all. But I'm not a Jedi—I'm a politician, and quite honestly, I admire anger. There's something refreshingly blunt and honest about anger. And anger, I can assure you, changes the world. Anger undirected—pure, raw rage, the sense that something must change, that things cannot go on the way they always, always have…" he paused. "That anger is powerful. It changes lives. Changes the course of history, even. Do you know about the King before Queen Amidala's predecessor?"

Obi-Wan frowned in thought, leaning forward. "King Veruna of Naboo, wasn't he?"

"Yes. Thoroughly corrupt, of course—cutting deals with the Trade Federation and the Outer Rim Mining Concern and the Intergalactic Banking Clan and selling Naboo out to all those corporate entities. King Veruna was not voted out. He was forced to abdicate because all of Naboo came to a halt. The last straw that broke the shaak's back was when they found out he was siphoning public funds into his personal holdings. There was massive outrage—and weeks and weeks of public demonstrations. All that anger, focused and channeled towards exactly one objective—desposing King Veruna—and it changed the history of Naboo. It gave us King Jahur, and after him, Queen Amidala."

"It sounds like it was a good thing," said Anakin, and perhaps it was the reminder of his conversation with Mace Windu and his own private fears but Obi-Wan felt the slightest twinge of unease.

"It was. I don't mean to say that I think the Youngbloods are right, of course, but such anger doesn't arise from nowhere. If anything, it's a waste."

It was a waste, Obi-Wan thought, thinking of Ernan lying dead, of the few Youngbloods who'd been killed during their revolution, of the trail of bodies scattered across Theed now: the legislators killed besides Androl Oden, those killed and wounded in the attack at the victory parade, and Orm Junaka and Nurié Helukala and Dr. Pallié Talein who'd never woken up, and the count of all the dead and wounded and dying rising by the numbers because the Youngbloods were angry but raw, brute anger alone was never enough.

"Yes," Obi-Wan managed, at last. "It is indeed a waste, Senator."

Falce Valarin sighed. "They could have changed things, you know. But anger alone isn't ever really enough," and unconsciously echoed the direction of Obi-Wan's thoughts. "I respect anger. Anger changes the world. I respect that. That's powerful. Most people get into politics because they want to change the world. But anger alone, anger undirected and unfocused… It's a caché of explosives, just waiting for someone to light the fuse, whether for better or for worse… The trick is to use anger, and to use it well."

There was a world outside the Temple, Obi-Wan reminded himself, even as Anakin leaned forward and listened, intently, even as they exchanged pleasantries and the new Senator of Naboo thanked them again, earnestly, for having saved his life.

Some good had come out of Anakin's emotional outburst, Obi-Wan was forced to concede. If Nurié Helukala had successfully killed Queen Amidala, or even Falce Valarin, they would be worse-off. And yet.

And yet.

Anakin was silent for a while, after they'd left Falce Valarin's office to return to the palace. "Was he right, Obi-Wan?" he asked, tentatively. Curiosity, perhaps. Warring with the knowledge that the Jedi way was different, that Mace Windu had spoken disparagingly of emotion, and Obi-Wan had
said anger was bad, and yet.

And yet Falce Valarin had sat there, supremely confident, and wrapped in power, and he hadn't been able to save his own life, and yet Anakin wanted both that assurance and the sort of power the Jedi had, and why couldn't he have both, anyway?

The yearning tugged at him, deep in his heart of hearts, though Anakin never quite bothered to put words to it since Obi-Wan would not approve of this talk of power, he knew by now, and if he had to be a Jedi—the perfect Jedi—to taste that sort of power, then he would be as perfect as he had to be.

"About?" Obi-Wan asked, turning to regard him.

"Anger," Anakin said.

Obi-Wan chuckled, quietly. "That anger changes history? Oh, yes."

"But the Jedi don't like anger. Anger corrupts the Force, you said. It leads to the Dark Side, and the Dark Side is bad."

"Fear leads to anger," Obi-Wan agreed, and Anakin remembered what that small green Jedi Master had recited in the central chamber. It felt like ages and ages ago.

"—anger leads to hate, and hate leads to suffering." They finished together. "That is the way of the Dark Side," Obi-Wan added, firmly.

"Are we so different from ordinary people that anger is fine for them but not for us?"

Obi-Wan exhaled. "No," he said. "But the Senator misunderstands what it is to be Jedi. As do you, my very young apprentice."

Anakin scowled. Always that, with the Jedi. Always tricks with words and more twists than you could put your finger on. He wanted things straightforward and honest and blunt. Why take ten words when you just needed two? Shmi had always said that honesty required the least thought of all. "What, then?"

"You will feel the emotion," Obi-Wan whispered, dropping to a knee in front of Anakin. "You will feel the anger. And then you must let it go. Master Talis Canaith told a story—a teaching tale—to my class once. I will tell it to you. There was an order of travelling monks, once, that followed the ways of wisdom. The precepts of the order forbade three things: it forbade possession, and it forbade family, and it forbade physical contact with others, for the monks thought that physical contact was of the flesh and their eyes were on the realm of the luminous, rather than crude matter."

Anakin blinked. "That's stupid," he said, flatly. "Why would touching someone be bad?"

"One day," said Obi-Wan, ignoring his comments, "Two monks of the order—a senior and a novice—were crossing a river when they saw a child crying by the river. The senior monk asked the child what was wrong. The child explained, "My home is on the other side of the river, and I can't swim."

Without another word, the monk lifted the child onto his back and swam across the river. Then, he set the child down, and bowed, and continued on his way."

