Reprise II

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Summary

The second arc of the Reprise AU. Ben Kenobi has been living in the past for three years, working behind the scenes to change the course of history. New friends and allies bolster his efforts, but old enemies - and new - lurk around every corner. With every day and every decision, Ben steps away the life that he knew and into a future he cannot predict.
Days became weeks. Weeks became months. Months, in their rightful turn, became years. Suddenly, without his knowing precisely where all the time had gone, Ben Kenobi had been living in the past for a full three years.

Obi-Wan was now eighteen years old, grown as tall as Ben, ("That's it?" Obi-Wan had asked upon the anticlimactic milestone. "Damn.") and swaggering with all the overconfidence that a freshly promoted senior padawan may hope for.

Qui-Gon had changed very little, give or take a few grey hairs, but now seemed more like the Qui-Gon that Ben remembered from his youth. Perhaps it was Obi-Wan's age that prompted the shift. No longer stuck in the insecurity of childhood, Obi-Wan was shaping up to be a talented and powerful Jedi. Qui-Gon was of course the first to notice; he was also the first to remove his kid gloves and remind the padawan of the power and skills of a real Jedi Knight. The clashes of wit and saber within the Jinn/Kenobi team became a testament to Obi-Wan's own talents a much as Qui-Gon's well-earned right to teach him.

"Super nova," Aola winced, gripping the bench. Ben smiled beside her.

"He'll get up," the master reassured.

After much groaning, Obi-Wan did, gripping the boot-shaped sore spot on his stomach. "Is that..." he coughed through a smile, "all?"

"That depends, do you intend to run into my boot again?" Asked Qui-Gon with superiority, though he was, to Obi-Wan's credit, looking a bit winded.

"I had to give you some chance at victory," Obi-Wan shot back, showing only a slight wince of pain when he straightened his spine. He brought his saber to the ready. "But I see you've wasted it."

"Cheeky brat," Qui-Gon growled. He did not wait for his apprentice to catch his breath before he leapt back into the offense, landing strike on strike, pressing his smaller opponent into a retreat. Even so, for every strike that Qui-Gon delivered, Obi-Wan was ready – if only barely – with a counterstrike of his own. Blue rushed in hurriedly, barely on time to meet green, but it never once missed its mark. In years past, the fight would have been long over by now, but the dance had elongated to accommodate a budding genius. Once in a while, Ben could spot a Soresu move thrown in with Obi-Wan's Ataru-Mikashi cocktail. He felt a rush of pride.

Obi-Wan would not have been able to tell, but Ben could see that Qui-Gon was holding very little back from this duel; the proverbial training wheels had come off. Obi-Wan was fighting a true, unchecked Jedi Master and matching him stroke for stroke. For an eighteen year old apprentice, this was no unimportant feat.

Both Qui-Gon and Ben knew that Obi-Wan's ability with a blade would one day outshine his master - that already, Obi-Wan could defeat any other Jedi his age. However, they both also knew that to mention this out loud would embarrass Obi-Wan terribly and compromise his progress. A swaggering, self-confident Jedi he might have been while in the dojo or the classroom, but when faced with his own abilities (as much as his own faults) Obi-Wan was still a self-conscious young man trying to find his way in the world. Ben was reminded of his dorva vine, which only ever grew when ignored completely. He and Qui-Gon had discussed the similarities at length.
Therefore, it was no surprise when, upon Qui-Gon's inevitable victory, the master said nothing of the massive amount of pride pressing on his chest nor of the fact that his own apprentice had just fought him to the point of breathlessness. Instead, he held his saber steady at Obi-Wan's collarbone, checked his breathing into a calm, effortless tempo and said,

"Would you like to run into my boot, or surrender?"

Obi-Wan groaned and deactivated his saber. "Solah," He griped. Qui-Gon deactivated his blade and stepped back. Obi-Wan promptly flopped to the floor, arms and legs melting in exhaustion as his chest continued to heave.

"Well done," was the nugget of praise Qui-Gon offered the boy. He nudged him in the ribs with a booted foot. "Shower before you leave."

Obi-Wan was basking in motionlessness. "Yes, Master," he huffed, and stayed lying down.

"Quite the performance," Ben commented when Qui-Gon came over to the sidelines. Their eyes met and they looked as one to Aola, who was swinging gangly teenaged legs off of the bench. Noticing the masters' attention, she smiled.

"Aola, fetch some water for him, would you?"

"Yes, grandmaster," She rose, silka bead braid swinging against her shoulder.

"She has to call me that," Qui-Gon complained as he lowered himself into a seat next to Ben. "Makes me feel a hundred."

Ben chuckled. "Personal vanities? For shame, Master Jinn."

"Ugh," the taller man groaned, drawing up a tabard end to wipe sweat off his face. "You were never called as such, were you?"

"No, mine wasn't so fond of it."

"Lucky bastard." Which made Ben chuckle. "There is only one troll under this roof meant to bear that title." Qui-Gon drew away from his makeshift towel and leaned back against the wall.

"There's always room for growth, master," Ben counseled. Qui-Gon kicked him in the ankle. Ben only laughed. They watched Aola animatedly reenact her favorite parts of the duel while Obi-Wan looked on from the ground.

"He's improved a great deal since I got here," Ben said quietly. Qui-Gon glanced at him. They rarely mentioned Ben's beginnings nowadays. It raised less questions.

"Yes, he has."

"Do you think he'll ever be able to beat you?"

"Oh," Qui-Gon shook his head, sad and proud at once. "Sooner than I'd like to think about. He'll be as good as you, one day."

Ben shook his head at the praise. "Perhaps. But not the same as me. He'll be different, thank the Force."

"You always say that."
"I always mean it."

They paused to listen to a burst of conversation from their younger companions. The details of words were lost in the echoing walls of the dojo, but Aola had said something that made Obi-Wan laugh heartily, reach up, and yank her to the ground. After a short wrestling match, he ended up sitting on her back, sipping at the cup of water she'd brought him. She smacked and elbowed at him from behind, screeching angrily all the while, but he only crossed his legs and raised the plastiform cup to his lips as if it were fine porcelain. Eventually, Aola reached up and, using Obi-Wan's propped leg as leverage, yanked him off of her and threw him to the ground. Water splashed everywhere. Obi-Wan cursed. Aola leaped on him, twisted his arm around to his back and sat on it. Obi-Wan cursed again. "Ha!" cried the twi'lek triumphantly.

"He still has some ways to go," Ben said sagely.

Qui-Gon rose, sweaty and long-suffering, to fetch his defeated padawan. "Yes, I daresay he does."

They took their lunch together in the Jinn/Kenobi apartments, as had become their custom whenever one was freshly returned from a mission.

Ben, Qui-Gon, and Aola had already been enjoying their meal when Obi-Wan, now showered and finally done with his homework, joined them. The apprentice heaped his plate with food and sat across from Ben.

"Kind of you to appear at last," Qui-Gon said mildly. "Are all of your assignments done?"

"Done enough. How's Senator Organa, Ben?" the boy asked, digging into his meal as soon as the last syllable was out.

Ben shrugged, chewing pensively on his bite. "As well as can be expected. His bill is still dead last on the order of consideration and he's rightfully miffed about… uh, about it…" Ben was watching in horrified fascination as Obi-Wan inhaled half a plate of Ghoba rice as he spoke. "He, uh…. Thinks Senator Thane might be… behind it. Force, surely I was never this bad."

Aola and Qui-Gon laughed. Obi-Wan, cheek full, looked up in bewilderment. "What?"

The door opened with a hiss. "Well, if it isn't the terrible twosome himself," Feemor joked upon seeing the Kenobi duo. Obi-Wan made urgent eyes at him, a silent code. Aola leaned into view.

"Ah," the incomer recovered, hoping she hadn't grown wise to the joke. "So this is where my wayward apprentice has gone off to."

"I was helping Obi-Wan train," she explained.

"Help is not the word I would use," The senior apprentice complained. Her eyes twinkled with a
smile, adolescent freckles camouflaging the fact that at just fourteen, she was already a wicked wit and fully aware of the fact.

Qui-Gon gestured to the table. "Please, Feemor, join us. There's more than enough for you, assuming Obi-Wan doesn't eat it all first."

"Hey!"

"Oh, don't mind them, Obi," Feemor said, squeezing a chair in between Qui-Gon and Aola, "you're a growing lad. You have to catch up. Put some length on those bones so one day you can tower over your old uncle," Feemor teased, a knowing light in his eyes. Obi-Wan glared at him from under his brows, shoving a forkful of rice into his mouth.

"I resent the 'old' comment," Ben deadpanned in a tone to match Obi-Wan's expression. Feemor only chuckled at the humor of genetics.

"Take a joke, Kenobi. I meant to say sooner: welcome back. How is the Senate treating you?"

"About as well as anyone might expect."

"That bad, eh?"

"Mmm. Senator Organa sends his regards."

"Next time he's on Coruscant you really must introduce us," said Qui-Gon.

Ben raised an eyebrow at him. "When he's on Coruscant the same time as you, you mean."

"You're gone as often as we are," Qui-Gon reminded him.

"Oh," Feemor snapped his fingers. "That reminds me. Ben, while you were away, a call came in for you at your apartment."

"Oh? From who?"

"Acquisitions."

Ben frowned, letting down his fork in surprise. "Acquisitions? What did they want?" Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan mirrored his surprise, but the latter did pause to stop eating.

Feemor shrugged dispassionately. "Apparently your name came up in conversation and they were hoping you could solve a dispute." The explanation only made Ben frown.

"Dispute? Over what?"

"That, I shan't guess. I was just watering your plants when the comm came on. They recorded a message, if you haven't checked it already."

"I haven't. I'll do that." Ben suddenly lost his appetite. Acquisitions? He'd never had any dealings with them – in this life or the last. What on earth do they want with me?"

"Is there any more left?" Obi-Wan interrupted, craning his neck to see the pot, empty plate in hand. Qui-Gon sighed. Aola laughed.

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BEEEEEP
"Hello Master Kenobi, this is Moira Wool, head officer of Acquisitions. I understand that you are on assignment at present, but I would like to speak with you to clarify an internal dispute; it is official Jedi business. Please contact me or another Acquisitions officer at your earliest convenience. I will attempt to contact you again when you return to the Temple. May the Force be with you."

BEEEEEP

Ben frowned at the recording and replayed it. Not knowing what else to do, he dialed the frequency of the message and waited. The line clicked open.

"Master Kenobi, I was about to call you."

"Master Wool, yes, I heard that you wanted to speak with me."

"Indeed I would, we've had the file on hold this whole time. There is some paperwork involved. Would you very much mind coming down to my office to discuss it?"

"Um… of course, but Master, what exactly will we be discussing?"

"The intake of a Force sensitive youngling from Alderaan. We have no record of him in the Kyber, but the mother swears that you were the Jedi who detected his sensitivity. I was hoping you could confirm a few details before we consider the boy's candidacy."

Ben's heart was in his throat. "What is the mother's name?"

A pause, tapping on a screen. "Shmi Skywalker."

Ben was glad to have received the news in private. His face was sure to be a sight. After he recovered from the wave of emotion, he said, "I'll be right down. Are you in your office now?"

"Yes. I'll be waiting."

Click.

Ben ran a hand, now shaking, over his mouth and beard. He collected himself, donned his cloak, and walked to the nearest lift as quickly as he could.

"So you did meet this woman, and her son."

"Yes, he was exceptionally strong in the Force," Ben said, scanning the transcript of Shmi's call to the temple. Across the desk, Master Wool looked annoyed.

"And you didn't think to tell us?"

Ben blinked at her. He'd forgotten how anal retentive the acquisitions officers could be, before the war. This world never ceased to surprise him. "It was not my place. It is the mother's decision."

Moira looked unimpressed. She sighed, paging through a barebones file on the young Skywalker boy. "Did you get a midichlorian count, at least? It'd help if we had something to say about him before we make an entry in the Kyber."

As her words faded into the history of that grey office, as the two Jedi sat across from each other surrounded by paperwork and mundane minutiae of the most quotidian sort, a rare moment appeared in the continuum.
The feeling that descended upon Ben's consciousness was thick and silent like the arrival of morning dew. He had not felt it in years. Ever since he'd begun his work with Bail, changing the future had been a matter of legislation, of missions, of reports and carefully worded clauses. But now, here he was in the thick of things again, a familiar name on his lips, a call to return home. It was a home he'd never been to, a home that neither he nor his progeny had had. Finding it would require action. Action now. Change. Balance. Urgency. Tea leaves shifted ever so slightly against a galaxy of porcelain.

"Yes, I did actually," Ben lied with momentous clarity. "Did I not send it in?"

"If you did, I can't find it. Do you still have the record?"

"Yes."

"Right. Well, you can send it to me as soon as you get the chance – and I mean as soon as you get the chance. For now, sign here to vouch for the boy and we'll send someone to pick him up."

Ben pressed his thumbprint to the scanner and it thanked him for his signature. "Master Wool," He said, "Perhaps I should be the one to retrieve the boy? Seeing as I was the one to locate him."

"I appreciate the offer, Master Kenobi, but there is another Jedi stopping on Alderaan on his route home later this week. He will retrieve the boy. You needn't worry yourself over it – just send me that midichlorian sample."

Thus brushed aside, Ben shifted his focus. "I see," he nodded carefully, mind already outlining the details of his next steps. He squared his jaw and gave Moira a smile. "Thank you, Master. May the Force be with you."

"And also with you – don't forget that sample!" she tossed after him as he left.

"Good morning, Vokara," Ben's grinning face appeared in the doorway. The Head Healer did not budge from where she was sewing up a padawan's bleeding chin.

"Whatever it is it can wait, Ben."

Ben stepped quietly into the room to wait, and frowned when he recognized the patient. "Padawan Muln?"


"What's happened to you?"

"Reeft and I were practicing those new forms you showed us last class."

Ben suddenly had a bad feeling. "Which ones?" He asked, foreseeing the answer.

"Those sand-dune ones."

Ben closed his eyes and sighed. He propped his hands on his hips. "Garen, that was meant to be a demonstration, not an assignment. You're lucky you didn't hurt yourself more than this."

"That's what I told him," Vokara said, hand bobbing in and out of view, a pink suture in tow.

"Oh," the boy winced as the anesthetic began to wear off. "It was Reeft's idea, really-"
"Stop talking," Vokara reprimanded, forcing the boy's mouth closed so she could work. Garen looked at Ben with apologetic eyes.

"Sorry, 'aster Kenodi," he enunciated through closed teeth. Ben only shook his head.

After the reprobate was stitched back together, lectured, and released into the custody of a stern Master Clee Rhara, Vokara finally turned to her visitor.

"What did you want, Ben?" She asked, cleaning her hands.

"I need to talk to you."

"About what?"

"About… things."

Her eyes darted to him in suspicion. He smiled. She squinted. "What kind of things?"

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"Ben, if anyone finds out about this I'll be put under censure," she whispered to him.

Head hovering over her shoulder, Ben shrugged in a cavalier manner he'd picked up from Qui-Gon decades ago. "No one will find out."

Vokara's head swiveled around to glare at him with indignance. "Do you know how many people have said that before landing themselves in massive trouble?"

"Vokara," Ben said, gravely serious now. "This is important. Very important. You have to believe me."

She snarled as she turned back to her work. "Changing things?"

"Yes."

"For the better?"

"As the Force prompts me to." He turned around to sit on the desk next to the computer. He rolled up his right sleeve and held it out towards her.

"The Force must work in damned mysterious ways," she grumbled, digging through her medic's bag and tearing open a blood sampling kit. She jabbed his arm more violently than she had to. As the computer scanned the sample and auto-populated the results into the computer, she rubbed away the damage to Ben's arm with a disinfectant.

"Force or no, if I'm going to do this, you need to tell me why."

"That is… problematic on many levels."

She sighed and scrolled through the results. "Type O negative, high iron counts, healthy platelets… And your midichlorians have seen a boost."

"Have they?"

"Not too impressive, though?"

"How do you mean?"

"If someone, say, an acquisitions officer, were to see that number, would it cause a stir?"

Vokara shrugged. "Well, not exactly, no. Half the council hits around this mark, but… they’d never turn you down as a recruit. I’d say they’d fight rather strongly to take you on."

"Excellent. Now, just change the bloodtype, the name, and the date, and I'll leave you alone."

"Ben," Vokara groaned, typing out the information he'd written down for her, "What is this about? You aren't trying to sneak in a non-sensitive into the Temple, are you?"

"Don't be absurd. This is entirely the opposite."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He ignored her question and pointed to the screen where she was typing. "It's A negative, not A positive."

She corrected the typo. "How do you even know his bloodtype?"

"My memory is not so far gone."

"Your memory?" She looked over her shoulder at him. Their eyes met, and an understanding passed between them. "Oh," she said. She finished punching in the surname, given name, date. Her tongue burned to ask the obvious questions, but she restrained herself. Clandestine this forgery may have been, but they were still in a public space. She couldn't risk asking about his past – the future – out loud.

When the falsified record was on his datapad and Vokara wiped the computer clean of her incriminating record, she turned to him with barely restrained curiosity shining in her face. "I hope you know what you're doing, Kenobi."

"I try to." He hopped off the desk. "Tell me, when new younglings come to the Temple, they go through your office first, do they not?"

"They do. Vaccinations, examinations, the like."

"When this boy arrives here, will you tell me?"

Vokara crossed her arms in a show of defiance "Why?"

Ben crossed his arms in a mirror to her. "I don't have to explain for you to know that I have a lot invested in this boy. I want to see him." His expression softened somewhat. "Truth be told, I didn't think his mother would give him up. I need to keep an eye on his progress."

"Need to?"

He glared at her. "Yes."

They held a staring contest. In the end, it was a draw. Vokara bit her lip and stepped down first. "Fine," she said, "but you owe me big – a drink and an explanation at the very least."