Anakin frowned, puzzled. "Okay, wait, didn't you just say that they weren't allowed to touch people?"

"The novice," Obi-Wan continued, "Was as lost as you are. He tried to make sense of the senior
monk's action but he could not. Finally, he could not hold back any longer and burst out, "Master, are we not to refrain from touching another being? Why did you help the child across the river?" The monk replied, "I have set the child down at the river. Why do you still carry the child with you?"

He fell silent and waited, expectantly.

"Okay?" Anakin said, slowly. He wasn't really sure what the tale of monks and rivers and lost children—and how had that child gotten on the wrong side of the river anyway?—was about, but Shmi had been adamant on the power of stories to teach, and he'd grown up on his fair share of legends and tales and folklore on Tatooine but those were easy enough to understand: be kind, be brave, be stubborn, and so on. If there was a kernel of meaning to be found in Obi-Wan's story, Anakin could not seem to make it out at all.

"Think about it," Obi-Wan said, merely, as he stood up again and stretched languidly.

"I am, I am," Anakin grumbled.

He fell into reluctant thought, even as they continued walking back to the palace. They weren't allowed to touch other beings. Well, the Jedi weren't allowed to be angry either, weren't they? So was Obi-Wan saying it was okay to be angry sometimes? But he'd said it wasn't okay.

Huffing quietly to himself, Anakin turned over the seirta, again and again in his head like a sun-warmed stone. And exactly like a sun-warmed stone, it settled comfortably into his mind, a little rough, heavy with significance, even if Anakin didn't quite understand just yet.

On their return to the palace, Obi-Wan was pleasantly surprised to encounter a very familiar Force-presence as they crossed one of the many sprawling courtyards in the palace. "Bant!" he cried out, and ran to meet her, and swept her up into a tight, friendly hug.

"It's so good to see you again!" Bant exclaimed, and then he saw the moment her silver eyes grew dark with grief. "I heard about Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and I'm so very sorry—"

"I know," Obi-Wan murmured, though there was a burr in his throat and his words seemed to catch right there. "I know, I know, I know, and he died fighting a Sith Lord, and there must be worse ways to go out, but he should've died peacefully in the Temple, rather than on the battlefield." Except this was how Qui-Gon would've wanted to die, he found himself thinking. Qui-Gon had always been one for action, for going where he felt the Force willed, for allowing himself to be borne like a leaf on the currents of the Living Force, and who was Obi-Wan to gainsay his Master, even on something like that?

Her hand went to the roughened patch of hair where he'd cut off his Padawan braid. "They Knighted you?"

"They did," Obi-Wan confirmed. "You didn't know?"

Bant shook her head. "Only word that Qui-Gon was dead."

Obi-Wan let out a long breath in a sigh, and then was abruptly reminded of the small boy hiding behind his leg. "Anakin Skywalker, meet Bant Eerin. Bant, this is Anakin, my new Padawan."

Bant smiled down at Anakin, who carefully peeled himself away from Obi-Wan's side. "You're strange," he said, frowning carefully at her.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan snapped, horrified. And then to Bant. "I'm sorry, he's come from Tatooine, and
"Ah, that explains it," Bant said, cheerfully. To Anakin, she said, "You grew up on a desert planet—you've probably never seen a Mon Calamari before. My homeworld is full of water, and if we don't have enough moisture, we die. Also, Obi-Wan's often been a stick-in-the-mud, and has been ever since we were Padawans, so don't mind him."

Anakin cracked a smile at that, while Obi-Wan merely rolled his eyes at her.

"What are you doing on Naboo, then?"

Bant blinked, nictitating membranes flicking over her pale eyes. "You don't know? I'm the Jedi team sent to take over the investigation in your place."

"You?" Obi-Wan asked, startled. "What happened to—do you have a partner?"

Practically everyone in Obi-Wan's approximate age-set had been Knighted before him. The last Obi-Wan had heard, Quinlan Vos was on some deep undercover mission on some abandoned backwater of the galaxy; Reeft had completed his apprenticeship and was a full-fledged mind-healer; Garen was a hotshot Jedi Knight hopping in and out of combat zones; and Bant, Bant had gone into the Archives, just as Tahl had before her, and brought with her small gifts and stories for all their impromptu gatherings at the Temple, and tiny little messages for Obi-Wan for when they weren't at the Temple at the same time.

And then there was Siri, but Siri had left, had fallen, and part of Obi-Wan still couldn't believe it, was still reeling as though he'd lost a game of push-feather in the crèche; as though he'd tipped over and was still falling, falling, falling and the world was spinning about him, faces crowding, laughing and concerned into his vision as the breath fled from his lungs.

Qui-Gon's death had felt a little like that, of course; only more. His Master had been such a natural part of his life that his death still echoed in all the empty spaces.

Qui-Gon had asked him, once, how he felt about still being Qui-Gon's Padawan, even as his friends all moved onwards, to Knighthood, and to whatever lay beyond. His Master's blue eyes were serious, searching.

Obi-Wan had once wondered if Qui-Gon was holding him back, keeping him away from Knighthood. He had found that he did not actually care. It felt strange, certainly, to watch his friends move forwards, to realise that he was still there, still standing still, still having lost that game of push-feather.

But it did not bother him; not as it once might have.

His path was his own, and all paths were one, and he was content.

"No," Obi-Wan replied, and meant it. "I am content, Master."

Bant was saying something, and with a twinge of guilt, Obi-Wan realised he'd missed most of it. "... that's why I was delayed," she was saying. "I imagine Master Yaddle has her hands full by now."