"You are an absolute angel, Master Che," Ben praised, taking up her hand and kissing it. She rolled
"Flattery will get you nowhere, Kenobi, now get out."

He smiled winningly at her, dimples visible over his beard. "Until later," He charmed. After he left, Vokara stormed back to her office.

"Politics have ruined him," she grumbled to the air, wiping the back of her kissed hand on her trouser leg. "Sycophant."

"Growing well, it is," Yoda commented when, days later, he found Ben in the gardens admiring the now sizable woosha plant that had once grown in Ben's living room.

"It is, Grandmaster."

Yoda made small *hmph* noises as he hobbled over to his great grandpadawan. "Good it is for it to be rid of you. Never at home you are. Busy in the Senate, hmm?"

"Busy enough. Senator Organa has been experiencing… setbacks of late."

"Mmm. Inconsiderate of his ideas they are. In their eyes too young he is. Too idealistic." The grandmaster peered up at Ben like the nuisance he was. "A mentor he needs. A master diplomat, hmm? Know not how to negotiate, young Bail does. Knows only how to fight, yes. Learn to compromise he must, if wishes to win future battles he does."

"Yes, I know, master," Ben said. It was not the first time they had discussed Bail's youthful naivety. "He is too headstrong to take my advice to heart."

"Hm. Sound familiar it does." Yoda 'accidentally' hit Ben's toes with his cane as he walked around him. "Headstrong, children often are. But know this well you do. Taken up an interest in new younglings, you have. Most curious it is, considering how little patience for stubbornness you have." The troll chuckled at his own idea of a joke.

Ben fell into step with him. How Yoda knew *everything* that went on in his life, Ben would not guess. "I was contacted by Master Wool for paperwork purposes."

"The boy," Yoda's tonal shift was instantaneous and familiar; his next comment would bear no jokes at Ben's expense. "The one from Tatooine he is."

"Yes, Master."

"On Alderaan, he is."

"With his mother."

"Hm." The elder Jedi's expression softened despite their proximity to Ben's polarizing history. "A better life for both it is." He turned his face up to Ben. "But still here you are. Why? Fetching this youngling you should be."

"I offered, master, but Master Wool claims another Jedi is already en route to Alderaan, a stop on his way home."

"Oh?" Yoda seemed genuinely curious. Then, his eyes squinted slightly and his ears fell. "Oh," he said again, in flat recognition. "Alderaan. Yes."
"Do you know the Jedi, master?"

"Mmm. Know him I do." Yoda did not seem altogether enthused by the fact. "But worry yourself do not. Tell me more about young Organa's plans, you will."

Ben and Yoda spent the rest of the afternoon distracting each other from their mutual anxieties, but near the end of the afternoon, Vokara Che interrupted to comm Ben the news he'd been anticipating and dreading all day: Anakin Skywalker had arrived at the Jedi Temple.

When Ben went down to the healer's wing, his heart leaped upon hearing Anakin's high, babbling voice speaking with Vokara. Before he could make it into the room, however, another voice caught his ear.

"Qui-Gon?" Ben called in confusion. Master Jinn turned to him in equal surprise.

"Ben," he said, his voice lacking its familiar confidence and composure. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see the newest recruit," he explained, gesturing to where Anakin was obediently breathing in and out while Vokara listened to his heart. He found it hard to look away. As he had been three years ago, Ben was suddenly struck by how small the boy was. But here he was, whole. Young. Smiling, even. Ben's heart ached and he realized he had no idea how to reintroduce himself. He added, in a wistful tone: "I was actually the one who found him, years ago."

"Really?" Interrupted a new voice. The spell over Anakin was broken. Ben turned to face the newcomer, a primal sense of protectiveness washing over him like ice. Qui-Gon was looking anxiously between the two as the speaker continued: "When they sent me to Alderaan I thought I'd be going in blind, but I've never seen anything quite like him. You must be proud of your discovery, Master…?" He reached out a hand and smiled, a perfect shine that never quite reached his eyes.

Ben stood stock still, unable to move or react. Qui-Gon stepped in.

"Ben," he offered, latent hangups of his youth injecting the slightest burr into his voice, "this is Jedi Master Yan Dooku. Master, this is Ben Kenobi."

Ben did not remember offering his hand, but suddenly Count Dooku was shaking it with a smile and using that haunting bass voice of his to say: "Kenobi?" He glanced briefly at Qui-Gon, and smiled wider. "My, the galaxy is full of surprises today."
"Master Dooku, a word?" Vokara clipped the tension with opportune timing. She watched Ben, Anakin, and Dooku in turn, eyes betraying nothing and suspecting everything.

"Yes?" Yan turned toward her with half the smile of before, corners of his mouth and his cape communicating displeasure at the interruption. If the message affected Vokara in the slightest, it was only evident in the coolness of her riposte:

"I have some paperwork for you, if you care to step into my office."

"Ah." Even the most distinguished members of the Order were not immune to the wiles of departmental bureaucracy. "Of course." Dooku's silky brown cloak swished dispassionately as he followed Vokara away from the scene. The bass echoes of his questions rumbled in Ben's chest, but he could not comprehend their meaning.

Filling the lacuna where Dooku had burned through spacetime, Qui-Gon watched Ben like a man watching a bomb.

"Ben?" He asked, experimental and wary.

Digging his way through the smog of recurrent horror, Ben locked eyes with his master. "What is he doing here?" He spat. Qui-Gon's face flinched in disapproval.

"Running an errand, apparently," the master gestured to a space behind Ben's shoulder. "Or didn't you know?"

Ben turned about and was suddenly reminded.

Anakin was hunched over, restless fingers picking at the flimsi sheet covering the examination table. His chubby toddler legs were bare-footed and swinging, heels hitting the topmost drawer with a soft *thud, thud, thud.*

The same senses that had once taught Anakin to tug on his mother's necklace now told him to look up. He stopped kicking his heels. Two grownups were watching him, one taller and hairier and more imposing than the other – but it was his nondescript companion that pulled at Anakin's attentions.

The boy's grasp of spatial realities was nascent and imperfect, but something in his three-year-old mind understood that this unimpressive grownup was a paradox of the highest order. Anakin cocked his head to the side, instinctively harkening the inborn guide that whispered a mystery in his ear: the smaller man was special. He was just a man on the outside, but inside, he was a galaxy. Anakin squinted hard, thinking he might see constellations.

"Hello there," the galaxy man said. There were crinkles by his eyes that reminded him of his mother.

"'Lo," He said back.

"I doubt you remember me, but you and I met years ago, when you were younger." Anakin thought to himself that he would've tried his best to remember this man, if they had indeed met. But it having been so very long ago, hopefully the man would understand.

"I don't 'member."
The lines around the man’s mouth reminded him of his mother, too. "No, I wouldn't think so. I'm Master Ben," he said, and held out his hand in the way that grownups did to each other sometimes. Anakin wasn't sure if he was allowed to reply in kind, so he wrung his hands uncertainly in his lap, shoulders squashing up against his cheeks.

"M'mamakin," he mumbled, senses distracted by the vastness of the hand held out in front of him.

Ben chuckled, and said with very soft voice, "It's good to meet you, Anakin."

Anakin looked up at the man's face again and could no longer see a galaxy; he only saw the lines of his mother's kindness and a beard whose soft edges plucked at undefined thoughts of home. He blinked in rapt consideration.

"Good meet you," he muttered, eyes lost. His attention wandered and he noticed the second adult, the tall and hairy one, watching him too. "Hi," he said, hands still in lap. The tall man's face sported even more kind lines than the galaxy man's did; it put Anakin immediately at ease.

"Hello there, little one," the speaker came over. Anakin thought that this new man could've been a giant, and he almost asked if he was one. "Welcome to the Jedi Order, little brother."

Mention of the Jedi made Anakin's heart ache for his mother, whom he'd cried over for half of his trip here, but the new moniker kept him from dwelling on his grief. He'd never had a brother. He'd asked for one once while he was at market with his mother, but she'd refused to buy him one, for reasons he still didn't understand. The idea of having this man as a brother struck him as humorous, and he giggled.

"You're really big," he said. Both of the grownups smiled.

"I suppose I am, from your point of view," the tall brother said through a chuckle, "My name is Master Qui-Gon."

"M'm'amakin," he repeated for Master Qui-Gon's sake. Master Qui-Gon bowed.

"It is good to meet you, Anakin."

"You're big too," Anakin said to Master Ben, "Big inside."

Ben chuckled. "How do you mean?"

"Here," Anakin reached out as far as he could to poke Ben's chest. "You're bigger than look."

Anakin did not register the astonished silence that passed between Ben and Qui-Gon, nor did he understand the questioning look that the taller man sent to his shorter companion. Ben's smile made Anakin think that maybe, the man knew that he was bigger on the inside.

He would've smiled in glee to have correctly guessed the secret, but his mood evaporated when Master Dooku stepped back into the room. Anakin began frowning without realizing it, watching the man venture back toward the newly introduced group with the twi'lek doctor.

"Are you quite sure?" The old man was saying, "When I ran the test earlier, it was… well, it was unprecedented. Unlike anything I've ever seen."

"And for good reason, Master; it was a glitch. Those pocket medkits are notoriously unreliable in this respect. It was faulty equipment, or a poor sample. Whatever the case, I've run the tests twice today and I assure you," Vokara came to stand by them and Anakin wondered why she eyed Master Ben
in such a mean way, "young Skywalker's midichlorians are quite within reason."

"Yes," Yan said, nodding and watching Anakin with a piercing gaze, "yes, of course."

Something in that gaze felt sharper than empty space, and Anakin subconsciously began to lean away from the silver-haired Jedi.

A reassuring hand appeared on Anakin's shoulder, and he was surprised and relieved in equal measure to see that it belonged to Master Ben. He followed the hand up to look at Ben's face, hoping to see the lines of home again, but Ben was busy glaring at Master Dooku. Master Qui-Gon was looking back and forth between them. Anakin never had understood the unpredictable attentions of adults, so he decided the safest course of action was to pick at the fabric in his new tunic and ignore them.

"I suppose you will be leaving again, Master," Qui-Gon said, choosing to redirect the tension where it could not be diffused.

Dooku raised an inquisitor's brow at his former apprentice. The muscles in Qui-Gon's jaw jumped, tendons in his neck tensing this way and that like tethers shaking in a storm. A silent battle of wills was declared, waged, and ended in a draw within a matter of seconds. Reduced to the role of bystander, Ben realized that he'd never actually seen his master interact with his grandmaster. It was somehow even more uncomfortable that he'd imagined.

"You always were quick to be rid of me, Qui-Gon," Dooku accused in an aristocratic air. "I thought I might stay awhile. I've been away from the temple too long. I'd like to see Master Yoda again – and investigate the legitimacy of his claim that I have a new grandpadawan, and have for what is not an inconsiderable number of years." He folded his arms serenely into opposite sleeves - a politic expression of displeasure. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Qui-Gon crossed his arms bluntly, an ordinary expression of displeasure. "I did not think you would care to know."

"You did not think," Dooku truncated. Makashi was a form of conservation and a vicious offense. "Years pass and nothing chances." Ben was not so shocked by the barb, but he felt physically struck when Qui-Gon said nothing to deflect it. "Of course I would like to know. I'd like to meet him. You'll have imparted the worst already, it is my duty to assess the damage."

Qui-Gon's arms tightened against each other, hand closest to his saber twitching on impulse.

"My nephew's talents are developing quite admirably, Master Dooku," Ben broke into the family reunion as tactfully as he could. "You will find that Qui-Gon's teaching has been quite salutary."

Qui-Gon's shoulders eased somewhat and silent gratitude floated over the seldom-used bond between he and his old apprentice.

"Nephew?" said Dooku in surprise. "Families with such gifted progeny are blessed indeed – now I must meet him." He appraised Ben with a new light in his eye. "Does your family have a history in this Order, Master Kenobi?"

"Not to my knowledge," Ben replied. "A coincidence."

"Hmm. More's the pity."

Behind them, Anakin yawned hugely and tugged on Ben's tunic.
"Yes, little one?"

The boy rubbed his eyes. "Wan' my mom," he muttered. Ben shared a saddened look with Vokara, who'd been finishing up Anakin's paperwork on her datapad. Her fingers rushed through the final touches.

"I think it is time to introduce young Skywlaker to his crèche master," She decided out loud. "Naptime is upon us. I apologize, masters, I must ask you to take your conversation elsewhere." The healer moved to take Anakin from the tall table, but the boy's hand was still on Ben's tunic. Ben turned without hesitation and gathered the boy in his arms. "I'll walk there with you," he told Vokara. Unable to protest, she shrugged and collected her things.

"A good day to you, Master Kenobi, young Skywalker," Dooku glanced over them both, but his eyes lingered on Anakin with special interest. "I look forward to meeting you again."

"Of course, Master Dooku. It was good to meet you." Ben disposed of the pleasantries as politely as he could. He held Anakin on the hip furthest away from Dooku. "Master Jinn," He nodded as they passed.

Qui-Gon rarely communicated with Ben via their old bond. However, as Ben scurried past Dooku with Anakin Skywalker on his hip, Qui-Gon made a concession. Eyes boring into the back of Ben's head, he summoned every iota of frustration that he felt and packed it into a mental command:

"We will have words."

Ben cast a look over his shoulder and Qui-Gon was gratified to see a considerable amount of contrition there. Behind him, Dooku loomed.

"Walk with me, Qui-Gon," the master began strolling down the hall, not waiting for an answer.

Qui-Gon's silent resistance was strong but futile. "Of course, master," He grit his teeth and fell into step.

Vokara snuck looks at Anakin as they walked, and couldn't help but smile. He'd begun their journey with his head swiveling around to take in the sights of the temple, but now it rested at the root of Ben's neck, hand fisted in the fabric at his collarbone.

"Don't fall asleep yet, Anakin," Ben told him. "Don't you want to meet your crèche master?"

"I wan my mom," He whined sleepily. Ben refused to coddle the boy, but put a hand on his back and exuded a suggestion of peace.

"Just this way," Vokara pointed. When they arrived in the crèche, Anakin perked up again, senses piqued at the bustling concentration of his agemates. He peeked over Ben's shoulder as a mirialan girl was walking across the hallway behind them. She waved at him. He tentatively waved back.

"Here we are," Vokara announced. She knocked on the doorframe softly.

"Master Zyrha?"

"Just a moment," called a deep alto voice. A moment later, a tall selonian female ducked under the doorway. "Ah, you've brought young Skywalker. Hello there, Anakin," she grinned, rows of sharp teeth showing below the arcs of her whiskers.
Anakin was awestruck. He'd never seen anyone quite like Master Zyrha; which is to say he'd seen anyone covered in fur with a whiskered snout who stood a full seven feet tall. He shrunk against Ben's chest, eyes wide and watching the newcomer with fascinated alarm.

Zyrha chuckled. "You've never seen a selonian Jedi before, now have you?"

"I believe he's never seen a selonian at all, Master," Vokara smiled. "He grew up on Alderaan."

Zyrha chuckled. "Ah, a beautiful world, with beautiful talent. Don't be frightened, child, feel, use your senses." She reached out a forearm and let Anakin feel the soft, slick fur there. He smiled at the sensation. "There now, that's not so bad, is it?"

"You're soft," Anakin decided. "And really tall."

Zyrha nodded sagely, smile hidden by whiskers. "A keen observer. Come. The Wolf clan is anxious to meet their new brother."

"Never had a brother," Anakin said as they followed Zyrha inside the room. The giant Jedi clapped her paws together. It made little sound, but a silent signal shot out through the Force. Twelve heads of various species turned on their respective anatomies to look at the crèche master.

"Younglings," Zyrha announced to her brood, "we are welcoming a member today." Ben lowered Anakin to the ground and nudged him forward. He was too busy taking in the sight of everyone to protest. "This is Anakin Skywalker. Anakin, welcome to the Wolf Clan, your new Jedi family."

The younglings bowed to their new member, the elder more expertly than their younger counterparts. A chorus of polite greetings ran about the room, and Ben couldn't keep from smiling. He wondered how many times Zyrha had made the littlest ones practice.

Anakin tugged on Ben's trouser leg, and the master bent over to harken to him. "Why are they bowing?"

"It is how we greet each other," Ben whispered back. "It's a way of saying hello."

"Oh," Anakin said. He thought for a moment, and then clumsily bowed back. "Hi," he said to the group. Then, as only children can, the Wolf clan grouped about their new member to ask questions, make introductions, and comment on the innocent differences of species. Before long, Anakin was smiling.

Vokara was imparting Anakin's records to Zyrha. "He's still very young. Only just shy of four standard. We thought it might be more expedient to move him straight into the initiate dorms."

"Yes, of course," Zyrha took the datapad from Vokara with interest. "I sense he will do well here. My oath," the selonian exclaimed, pointing a claw at a line of paperwork. "Truly?"

"Yes, he's quite gifted," Vokara said, eyeing the fake midichlorian count and then Ben Kenobi, who was watching Anakin and lost in memory. "I'm sure he will do quite well here."

"As the Force wills, I daresay. Thank you, Master Che." She turned back to the room. Younglings," She signaled her charges again, and they attended amid excited distraction. "Let us make a circle and introduce Anakin to our clan properly."

"We will leave you to it," Vokara smiled. As the younglings rearranged themselves into their learning circle, an older initiate came over to help Anakin find a spot on the cushioned floor. However, the newest member suddenly noticed that Ben was leaving.
"Madster," the boy tore his hand from that of his new clanmate, untrained anxiety radiating across the Force and earning him a series of compassionate looks. He rushed to the door.

Ben turned and crouched in a waterfall of brown so he could meet Anakin eye to eye. "Where are you going?" Anakin grabbed insecurely at Ben's cloak.

"Not far. I have work to do, just as all Jedi do."