"Of?"


Obi-Wan blinked. That name was fairly familiar, but... It took him a few moments of racking his
memory but then he had it. Janek Dooku, the uncrowned Count of Serenno. Janek Dooku, one of
the most brilliant, most intimidating, most uncompromising Jedi Masters the Order had ever
produced. Trained by Master Thame Cerulian, and mentored by Master Yoda himself, Janek Dooku
was a force to be reckoned with, and might have been a popular candidate for the Jedi Council, if
only he had been anything less than intensely solitary.

And Janek Dooku had trained Qui-Gon.

Qui-Gon had never been one to talk about the past. Obi-Wan had found out about his connection to
Janek Dooku through Bant, who'd been studying training lineages, rather than from Qui-Gon
himself.

He'd asked Qui-Gon only once about what Janek Dooku had been like. Qui-Gon had stirred his tea
and said, after a long while, "He taught me a great deal. Trained me into Knighthood. It was a
difficult relationship, on both sides, though I will never fault his teaching, nor his dedication." It was
as polite a non-answer as Qui-Gon was going to give.

"What about Dooku?" Obi-Wan prodded.

Bant snorted. "You missed what I said, didn't you?"

"Well…"

She let him squirm for a few, long, embarrassing moments before she took pity on him. "Janek
Dooku—he didn't take the news of Qui-Gon's death well. He was supposed to be sent to Naboo
with me to investigate. I suppose the Council thought he'd want to attend Qui-Gon's funeral as well."

"What happened, then?"

Mon Calamari didn't have eyebrows, but Obi-Wan recognised the crinkles about Bant's eyes. "He
went into seclusion for several days. Refused to accept any calls or comers. And then, by the time
Master Yaddle had gone to his door and attempted to drag him out, he came. Went before the Jedi
Council and told them he was leaving. And then he stormed out of the Order."

"That's it?" Obi-Wan asked, incredulously.

Bant's eyes glinted with amusement. "He also went before a session of the Senate as the new Count
of Serenno and fillibustered the Senate, accusing them of having badly mishandled the Trade
Federation and the Naboo situation."

And there was the legendary firebrand, the veritable force of nature that Janek Dooku was in Jedi
rumour.

Janek Dooku had taught Qui-Gon. Had never spoken to Obi-Wan, or his Master, for as long as Obi-
Wan could remember. Had mourned Qui-Gon's death, apparently—and was mourning in his own
way.

He wondered what it might have been like to meet Janek Dooku at Qui-Gon's funeral.

"So I'm here now, on my own, though I'm told the situation seems to have resolved itself, and I'm
just going to have to be running down some loose ends."

Obi-Wan nodded. That was more or less his assessment of the situation, and he said as much. "I'm
fairly certain that with the Youngbloods in custody, most of the attacks against Queen Amidala will
stop." He said nothing of the death of Nurié Helukala, mindful of Anakin's presence. "Good luck
Bant laughed. "I'd prefer chasing down rumours of some lost manuscript in a dusty tomb, but we never get to pick where we're sent."

"No," Obi-Wan agreed, soberly. "We never do." He thought of New Aspolon; of a similar meeting, though colder. Bant had hurt no less for Tahl's death, and perhaps he knew what it felt like, even though he'd been there when Qui-Gon was killed. Bant never even had the chance to say goodbye.

It hadn't felt like goodbye though. And maybe that was the problem.

Bant's hand rested gently on his shoulder, and for a moment, he thought he felt the ghost of his Master's touch. Gone, now. "It's still fresh, isn't it?"

Obi-Wan fought back the thorn of grief that had worked its way into his heart, digging deeper like the strangler brassthorn vines of Haruun Kal. "Always."

It wasn't a Jedi response. Master Yoda would have lashed him with the gimer stick for it. Master Yaddle might have reminded him that grief, too, was a conditioned phenomenon and thus transient. But this was Bant and they'd grown up together and shared laughter and tears and lessons and secrets, and he was so very tired, and—

—and Anakin needed him, which meant Obi-Wan couldn't crack, not here, not now, and so even as Bant took his hand in hers and pressed it lightly and whispered, "I know," Obi-Wan fought to retain his composure, to let the pain sluice out through the cracks that had formed, until…until…

Until nothing was left but a dull ache. He didn't know if that was at all better.

Now that Bant had arrived to take over the investigation, the full Jedi Council—or at least, those members present on Naboo—met to confer and to debrief Obi-Wan and to brief Bant. Anakin followed Obi-Wan into the proceedings; after all, he would hopefully be a full Padawan soon enough, and since he'd accompanied Obi-Wan through most of the investigation, it seemed only right that he'd get to hear for himself how things had turned out.

Obi-Wan summarised what had gone into his report: that it seemed that the Youngbloods on Naboo had radicalised; had moved from a burgeoning separatist movement to one advancing armed struggle. Questioning of some of the disheartened Youngbloods in custody had identified Irmé Piraka among whatever passed for leaders in their numbers, and that Piraka especially had been instrumental in coordinating with Maric Ersken and Nurié Helukala and Orm Junaka. The exact nature of the connection had to be determined, but Obi-Wan strongly suspected that it was either through the Ersken or through Piraka that the Youngbloods had been able to coordinate with the Trade Federation and obtain suitable weapons. The Youngbloods had sought to distance Naboo from the Republic first by murdering the sole surviving Jedi representative on Naboo and then by attacking the Queen. The other murders, he hypothesised, were part of an increasingly desperate attempt at covering their tracks. It was in some ways, an unsatisfying report, and did not feel entirely right. But it was at least a coherent picture of the past events.

It was Plo Koon who currently held the floor, however, with the information he'd managed to retrieve from Androl Oden's computer. "Unfortunately," Plo Koon reported, "A lot of the information is lost, missing, or incomplete. I managed to extrapolate with relative certainty about some of what's left, but I'd otherwise need more time, more manpower, and more expertise to be able to retrieve more than this. It's my assessment that it's worth the investment, but we can let the information speak for itself."
There was a data-reader in the centre of the makeshift Council chamber, connected to a holo-projector. Plo Koon proceeded to the holo-projector and inserted his data-stick. "Take a look at this," he said, as lines and lines of damning information in Aurebesh and numbers flicked on, projected in pale blue light.

"What's it say?" Anakin whispered.

"It's financial information," Obi-Wan replied, keeping his voice hushed, after a moment. "Incomplete, but it looks like Androl Oden has had a series of financial records concerning transactions made to and on behalf of Edaan Corp."

He hadn't kept all that quiet, because Plo Koon nodded to him. "Exactly," said the Kel Dor Jedi Master. "I'd also like to highlight something else." He flicked on his lightsaber—Anakin started at the loud snap-hiss of the blade igniting, and Obi-Wan placed a calming hand on his shoulder and felt the boy slowly relax again—and used it to point to a particular set of numbers. "I had Ki-Adi do a bit of digging on these identifiers. Why don't you tell them what you found, Ki-Adi?"

Ki-Adi-Mundi gave a thin, cold smile. "It was quite 'a bit of digging','" he said, acerbically, "But these identifiers belong to an account held in trust with the Intergalactic Banking Clan. They were extremely cagey about identifying who the account belonged to, but fortunately, we had something else that solved that particular mystery. The requisite authentication module was fixed to Arvol Resnik's datapad, meaning that Edaan Corp handled the payment."

"What's that mean?" Anakin wanted to know. A flicker of amusement, there, from Even Piell.

"Edaan Corp is connected to two locals," Obi-Wan explained. "Ule Marran and Ciré Perola. We know that they must be from Naboo—the regulations required them to submit identification and the paperwork needs to check out, at least on first glance. There are only so many reasons Androl Oden had this sort of information on Edaan Corp and given that he was killed so very soon after he'd commed me, it seems likely that he was our missing Ule Marran."

"There were two," Even Piell said, grimly, and Obi-Wan's mind flashed back to the conversation he'd had with Mace Windu about the Sith, and his eyes flicked to where Bant stood, beside him, listening to everything the Council had to say.

He felt a flicker of dread moved through him. The Sith he'd fought had been deadly, and so strong in the Force that fighting him felt like swimming in silty water in the cold and dark confines of a tunnel. What if Bant's investigation brought her into the crosshairs of the Sith?

He made himself breathe; let the fear and the dread move through him, and depart as he exhaled. Bant must've sensed his anxiety—she was always extremely perceptive where he was concerned—and reached out to take his hand.

"Who, then, was Ciré Perola?"

"I think," Depa Billaba said, "That is a task for Knight Eerin." She looked over to Bant, and nodded. "There are still a number of things that are unclear. A number of loose ends that might or might not be connected to the affair at hand. Your task is to tug on them, and to see what comes undone."

"I am ready, Masters," Bant said, inclining her head, the very picture of a composed Jedi Knight and Obi-Wan felt a soft, pleasant buzz of warm pride for his best friend.

"This is not all, however," Plo Koon said, and immediately, all eyes returned to the Jedi Master. "There is something else this Council needs to see, and this was recovered also from Androl Oden's
He removed the data-stick and replaced it with another. The holo-projector whirred and sketched out a grainy, flickering image in blue light. A corridor that Obi-Wan did not recognise, though it looked strangely familiar. The time-stamp below was illegible.

Plo Koon froze the image. "It took me quite a bit of effort to determine where this holo-vid was taken from. I eventually ascertained that it was a recording from the palace security surveillance system. Specifically, this image has been stolen and wiped from the palace systems." He looked about to make sure everyone was following so far. "This corridor was from the camera overlooking the cells where Trade Federation viceroy Nute Gunray and Rune Haako are being detained."

Obi-Wan frowned at the still image. "No guards?" That seemed like unusually light security for the leadership of the Trade Federation, even as they were due to be returned under heavy Judicial Department escort to Coruscant to face trial.

"I spoke with Captain Panaka," Plo Koon replied. "The corridor has only one point of access and guards are posted there all times. The security lockdown happened exactly during the changing of the guard, and hence the corridor was unguarded during the time of this video." He resumed the recording. "Some frames were too fragmented to be recovered. I'm going to push us ahead to the time of interest."

The recording skipped about quickly and then there was a figure in the corridor, and then he was kneeling before the cell, and left.

"This is the fast version," Plo Koon explained. He rewound the recording and froze the frame at the figure entering the corridor. "I'm blowing this frame up as big as possible—there we go."

It was Orm Junaka.

It was Orm Junaka, and he was holding something. Obi-Wan strained his eyes, trying to make out what it was, but the quality of the recording, even with Plo Koon's tech-wizardry, was extremely poor.

"It's the feather of a pylat bird," Plo Koon said. "Snapped."

"What's a py-pylat bird?"

"It's a songbird from Neimodia," Obi-Wan explained. That had been in the mission briefing materials he'd gone over so long ago, back when his only task was to successfully negotiate a resolution to the Trade Federation's blockade of Naboo. "Highly-prized as a symbol of wealth and status." He narrowed his eyes, frowning at the image. Snapped, Plo Koon had said, though Obi-Wan could not see how the Master had pulled such detail from it.