"Oh," said Anakin. He glanced back at Master Zyrha, who was speaking softly to her crèche while they waited for Anakin to rejoin them. "Will you come back?" He begged.

Ben could make no promises, but he had to be honest – with Anakin and with himself. "Of course. But you ought to have a chance to get to know your new home for yourself. Go on. Best not keep your crèche master waiting."

Anakin was unsure of how he felt about Master Zyrha being his master, but… he glanced at her, still in awe of her height and her fur and her wickedly sharp teeth. She smiled kindly at him, soft ears folded against her head. "Go on," Ben prodded again.

Anakin shuffled away uncertainly and Ben finished extricating his cloak from the boy's grip. "May the Force be with you, Anakin," Ben said.

"May va Force…" Anakin struggled to pronounce the phrase, which Master Dooku had tried to teach him on their journey. He forgot the words anyway. "Bye," He amended. Ben chuckled.

As Vokara and Ben strolled out of the crèche, they could hear Master Zyrha speaking in soft tones about change, the value of community, how the Force binds Jedi together across the galaxy. Ben tried to let himself be soothed by the sound.

Hands folded into opposite sleeves, Vokara sidled up to Ben with a stern expression. "Master Dooku reported his midichlorians were over twenty thousand," she hissed under her breath.

"Faulty equipment, I thought." Ben feigned indifference, focusing on the burbling sound of fountains and children laughing.

"Damnit, Ben," Vokara swerved away from a passing master and waited until they were out of earshot to say, "if those readings are true, he won't be able to hide it for long. He'll be too powerful to help it."

"Yes, he will be." A statement, not speculation. Vokara glared at him long enough to for her brow to wilt from anger into worry.

"When he does, Dooku will take notice. Of that, I promise you."

Ben clenched his jaw, and made himself focus on the fountains and children.

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Later that evening, Qui-Gon let himself in to Ben's apartments, a cloud of ill mood and temper rolling in his wake. Ben looked up from where he'd been cleaning dishes.

"Evening," He greeted, ambiguous tone fading into dread as the steely brow and tense shoulders came into focus.

"Sit down," Qui-Gon ordered, taking the half-dried dishes from Ben's hands. Nonplussed, Ben stepped out of the kitchen to watch his former master flick away the flatware with entirely
inappropriate, flippant uses of the Force. He did not sit down, and crossed his arms instead.

"Something on your mind, Qui-Gon?" He asked.

Qui-Gon shut the cabinet door and let his hand stay there, taking three deep breaths and staring at the wall. Ben bit his lip; he'd overdone it.

"Yan Dooku will not interfere with Obi-Wan's training. I won't let him."

Ben raised his brows. "I see."

"You knew he was coming here?"

"I knew someone was picking up Anakin to bring him to the temple, I had no idea who. Master Yoda did."

"Of course he did." Qui-Gon had managed to calm down enough to toss a handful of tea leaves into their pot. "That troll never tells me anything."

"Nor I."

"Nor you him, I imagine," Qui-Gon spat, and instantly wished he could take it back. Ben said nothing of the insult and nothing when his master gave a quiet, "I'm sorry." Qui-Gon stopped to breath deeply again. "You know Master Dooku?"

There was no safe way to answer that. Ben opened his mouth, a partial truth composing itself on the tip of his tongue. Qui-Gon saw it before it arrived. He sighed. "I take that as a yes."

Ben let the breath out. "From a certain point of view." He helped Qui-Gon fetch tea bowls and accessories and bring them to the sitting room. "I never actually met him while I was your apprentice."

"Really?" Despite his anger, Qui-Gon seemed genuinely struck. "That surprises me."

"It surprises me that the same will not be true for Obi-Wan."

"Hmm," Qui-Gon stared at the tea, as if he could make it steep faster through sheer force of will. "I do not intend to let them know each other well."

Without a cup to gaze pensively down into, Ben sufficed with clasped hands and a trained expression. "You and Master Dooku do not get along well."

"You should know that already."

"Anecdotally, yes. I'd never seen you two interact before." Qui-Gon stammered through the tea ritual, bereft of characteristic grace. Ben watched him. He wanted to ask the obvious questions, the ones he'd never had opportunity to raise in his youth; what had happened between Dooku and Qui-Gon? What had driven Dooku from the Order? Where had the path of the Count begun all those years ago?

Qui-Gon's hands fumbled against hot porcelain and he cursed under his breath. Ben decided to hold his tongue. There would be a better time.

"Who is Anakin?" Qui-Gon asked, changing the subject. Now it was Ben put on the spot. He looked up from the tea tray to find Qui-Gon staring him down with a sharp eye. "You obviously know him."
Ben hesitated. There were so many facets of destiny encapsulated in that question, and even more within any possible answer. Who was Anakin? He was the Chosen One. He was Ben's apprentice - former apprentice. He was the boy whom Qui-Gon had championed over him. He was the boy who'd shared their old apartment when Qui-Gon's ashes were still crumbling. He was his brother and his friend. He was the instigator of the fallen universe that had chewed him up and spit him back out. He was the one who had, in one fell swoop, sent him here.

A hurricane of memory flew past Ben's eyes and left him staring at his tea.

"He was many things, before," Ben smoothed over the unwoven threads of time and tried to imagine how they would be rebraided. "He might not be any of them, now. But…" Which could be good and bad. Cords of forbidden attachment tugged at his heart. "I would like to see it through regardless."

"I see," Qui-Gon said, which both of them knew was a lie. Their gazes met and they stared back at each other for several long beats. Eventually, the furrows in Ben's brow softened and he looked down.

"He was my apprentice."

It was not what Qui-Gon had expected to hear. He poured their tea to fill the silence. Eventually, he said "But… he's so young."

Ben couldn't help the paternal spark in his smile. He gave a small smile. "Yes. I never knew him this young." He took his cup of tea and watch the steam curl.

"I meant Obi-Wan."

"How old were you?"

"Twenty-four."

"How old were you when you were knighted?"

Ben bit his lip. "Twenty-four."

Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows and sat back, turning this new information over in his mind, pinning them against memories of older discussions, discussions of death and trials and knighthood. The timeline was clipped at an alarming pace.

Cocooned in the darkness of the evening and safe familiarity of his master's presence, Ben felt compelled to explain further. "You were the one who'd found him last time. You wanted to train him yourself. But when you…" he hesitated, fumbling on the word he still couldn't muster between them. "I made you a promise."

Qui-Gon frowned at the unspoken. "He was the boy. The one I abandoned you for." The latent sadness bred by adversity surfaced, new light evolving it into something deeper. "You took him on for me?"

Ben's face precluded the need for a verbal reply. He set down his tea bowl and said softly, "Things do not happen the same way twice, Qui-Gon. Not anymore."

"No," replied the master, feeling very old.

Silence was not unwelcome. They poured second cups of tea in melancholy companionship, their disparate histories pulling at the corners of their awareness like lines on a wrinkled sheet. Ben shook
it out with thoughts of change.

"Dooku is interested in him too, now."

"He is." Qui-Gon drank deeply. "He asked not a few questions about him. I suppose I should be grateful for my ignorance, I wasn't able to indulge him." He caught Ben's eye with a cautionary look. "I would advise against letting Dooku getting too close. He is… not an entirely wholesome individual."

"Oh, believe me, I know." Ben's voice was low and drawn from the well of bitter experience. But how could that experience come to bear on the here and now? How could the vagaries of the now and never-were coexist, even around a figure like Dooku? Moreover, how could he possibly prepare?

"But things never happen the same way twice," He repeated. Qui-Gon was watching him, and Ben looked up again to meet his gaze. They looked at each other, each man equally as lost as the other, one in the past and one in the impossible future.

"Well," Qui-Gon said, setting down the last of his temper and drained tea leaves at once. "However things happen this time around, I should like to help you see it through, Force willing."

Ben's smile dispelled thoughts of Dooku for a brief respite. "I would be honored, master."
Lessons to be Learned

Obi-Wan and Yan Dooku were dueling.

They had been dueling for nearly two hours.

They had been dueling for nearly two hours every week for the past month, to Qui-Gon's deep and unforgiving chagrin.

As they neared the close of the most recent engagement, Ben watched the proceedings with calculated indifference. Out on the dojo floor, Dooku had Obi-Wan in retreat. After staging an intentional flurry of strikes and parries to dizzy his opponent, the master attacked his grandpadawan in a vicious makashi fleche. Obi-Wan ducked last minute and rebounded with a passata soto maneuver that Dooku had only taught him the previous week; he executed it perfectly.

Beside Ben, Qui-Gon bristled. His presence was growing darker and thornier in the Force with every passing moment, digging itself beneath the Light's apathy to forge his own corner for sulking. Ben knew better than to say anything about it.

In the end, of course, Dooku was proclaimed the victor. Aside from his many decades advantage of experience, Dooku was a master of the most difficult of dueling forms; makashi was still only a new taste to Obi-Wan. The master ended the duel by landing a singing hit on Obi-Wan's arm. The boy hissed in pain but pushed through it with a defensive riposte, only to find his grandmaster's green saber resting centimeters from his throat. He slowed his movements and sighed. After a moment he let his sword arm fall. "Solah," He yielded.