"And it was snapped," said Anakin.

"A potent symbol," Even Piell spoke up again. He, too, was frowning. "Or perhaps a warning. A very personalised warning."

"I'm sure we know the purpose of that warning," Adi Gallia murmured. "A warning against playing the turncoat. And a reminder that even Naboo palace security or the Jedi cannot protect them."

Obi-Wan frowned. That made even less sense, unless… Unless…

"Nute Gunray is a notable coward," Eeth Koth said, in his quiet voice. He had a way of making
himself heard, all the same. Eeth Koth never shouted; people fell silent when he spoke. "The Council has previously found it strange that the Trade Federation should undertake such an aggressive move as an attempted blockade—much less an invasion of Naboo—in defiance of the laws of the Republic."

It was Yoda, though, who gave voice to Obi-Wan's unspoken fear. "Much, there is, that we do not know. Only a little of the who, and almost nothing of the why. Above all, clouded, the Force is. Seek fearlessly, you must, Knight Eerin. But be cautious, you must. Somewhere in the shadows, the Sith lurk yet."

Bant offered the Council a full, formal bow. "I understand, Masters. I will not fail you."

"That's it?" Anakin demanded, crossly.

Obi-Wan raised an eyebrow. "That's it," he replied, mildly, as he packed away his datapad and his gear into the tooled leather pouches on his utility belt. In comparison, Anakin felt overburdened with all the things in his backpack, but he was hardly going to complain or throw some of his stuff away.

He'd packed light. Qui-Gon'd told him to. But still, he'd found himself going through his tools and worrying about what he could take with him. Did he really need three specialised multi-tools and precision gauges? What about the set of four battered pliers he'd rescued from a junk heap? And what about the very old multimeter that Watto had grudgingly let Anakin retrieve from the waste pile? And what about...

No. He'd had a difficult time culling down what he would take with him to a single backpack. He wasn't about to throw his things out right now. And yet a part of Anakin still felt as if he'd left what was most important back on Tatooine.

And hadn't he? Shmi was still there, and she was still a slave, and Watto could be so very cruel.

"What about the Youngbloods?"

"What about them?"

"What if there's more out there?"

"That's what palace security is for."

Anakin scowled at that answer. He didn't like it. Sure, Padmé had guards. And the guards had done nothing at all, had been perfectly helpless, just like the rest of the Jedi had been when Nurié Helukala had come out from nowhere and prepared to shoot—to shoot her? To shoot Falce Valarin?

"You are going to be a Jedi, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, unfazed. "You cannot afford to narrow your focus. Queen Amidala has a great deal of political work ahead of her, and Captain Panaka is competent. We have rooted out a number of conspirators and the rest of the investigation has been farmed out to Bant and the relevant authorities on Naboo. She will be safe, I promise." He straightened up, wincing a little as he put weight on his injured leg in the process.

But Anakin didn't know Bant, for all Obi-Wan did, and for all Obi-Wan seemed so certain that Bant would be enough, Anakin couldn't quite bring himself to believe that would be the case.

"What d'you mean, narrow my focus?" he demanded, seizing instead on the other part of what Obi-Wan had said.
"I mean to focus on the small things," said Obi-Wan. "To miss the forest for the trees. You need to be trained, Anakin. You will not become a Jedi by waiting on Naboo to throw yourself between Queen Amidala and any threat—if and when the threat arrives. You were in the right place at the right time, and the Force was with you. Trust in the Force, now. What does it tell you?"

But the Force was silent, and as much as Anakin reached out, he just didn't know, and all he could think of was a blaster pistol pointing right at Padmé and part of him fiercely rejected that. He was not going to let her die, and wasn't it a sin to kill an angel anyway?

Obi-Wan was waiting, expectantly.

"Nothing," Anakin ground out, annoyed. "Nothing at all."

"Then," Obi-Wan said, "I will teach you to listen. But for now, you have some time before we leave. And Queen Amidala has expressed her desire to thank you."

Anakin blinked. "Really? Where?"

"She's waiting in the hangar right now," began Obi-Wan, "You should hurry—it's never good manners to make royalty wait," but Anakin slung his pack over his shoulder and was already running off.

Ordinarily, Obi-Wan would have followed Anakin to the hangar to meet with Queen Amidala. There was something about the situation that unnerved him: perhaps it was how easily and readily Anakin had formed a connection with the young Queen of Naboo. Attachment was not the Jedi way, and he found himself mulling over what Mace Windu had told him.

Anakin had acted and acted so quickly in Queen Amidala's defense. Was it youthful recklessness? A fear of loss, and therefore attachment?

The only antidote for attachment, the Jedi had taught, was to let it go. To allow it to come freely and to go freely; to pass from one's life as water. But even Obi-Wan struggled at the best of times with the ghost of Qui-Gon's loss. How could he teach Anakin the same lesson?

It was for more than one reason that Obi-Wan was relieved they would be returning to the Temple shortly. Anakin needed to be trained. That was still true. And time and distance would, perhaps, give some perspective to what bordered on boyish awe and hero-worship. He would outgrow it, Obi-Wan thought. He was overthinking this.

Time, and experience, would temper that enthusiasm. Would teach what Obi-Wan currently could not instill in his very, very young apprentice.

"I received your comm," he said, after greeting the librarian. "I thought you might like to know: the books never showed up on the antiquities market."

The librarian shook her head, slowly. "I did not think they would. They carry value only in the right circles, and there are only very, very few copies of the original manuscripts. They were priceless for exactly that reason. For any copy to surface now would be to invite unnecessary scrutiny and investigation, and I would expect them to either be in private hands, or off Naboo completely."

Her tone made it clear she did not expect to find the missing items of the collection ever again. Bant would have been heartbroken, Obi-Wan thought, at the idea of the damage that had been wrought.

"In any case, as mentioned previously, I did an evaluation of what was most likely lost, Master Jedi."
"What was, then?"

"It's rather eclectic," the librarian said, frowning. "But what's clear is that most of the books stolen pertain to Queen Phaisté's reign, as well as King Ulrajna—that's the king prior to Queen Phaisté—and her successor, Queen Oliské the Pretender."

Obi-Wan frowned. Queen Phaisté. Why did that sound so familiar?

"Some of the manuscripts were priceless; original texts, some of them enciphered, which can be traced to around that period. We suspect a number of them were memoirs, and of similar provenance, though authorship was questionable."

"Queen Phaisté," Obi-Wan said aloud, thinking. "She was Queen when Jedi Master Visas Marr dwelled on Naboo, wasn't she?"

The librarian's thin lips pressed together in an almost-smile. "Yes. You know that much of Naboo history at least."

"Unfortunately, it is not my specialisation," Obi-Wan said, placatingly. "As far as I know, there's a cabin where Jedi Master Visas Marr used to live, out in the Lake Country, and Queen Phaisté was reputed to have sought her counsel on occasion."

"That, at least, is more or less known," the librarian agreed. "There are royal documents in the palace archives which attest to Master Marr's influence on palace politics and Queen Phaisté's decision-making processes. Some of this, in fact, accounts for Queen Phaisté being removed from the throne and being replaced by Queen Oliské the Pretender."

"Pardon?"

"There's always been a strong independent streak on Naboo, Master Jedi," said the librarian, offering him a glacial smile. "No one likes the idea of someone else other than Naboo telling the Queen what to do."

"Even though the Queen merely sought counsel?"

The librarian shrugged. "You know as well as I do that facts matter less than appearances in politics, Master Jedi. I wish it were not so, but the history of Naboo has been littered too often with Talacinian shadow-plays rather than actual substantive evidence-based decision-making."

Beings sometimes reacted more to emotion than truth, Obi-Wan thought. There was a Jedi seirta that said as much.

"Yes. I do know that, unfortunately."

The librarian nodded, more to herself, as though his answer had satisfied her. "Well, then. You won't believe how many lurid legends there are about that period, Master Jedi."

"Legends?"

"Yes. Legends. Stories of hidden cachés of Jedi knowledge, or ancient holocrons and artefacts buried away in the Lake Country, that Jedi Master Visas Marr was protecting. Why, after all, would she come to Naboo? For years, we've had Jedi chasers—that's what they're called, people who read the histories and think of legends and want to be a part of it, want to be the one to find an old buried lightsaber or holocron, some piece of the past, and go searching. Some of them come to the palace library, thinking that Jedi Master Visas Marr left clues behind and that the clever and the patient will
find them." The librarian eyed him wearily. "I can safely say that if there has been any sign at all of a hidden Jedi caché, your Order would have been notified."

"The Order has been notified," said Bant, as she joined them. Her presence took Obi-Wan by surprise, but he recovered quickly and offered a quick round of introductions. Bant continued, "It's scutwork, in the Archives. Almost any planet that has ever had a reputed Jedi presence writes in to the Archives claiming to have a Jedi caché, or a lost Academy, or buried lightsaber focusing crystals, or holocrons, or even the trapped spirits of Jedi Masters long gone. Not every planet is Onderon, and the Archives has several whole branches devoted simply to researching for any sign that these leads are worth following up on."

Obi-Wan whistled softly. He hadn't known about that. But then, most Jedi in any given specialisation often were only vaguely aware of what happened in the other specialisations.

"And the legends of Master Marr's caché's?"

Bant shook her head. "What have I been telling you? We've got tons of live investigations—the report's probably been dumped of the lap of some senior Padawan or a haplessly green young Knight. No one knows."

They thanked the librarian and left. "Were you looking for me?"

Bant nodded. "I just wanted to catch you before you headed back to the Temple." She grinned; the same conspiratorial smirk they'd given each other before some of their worse escapades at the Temple, like the time they'd snuck out of astronavigation class to go cliff-diving and swim in the Room of a Thousand Fountains. "Honestly, I just wanted to check about the raid on the palace library since your briefing notes mentioned this."

Obi-Wan nodded. "It's an anomaly, I think. Possibly opportunistic."

"Perhaps," Bant said. "It's strange, though. I want to ask the Temple when reports of a possible caché on Naboo started. Maybe it's a tangent. But then again, it doesn't really fit, does it?"

He fell in alongside her as they walked down the corridor. "How so?"

"If it's opportunistic," Bant said, "You need someone with freedom of movement in the palace during an emergency lockdown."

He took her point. "Unlikely, then."

"Rather, I should think. Which means our thief knew there would be a lockdown. And was interested in old Naboo history…or rumours of a Jedi caché."

Obi-Wan's mind flew back to thoughts of the Sith. Was he jumping at shadows now; seeing the Sith in every movement, every nook and cranny? Perhaps the Youngbloods had thought to locate the Jedi caché, to use it as leverage.

Something about that picture troubled him, but he could not figure out what it was.

"Obi-Wan?" Bant was looking at him, quizzically.