Dooku flicked the blade almost tauntingly past the boy's nose before he withdrew. "Your offense is indulgent," He pronounced, not winded in the slightest. "Even for a student of Ataru, I am surprised that you would deign to such extravagance."

Obi-Wan, drenched in sweat and now feeling the sting of his burns, smiled up at his austere superior. "I believe it was Master Wynn Ra'al'scha who said 'even the mighty may falter on the unexpected'. I kept you going for longer than last time, Master."

The angle of Dooku's eyebrow could have cut steel. "And what does your master think of your consulting the words of heretics, padawan?"

"Master Qui-Gon encourages the virtue of a diverse education," Obi-Wan's eyes twinkled. "I endeavor to honor his teachings in all of my pursuits."

"I see." Dooku pursed his lips and said nothing further. "Go clean yourself up, your tunics are a travesty."

"Yes, Master. Thank you, Master." Obi-Wan bowed respectfully and headed to the dojo showers. Across the room, Qui-Gon stirred. "I should go," He grumbled as Dooku approached.

"Did you not want the next spar, Master?" Ben asked.

Qui-Gon was already halfway to the door. "I have better things to do."

"For years I hoped he would grow out of his moods," Dooku told Ben as he came to the edge of the dojo. "Alas, the Force has other plans for him."
"He resents your teaching Obi-Wan makashi," Ben said, though they both knew it had nothing to do with the second form.

"Yes, I know." Dooku scoffed. "He shouldn't. The boy's a natural swordsman, he shouldn't be squandered on ataru. He tells me you've taught him some soresu as well?"

"Yes, though he still favors Form IV."

"Hmm," said Yan enigmatically. "We shall see." The master glanced between Ben and the showers were Obi-Wan was licking his wounds with bacta. "I should like to speak with him further, but I have an engagement to meet outside of the district. If you see him before you leave, tell him he ought to brush up on his riposte."

Ben almost smiled at the sheer bluntness of the advice. "Of course, master. May the Force be with you."

"And also with you."

Obi-Wan emerged shortly thereafter, tunic still singed in places and face and hands rubbed sticky-pink with bacta where the burns were worst. Ben was waiting for him.

"Where did they go?" The boy asked, upon seeing neither his master nor grandmaster.

"Master Dooku had an appointment."

"And Master Qui-Gon?"

"He left earlier."

"Oh," Obi-Wan didn't seemed surprised, but was disappointed all the same. He poured himself a glass of water and sat down. Ben joined him on the bench.

"Dooku wanted you to know that your riposte is atrocious." This earned a dry, mirthless chuckle from the younger man. "What do you think of our esteemed grandmaster?"

Obi-Wan shrugged. "He seems decent enough. Stern and elitist to be sure, but he's a fantastic swordsman. I can see how Master Qui-Gon got as good as he is."

"He's not happy that you've taken to Dooku so fondly," Ben said.

"I know – but I don't know why. He's a good teacher, if not a bit harsh. He knows the code, he's well read, and has a lot of experience – and was on the council for years, too."

"You sound enamored," Ben eyed him. "Do you wish Dooku was your master rather than Qui-Gon?"

"Hels no," Obi-Wan burst. "I'd go mad. But he's very skilled and wise. He's precise in everything. I... don't get a lot of that with Qui-Gon." He looked guilty saying it, but Ben could sympathize. He'd picked up some finesse from Qui-Gon over the years, but real refinery was something he'd had to learn on his own. Obi-Wan finished off his drink. "And anyway, Qui-Gon's always encouraged me to diversify my skillsets and branch out. I don't see why he's so upset."

Ben sighed and shrugged. "I suspect his objections are far more personal than you give him credit for."

"He and Master Dooku don't get along," Obi-Wan agreed, using the Force to shove his flimsiplast
cup into the 'cycler bin. "Anyone can see that. But I don't understand why." His tone begged the obvious question.

"Unfortunately, neither do I." When Obi-Wan turned to him in surprise, Ben put up his hands and shook his head. "I didn't know Dooku when I was your age. I hardly ever knew him at all – and when I did it was not… ideal. I know even less than you do about their quibbles."

"But surely something must have happened to make them like this," Obi-Wan hypothesized, recalling the last month's worth of cold shoulders and ill moods.

"Your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps you can make uncovering the truth your next research project – when you're not busy studying the work of fringe theorists and heretics, of course."

Obi-Wan gave an angelic shrug. "I can only access those records with Master Jinn's permission, you know that."

Of course, Ben was able to see right through him. "It is extremely remiss of you to abuse your master's accesses codes without his explicit consent."

Obi-Wan was unaffected. "He extends consent by pretending not to notice."

"Can silence really be construed as consent, padawan?"

"I find that highly depends on one's point of view," Obi-Wan replied, dimples showing through. "Even so, it was not Master Jinn who first instructed me to consult heresy, years ago."

Ben squinted at him. "You honor his teachings well."

Obi-Wan hid his smile by bowing in his seat. "It is my sworn duty."

Obi-Wan did not see Qui-Gon until that evening, long after dark.

The apprentice glanced up from his heaping bowl of veggie pasta. "Good evening, Master." He finished a bite and nodded at the stove. "I made enough for two, if you'd like."

"I ate in the refectory," was Qui-Gon's cool reply. He picked up a datapad left for him by the door and sat across from Obi-Wan at their dining table. He browsed the reports and said nothing.

Obi-Wan finished his dinner in silence, eyeing Qui-Gon all the while. At eighteen, Obi-Wan had long been accustomed to the idea that Qui-Gon was not the infallible paragon of maverick have-no-care composure that made himself out to be. Even so, seeing the evidential cracks of grudge and hurt fracture the pedestaled image of Qui-Gon Jinn that he'd held in his mind for so many years was… disappointing.

But Ben had told him that he ought to try. He cleared his throat.

"Master, I feel I owe you an apology. For my actions this past month. I know that you do not approve of my training sessions with Master Dooku, and I have expressly ignored this on multiple occasions. I will cease training with him, and would like to train more in my Ataru focus, to-"

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon put out a forestalling hand. He shook his head, and hesitated. His next words were halted, but sincere. "Yan Dooku is the most accomplished practitioner of Makashi in the Order. You should continue to train under him if you sense that Form II would benefit your education." He returned to his reports.
Obi-Wan was rooted to his seat by the anticlimax. He blinked a few times, unsure of what to do or say. "Yes, Master," He gave the knee-jerk reply after a delay. He set his dishes aside. Qui-Gon ignored him.

"Master?" He said, in that dangerous, inquisitive tone.

Qui-Gon looked up at him from under his brows. Obi-Wan had the sense to look uncomfortable.

"Why…" he squirmed. "Why do you dislike Master Dooku so much?"

Qui-Gon continued to glare at him. He didn't want to reply. He wanted to tell Obi-Wan to kriff off and mind his own damn business. But Obi-Wan was not an invasive gossip, nor was he a mind healer or an inconvenient friend looking for something to lord over him. He was just a boy – no, a young man. A curious, worried young man to whom Qui-Gon owed a great deal. He sighed heavily and set his datapad aside.

"You know that Master Dooku trained me."

Obi-Wan nodded.

"We did not… always get along." It was a relationship difficult to put into words. Qui-Gon wrestled with his thoughts while Obi-Wan watched him. Eventually, he sat back, crossed his arms, and sighed heavily through his nose. He did not look his apprentice in the eye when he said,

"Obi-Wan… as your master, I hope that you see in me at least some qualities that you would like to one day see in yourself. And when you are as old as I am, graduated, with your own missions and padawans and grandpadawans," he paused to let Obi-Wan overcome his brief discomfort at the notion, "I should like to think that we will still be friends. Moreover, I hope that you will still see in me then the same qualities that you seek to emulate now." He chewed on his lip, eyes sad. "That is something that I can never say of myself for Master Dooku."

Obi-Wan gave a slow nod. "Oh," he said in a respectful whisper. He didn't actually understand; his brow was still wrinkled. He wouldn't let the matter drop, Qui-Gon knew, he was merely stalling to find a diplomatic mode of interrogation. To save them both the trouble, the master pushed headlong into the fray:

"When I was an initiate, I was headstrong – not unlike you. Passionate. Confident. Aggressive in the dojo and very successful at anything I put my mind to. Dooku saw these things and decided to take me on."

Obi-Wan frowned at that. Qui-Gon felt a chagrined pang of pride to know that his apprentice could predict, if even peripherally, where this tale was headed. "He pushed me to become the best version of myself. The most adept swordsman, the most shrewd negotiator, the most cultured and knowledgeable and adaptable Jedi in the Order, who could and would do anything to complete the mission mandate. It was exactly what I had wanted as an initiate. It was exactly where my own ambition would have led me. And I hated it."

Such strong words from a master made Obi-Wan's eyebrows shoot upward, but he said nothing, knowing that to interrupt would break the unspoken agreement of this confession. "He pushed me toward my own ends; the ends that I thought I had wanted. By the time I was your age, I was headed down a path that I knew would ruin me. It was the line he chose to tread, the path he forged for himself. He took me on because he saw himself in me. But after he pushed me onto that path, I realized that it was one I could not take. It was only through his relentlessness that I saw it for what it was."
"Master Yoda counseled me. I was not quite a senior padawan at the time. I trained with him. Learned more Ataru than Makashi. I studied the Living Force in depth. I trained away from Master Dooku more than I trained with him. The only reason he did not speak out publically was because it was his own master who taught me. Yoda did what he could to reconcile us. But… our missions together were hellish. We hardly spoke. It became evident that we would always see the opposite solution to any given problem. We did not agree on saberplay, or politics, or philosophy. The day I graduated, he hardly said a word to me. The day after, he left on a solo mission. It was never the same after that." Finally, Qui-Gon looked up at his apprentice. "I hadn't seen him since… oh, before you were born." He wondered if he looked as old as he felt. "Frankly, not much has changed."

Obi-Wan had been sitting still and quiet in his seat, but now shifted, sitting back to see his master in a new light. "He does not regard you poorly, you know." He relayed. "He speaks of you often."

Qui-Gon seemed unimpressed. "And when he does, does he berate me for my choice of Ataru? For my recklessness? For my overstated compassion or my hair?"

Obi-Wan gaped, then fidgeted. He began picking at his fingernails under the table. "Well… your hair never came up…" He mumbled. Qui-Gon only sighed. The apprentice rebounded. "He is harsh. Overly so. Anyone can see that. But he is a good teacher – at least in the dojo."

"Oh yes," Qui-Gon nodded. "Of that there is no contest. But he is not an entirely wholesome mentor."

Obi-Wan frowned, the wrinkle between his eyebrows furrowing deeper. He rubbed palms against his knees. "Is he… do you think he's a poor Jedi, master?" He was almost afraid to ask it too loudly.

Qui-Gon crossed his arms. "Dooku is not… a poor Jedi, padawan. But he is…" Qui-Gon faltered. How to explain?


The boy sounded hesitant, but Qui-Gon would not have put it any other way. "Yes," He said, heart aching despite his long grudge. "Yes, like Master Krell."

"But what does that mean for a Jedi? You don't… you don't think that he would ever…"

"I don't know, padawan. With these things, it is best to focus on the here and now."

"Yes, Master. Of course." Obi-Wan stayed seated a moment longer, and then stood to clean up after dinner. When he was done, Qui-Gon stood and faced him.

"I do want you to continue to train with him, Obi-Wan. Do not let my personal weaknesses detract from your training." His expression softened into a lighter emotion. "From what I saw today, your Makashi is improving a great deal." Which was to say that he was a natural at it. "I do not want to see you squander the opportunity."

Obi-Wan smiled and gave an overly formal bow. "Of course, Master. I seek to honor your instruction in all things." This last enunciation made Qui-Gon shake his head and tug on Obi-Wan's braid before passing him by to the kettle.

Obi-Wan left for his room to finish his homework assignments, but he paused in the doorway. "And master?"

"Yes?"
"I should be honored to be anything like you, one day." After a beat, he cut the maudlin sentiment by squinting and adding, "...though, maybe not the hair."

Qui-Gon smiled, the warmth in his heart not registering the insult to vanity. "Thank you, Obi-Wan," he said, and meant it. He jerked his head at the boy's room. "Finishing your studies on time would be a good place to start."

Obi-Wan gave him a grin. "Of course, Master." He disappeared into his room. "After all, I cannot emulate your fine example in all things."

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon growled. The apprentice only laughed.

"Does he really fight on low power?"
"I heard he was the best duelist in the Order – better than Master Windu!"
"Why in the galaxy has he been away this long?"
"Is Master Jinn cross with you for training with him?"
"Does he really wear a cape?"
"Come on, Obi," Garen flicked a grain of rice at his friend, mouth full, "speak up, it's not like you to be quiet."
"Well you haven't given me much to time to say anything," the padawan griped. "Yes, he fights on low power, and yes he does wear a cape. Yes, I'm training with him, and no, my master is not cross. Happy now?"
"But could he beat Master Windu?" Reeft postulated, squinting into some unseen oracle. Obi-Wan rolled his eyes.
"I don't know, why don't you go and ask him?"
"What is his like?" Bant wanted to know. "Is he as mean as he looks?"
"Oh for Force's sake," Obi-Wan let his hands fall on the table as he threw back his head. "So many questions! You're like a brood of younglings."

Garen gave a so-sue-me shrug. "It's not our fault you waited until we're all off-planet to start training with your grandmaster, the master of Makashi who hasn't been at temple since you were in diapers." He shook his head. "Honestly, Kenobi, you've no respect for the finer things in life."

"Finer things?"

Garen tore into a bite of tika-sal. "Juicy gossip," He explained around the food. "I need something to cheer me up after such a long deployment."
"Garen, it's only been three months."
"And you've been training with him for as long! Three months is a long time, mate."
"Well you should've wrapped up your mission a bit sooner, Muln."
"It's wasn't my fault!"
"Shifting blame to Master Rhara? For shame, Garen."

"It was neither of our faults."

Obi-Wan ticked an eyebrow. "If that's what she wants you to think."


"Sit down, you idiots," Bant grabbed an arm in either hand and yanked them back down. "Honestly, it's like neither of you left the crèche at all," she grumbled. The males glared at each other. Having played spectator while he chewed on his food, Reeft swallowed and asked,

"But really, Obi, what does Master Jinn think? And what about Master Ben?"

Curiosity curing him of his anger, Garen crossed his arms and warmed to his friend's query. "Yeah, I thought your uncle was trying to disciple you in Form III. Everyone knows you're his favorite student."

Embarrassed by the (albeit unwitting) accusation of self-obsession, Obi-Wan frowned and shot back, "That's no true."

"Debatable. You're still his best student."

"How come Obi-Wan gets all of the best swordmasters?" Reeft wondered aloud.

Obi-Wan ignored him. "Master Jinn isn't mad - he's actually encouraged me to continue training in Makashi. Ben doesn't say much about it. He still teaches me some Soresu. Speaking of," Obi-Wan decided it was high time to change the topic. "Have any of you seen Master Ben recently? I need to speak with him."

"About how to suck up to the best swordsman in the order?"

"Kiss a sarlaac, Garen."

"I saw him earlier today," Bant said, ignoring the testosterone-fueled bile on either side of her. "He said he was on his way to the crèche."

"The crèche?" Obi-Wan frowned in distaste, "what on earth is he doing there?"

Obi-Wan followed directions from half a dozen different crèche masters until he found himself at the doorway into the wolf clan dormitory.

"Ah, you must be Obi-Wan," smiled the tall selonian clan master.

"Yes, Master… how did you know my name?"

"Your uncle has mentioned you. I can see the family resemblance."

"Oh. Yes, I'm actually looking for Master Ben right now. I was told he was here earlier today?"

"He still is, in fact, visiting young Skywalker. Just this way." She led him across the warm crèche playroom to the sleeping hall. As they crossed the room, Obi-Wan couldn't help but think that the rooms were far smaller than he remembered them being. A group of younglings were playing levitation games in one corner, seeing who could raise a feather higher in the air without losing concentration. Obi-Wan remembered playing an identical game with his crèchemates as a young
boy. If he wasn't mistaken, he'd been rather good at it. He tried to remember the name of the game to no avail.

"Master Kenobi," his own name brought him out of his thoughts. "Padawan Kenobi has come looking for you."

"Oh?" Ben glanced at the door. "Hello, Obi-Wan. Thank you, master Zyrha."

"Of course." She frowned at some unseen disturbance and turned around. "Rilen, holobooks are not for eating." She gave the two Kenobis a serene smile before turning to leave. "Excuse me."

"And what, might I ask, are you doing here?" Ben inquired, fighting back amusement as Obi-Wan picked his way through the child-sized sleeping mats like a bumbling giant.

"I might ask you the same question," Obi-Wan replied, nearly tripping. He did not realize that Ben had a youngling sitting with him on the floor until he looked up from his mine-field navigation.

"Who that?" Anakin asked.


Obi-Wan joined the child and his older self on the ground, opting to kneel rather than mimic their reclined sprawling. "It's nice to meet you, Anakin," he said politely.

Anakin looked up at the introduced with curious blue eyes. "D'Obi Kenobi," he said.

"It's Obi-Wan, actually."

Anakin blinked. "D'Obi-Wab."

Ben bit back his laugh as Obi-Wan's frown intensified. "Obi-Wan," he said.

Anakin scrunched up his face in concentration. "D'Obi-Wanmn."

Obi-Wan sighed. "Close enough." He looked up at Ben, eyes demanding explanation.

"I'm the one who found him, years ago." Ben said. "Did your master not mention him?"

"No." He eyed the youngling as if it were an unsavory specimen in a lab. Pathetic lifeform.