"I think," said Obi-Wan, "You should ask the Youngbloods about the Jedi caché." It took Bant less than a moment to catch on.

"I will. Good luck training your new Padawan," Bant grinned. "I can't believe you already have a
Padawan of your own. The others are going to love this."

This time, it was Obi-Wan who moved first. He swept her up into a tight hug and tried not to think about his worries. *Don't focus on your anxieties, Padawan, Qui-Gon had always admonished. Listen to the here and now.*

"Be careful," he murmured. "Please."

She was his first and oldest friend, and even now, raw and aching from the loss of Qui-Gon, he did not know what he would do if the hunt sent her up against the Sith.

Her mouth quirked in a smile. "I will. Take care of yourself, Obi-Wan. Don't forget about yourself just because you've got a Padawan now."

"I will. I promise. May the Force be with you, Bant."

"May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan."

Anakin ran through the royal hangar, his backpack bumping into the small of his back repeatedly. Ordinarily, he would have stopped to gawk at the starfighters and the mechanics and astromech droids engaged in the multitudinous tasks of maintaining them. But Obi-Wan had said Padmé wanted to thank him, and it wasn't polite to wait, and already the thought made him dizzyingly happy. Padmé wanted to thank him! Personally!

He skidded to a halt at a big cruiser that bore the markings of the Republic. He was pretty sure this was the one the Jedi had arrived in. He was just in time too, as Padmé arrived from the other direction—Anakin wondered if it was yet another secret passage—and, to his surprise, she was entirely alone.

She didn't wear her ceremonial regalia, though. Right now, she was just Padmé, in her red, handmaiden's attire, even though Anakin knew she wasn't one of them. "Ah, the Hero of Naboo!" Padmé greeted, and her smile made him feel all warm inside, like he'd just bitten into a hot dinner back home. "Queen Amidala sent me to guide you to the antechamber for a private reception."

Anakin puzzled that through. After all, she *was* the Queen, so what was going on? But then he remembered that Padmé had a habit of disguising herself as a handmaiden. Which meant she wanted privacy, and didn't even want a trail of handmaidens and guards following her. And maybe it meant she *trusted* him, and he liked that thought a great deal.

He fell into step behind her as she led the way. As soon as they left the hangar, Padmé took him down a series of steps and through a passage in the wall and out the other side. "There," she murmured. "It's hard to get a moment alone, these days. Though that's not to say it was ever easy. You give up a lot in politics."

Anakin nodded wisely. He understood *that*. After all, he'd given up his home and Shmi to become a Jedi, even though so much about that remained terrifyingly uncertain. "I guess," he ventured. "You have to give something to get something, right?"

"Exactly that," Padmé said, with a tired smile. "Like Obi-Wan told you, I wanted to thank you, Anakin. You saved my life that evening—or Senator Valarin's life, at any rate, and if you hadn't acted, either of us would be dead."

Maybe that warm feeling was pride, Anakin thought. He was *good* for something; he was helping. He was becoming that figure of smoke and blue fire in his dreams, the Jedi who returned to Tatooine
and freed the slaves. A strange sensation—tight and prickling and electric—thrummed through his veins. It felt as though he was on the threshold of something momentous, some weighty destiny descending upon his shoulders.

"Aww, it wasn't anything," Anakin muttered, and he didn't bother to conceal his smile at all. "I'm just glad you're safe and alive."

"You protected me," Padmé said. "With the power of the Force alone. That's pretty amazing from where I'm standing."

Cautiously, he glanced up at her. "Really? You think so?"

Solemnly, Padmé nodded. "Really. Cross my heart."

She'd explained it to him before—while on the royal cruiser, transiting through hyperspace—that it was a saying they had on Naboo, and it was meant to indicate that the speaker was being truthful, or sincere. Anakin had confided in her that they had a similar saying on Tatooine: to swear by water. (If you went into the cantinas late a night, the engine grease-smeared mechanics and hardened mercs said, "Sure as spit." But they were the same thing, really. And Padmé understood.)

"I don't think the Jedi liked it," he admitted, quietly. Stars, he wasn't sure he liked it, either. The sharp sound of Nurié Helukala's neck snapping would haunt him, he was certain.

"I'm not going to pretend it's not terrifying, Ani," Padmé said, at last. "And I wish you could've stopped her without killing her. But you saved my life, and Senator Valarin's life, without any training at all, and I'm not going to devalue that either."

He bit at his lip. So even Padmé was afraid. And yet—and yet she was alone with him now, wasn't she?

"What do I do?" he asked, quietly. Painfully. "I keep thinking that she had to be stopped. But…"

"But not like this, perhaps," Padmé completed, and Anakin nodded silently. "You'll learn, Ani. You'll go with the Jedi, and you'll learn what they have to teach you, and you'll become a great Jedi and save planets and protect lives. No one's perfect. But the real pity is when we don't learn from our mistakes…and make them over and over again."

"And what about you?" he asked, tenatively. He wanted to be a Jedi, and yet…and yet there was the pervasive fear. He was the one with the power; if he wasn't here, what was to stop another Nurié Helukala?

Padmé smiled, fondly. "I'll continue as Queen of Naboo. There's so many reforms that still need to be passed, Ani. Things that could make people's lives so much better. And if I've made enemies in the process, so much the better. That tells you you're doing something worthwhile. Did you know my guards and handmaidens foiled four different assassination attempts in my first month as Queen?"

Anakin blinked. He hadn't known that at all.

"It's sweet of you to worry, Anakin, but I'll be just fine. Focus on learning how to be a Jedi. Learn to use your power wisely, because all power carries with it responsibility. Can you do that, do you think?"

Anakin swallowed. "Yeah," he said, at last, wondering why he felt like crying a little. "Yeah, I can do that, I think."
Anakin pressed his face to the transparisteel of the cruiser's side viewport, trying to steal a few last glances of Naboo, even though all he could see was the confines of the royal hangar. The hangar was mostly empty, though. Most of the mechanics and dignitaries had scattered. Farewells had already been said, after all.

With a loud roar, the cruiser's engines blasted to life. "All passengers, prepare for takeoff procedures," came the brisk announcement from the cockpit, except that Anakin was still trying to process that it was Plo Koon, the Jedi with the awesome, who was flying the cruiser.

Anakin had already fastened his safety belt, anyway.

"Catching one last look at Naboo?"

This was Obi-Wan, who was seated next to him, and leaning back comfortably into his seat. His eyes were almost closed, and for a while, Anakin had thought that the Jedi Knight was going to nap right through takeoff.

"Yeah," Anakin said.

"Who knows," Obi-Wan offered. "We might find ourselves assigned here again one day."

"Really?"

"Yes. The Temple likes to keep track of Jedi teams and their mission history. The thought is that if a team has a relevant history with a given situation or planet, it is better to assign them to similar situations. Qui-Gon and I have been repeatedly assigned to three different missions on Hushan, actually."

Anakin brightened slightly. "So you mean we might meet Padmé again?"

"Possibly," said Obi-Wan. "Or we might not. The future is always in motion, my very young Padawan."

Frowning, Anakin tried to puzzle that out. "What does that mean?"

"It means that there's no point in guessing the future, boy," Even Piell said, cheerfully, from the next seat over. "It means you've better luck divining the future by leaning against a wall and spitting. Or—"

"I think," Gallia interrupted, a stern note in her voice, "That is quite enough, Even."

Even subsided, but shot Anakin a wink with his single eye—and somehow, that gesture alone softened what seemed to be a permanently fierce expression.

"Suffice to say," Obi-Wan said, at last, when it appeared the members of the Jedi Council had only taken passing interest in their conversation, "That we do not fixate on the future. Qui-Gon always said to focus on the here and now. What will happen is an illusion. It is something that your mind obsesses about, but until it happens, it is not real. The only thing we have to go on—and so the only thing that is real and worth concerning ourselves with—is the present moment. Right here. Right now."

But Anakin cared about the future. That was why he was going to become a Jedi. And wasn't that thinking about the future too? A part of him wanted to see Padmé again. One day. He would be a Jedi then. An accomplished Jedi. And he would tell her that he'd taken her words to heart, and that he was powerful and doing good things with his power.
And she would be proud of him. And…

And he would free the slaves.

If his eyes were not firmly on the far horizon of the future, what was the point of it all?

But Anakin said none of that. Instead, he said, "All right. I guess I'll need to learn this non-fixation thing, if I want to become a Jedi."

"You will learn," Obi-Wan stated. Anakin wondered why he felt as though those words were as a vibro-axe, dangling precariously over his head.

"I will. I'm gonna be a Jedi," Anakin promised. "I'm gonna be a good one." I'm gonna make you all proud of me, he thought, and directed it at Shmi, at Padmé, at the ghost of Qui-Gon, if he still lingered, and yes, even at Obi-Wan and the members of the Jedi Council.

I'm gonna be the best Jedi ever. I'm going to become powerful, and nothing, nothing and no one's gonna ever be able to stop me.

Padmé had been just a little wrong, Anakin thought. He would need to become powerful first, to come into his full strength. Goodness without power was pointless.

For he had seen, on Tatooine, what became of those who were good but weak. The universe ground them into dust and scattered them on the sands.

Anakin would not be weak. He would be strong.

After all, he'd promised Shmi.

Chapter End Notes

This wraps up Part I of 'In All The World.' I'll need some time to work on fixing the next arc as I really would like to get to maintain a more regular posting schedule. For now I've wrapped up the first arc of four in IATW, and have uploaded everything at once as promised.

Brief notes: Anakin fixates on Padmé a lot. She'll pretty much not feature in the next arc, which is the Temple arc. Bant appeared sooner than I'd planned - initially, Obi-Wan would meet Janek Dooku on Naboo, but even a passing meeting didn't seem to gel well with Episode 2. So now, they don't meet at all instead. The idea/quote about goodness without power is an interesting quote/exchange from - of all things - "Six Flying Dragons," or a kdrama with lots of politics and the rise of a brutal young king. I've adapted/paraphrased a Buddhist tale (as well) - which is the one about the monks. Perceptive readers might know what Obi-Wan is telling Anakin.

A bit of Vaapad use shouldn't have changed Mace Windu's eye colour but I like the notion that he was drawing deeply on the Dark Side. Anakin begins to see that even Jedi flirt with darkness, so why can't he? He's also torn a lot between power and the values Shmi instills in him, and this conflict will continue in the arcs to come.

Some readers might notice that not everything about the Naboo conspiracy makes sense. This is because the Jedi don't have all the information and some puzzle pieces are not -
yet - fit the right way, though the payoff will come later. Well, that's about it. Cheers, and happy holidays! If you're an old reader, thanks for hanging in there with me.

Last but not least, I'd like to draw everyone's attention to the lovely fanart of Obi-Wan establishing boundaries at the Lake Country, done by the wonderful RandomRunaway. Thank you so much!

-Fjallsarlon (formerly Ammar)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!