"Where did you find him?"

"That is a long and complicated story that I may one day tell you. He comes from Alderaan; Master Dooku was the one who brought him to the Temple."

"Oh." Obi-Wan was trying to ignore Anakin's fascinated staring. "I see. I actually wanted to speak with you about master Dooku," he said.

"Oh?"

"Yes. I was speaking about it with master Jinn, and was wondering..." Obi-Wan glanced around the relatively empty creche, not knowing what he should and shouldn't say around children. "About... makashi. And... other things."

"I see," Ben sobered somewhat. "Of course. Let me return young Skywalker to the supervision of Master Zyrha, and we may walk together." He stood to his feet and shook feeling back into his legs.
"Come, Anakin. I must leave. Why don't you go play lift-feather with your friends?"

Obi-Wan's eyes sparkled in remembrance. Lift-feather, *that's* what it'd been called.


"Anakin, You know I cannot. What have you been taught about coveting?"

The boy moped, but let go of Ben's clothes. "To not to," he said morosely. "Not the Jedi way."

"That's right. And you shan't covet my time any more than I do yours. We are Jedi. We will see each other shortly, I'm sure. Come, now." He stood, and Anakin stood with him, still moping in a royal fashion but, at very least, following directions.

"Ah, leaving so soon?" Master Zyrha was cleaning a stack of holobooks in the other room.

"Duty calls, I'm afraid. Thank you for letting me visit, it's good to see he's adjusting well."

"Of course, Master Kenobi. It is always a joy to have masters interested in the younger generation."

"Obi-Wan, there you are," Qui-Gon Jinn's face appeared in the doorway. Two masters, one padawan, and one youngling turned to look at him. He stepped inside. "You really must remember your comm," he reprimanded, handing his apprentice a commlink. "I've had to consult half the Temple to find you." Obi-Wan looked surprised.

"Oh," He said, only now realizing that it hadn't been on his belt. "I'm sorry, Master. Thank you. It won't happen again." He took the comm and clipped it to his belt.

"My, who was I to know my clanroom would become a meeting place," Master Zyrha laughed. After a brief moment, her smile disappeared and one of her ears swiveled in place. She turned her head to look at a spot where two of her elder younglings had broken into an overly exuberant wrestling match. She sighed. "Excuse me."

Qui-Gon gave her a smile before turning back to his apprentice. "As I would have told you an hour ago, had you remembered your commlink, we have a council briefing set for later today."

Obi-Wan straightened in attendance. "We're being put on assignment?"

"Yes. I'm not sure of the details yet." A flicker of movement caught his eye, and Qui-Gon looked down to see Anakin watching him from behind Obi-Wan's legs. His stern expression smoothed.

"Anakin Skywalker," The baritone master recalled. "Greetings, little one."

"Anakin smiled at him. "Lo," He said back.

Qui-Gon glanced between the boy and his apprentice, an unreadable emotion on his face. He shook it away. "Ben, I was going to ask you if you wouldn't mind looking after things while we are away."

'Things' being 'plants'. "Of course," He said with a smile.

"Why do you have a long hair?" Anakin asked aloud, head tipped up to see Obi-Wan's padawan braid. Obi-Wan looked down at the child, nonplussed.

"Because I'm an apprentice. And it's not a hair, it's a braid."

"Oh."
"Will you come by for tea before you leave?" Ben was asking.

"I will try. The council may want to send us off immediately."

"Hmm. I should like to speak to you before you leave for too long."

"Of course."

"Why is so long?" Anakin asked of Obi-Wan's braid.

"Because I've been an apprentice for longer than you've been alive," The padawan replied dryly.

Anakin giggled. "It looks silly."

"You have a braid, too, you know," Obi-Wan gestured at the tiny stub of hair behind Anakin's right ear. The boy fiddled with it and shook his head.

"Yeah, but it's not silly," he insisted. Obi-Wan scoffed.

"Well, one day it will be."

"Yours will be sillier," Anakin said, spinning in circles for no discernable reason. Obi-Wan frowned at his antics. He'd never understood children.

"Mine will be gone altogether, Force willing." He winced when Anakin fell and caught himself. "What are you doing?"

"Practicing."

"For what?"

"For being as silly as you," The child giggled at his own joke, and Obi-Wan blinked slowly to disguise his eyeroll. Qui-Gon still saw it, and was smiling at him when he turned to look.

"Enjoying your seniority, Padawan?" he asked with a smile. Obi-Wan scowled.

"I'd like to go to the council now, Master, if possible," He shuffled away from the trajectory of Anakin's new nonsensical circling. Ben chuckled.

"Ah, so the crèche is able to motivate you toward docility." Qui-Gon's mouth tilted in subtle triumph. "I'm glad to know it." He took leave of the room, irascible apprentice in tow.

Ben turned to watch Anakin spin in circles until he ran into a meditation cushion and toppled onto it. He chuckled quietly to himself, and caught the eye of Master Zyrha, who had an apprehended youngling under either arm.

"I leave him in your very capable hands, Master," he said, glancing around at the lift-feather competition, at Anakin gazing up at the ceiling from the flat of his back, at Rilen (who'd found the holobooks again) and at the two rapscallions in Zyrha's custody. "May the Force be with you," Ben said to her as earnestly as he could muster. She smiled at him in the longsuffering way that only crèche masters could.

"Thank you, Master Kenobi. And also with you."

That evening, Qui-Gon appeared at Ben's doorstep with a small collection of potted plants. One of
them seemed to have teeth.

"I shall look after them as if there were my own," Ben assured him as he helped his master arrange the charges on the table and on the balcony, the toothed one far away from the others. They made tea afterward. "How did the council meeting go?" Ben asked as he poured their bowls.

"Well enough. They are beginning to take Obi-Wan's senior status to heart. I sense the mission will be a difficult one." Qui-Gon couldn't help the nostalgic look on his face. "Time passes quickly."

"Indeed it does." Ben took a leisurely sip, keeping the bowl close to his mouth so he could admire the aroma. "Where are you going?"

Qui-Gon waited until he'd finished his first sip. "Mandalore," he said. "Charged with averting civil war, it seems."

The tea bowl slipped from Ben's hands and it was only Jedi reflexes that allowed him to catch it. He muttered an apology and set aside his bowl to mop up the spilt tea. Qui-Gon watched with a new wariness in his eyes. At length, Ben recovered and said,

"Oh."

The only sound that passed for several seconds was the clink of teapot and cup as Ben poured himself a new bowl.

"Anything more to say?" Qui-Gon asked against his better judgment.

Ben set his cup down carefully, mind awash in old memories, of war, of living on the run. Of Satine. "It will be a difficult mission," Ben said at length, not looking Qui-Gon in the eye. "For him more so than you, I think." He ran a fingertip along the edge of his teacup, watching the leaves the bottom, still and settled.

Not everything ought to be changed, he thought. Hardship was not without its uses, and the very hardest of lessons were often some of the most valuable. But was Obi-Wan ready for it? Would he ever be? He was a different man than he'd been years ago, with different thoughts and values. What would change? Would the changes make it worse than before?

But he was still Obi-Wan. Confidence in this fact compelled Ben to let his teacup remain in its spot to steep. "Be patient with him," Ben asked Qui-Gon. "Just…" what to say? Give advice, but not too much advice. Intervene, but don't get too involved. Have a care; but do not compromise. Ben could not micromanage the situation from a distance. He sighed and said again, "Just have patience with him, please."

Qui-Gon looked more concerned and more solemn than before. "Of course," he said quietly. They drank their tea and spoke of other things. Qui-Gon avoided asking questions. Ben avoided giving unsolicited advice.

After their tea was gone, Qui-Gon rose to leave. As they were at the door, Ben said, "Master, you know that small holocron that I gave Obi-Wan years ago?"

Qui-Gon frowned. "Yes?"

"Would you make sure he brings it with him?"

Qui-Gon's curiosity was evident, but he restrained himself. "Yes, of course," he said.
Ben smiled. "Thank you. I have a feeling he will need it."

Qui-Gon nodded uncertainly. "May the Force be with you, Ben."

"And also with you, Master."

Ben watched him go for as long as he could, because he knew what Qui-Gon could not: they would not see each other for many, many months.
Chapter Notes

I've got an outline, I'm done with coursework, let's do this! I apologize that this chapter is a little slow, I'm hoping to start picking up the pace soon.

Hyperspace was cold, Obi-Wan thought glumly, tugging his cloak tighter around himself. Very cold. He sighed, a cloud of frustration puffing discontentedly at the universe at large. The commlink which he held fisted in his right hand chuckled at him. He glared at it. He hadn't realized that Ben had already picked up the signal.

"This is not the longest hyperspace journey I've ever been on," the apprentice confessed to his distant companion, glancing with severe displeasure at the ice crystals forming on the small port window next to him, "but it sure feels like it."

"Mandalore is not so far, I thought," Ben said from the comfort and warmth of the Jedi temple on Coruscant. Obi-Wan resented his easy, casual tone. He vowed to never grow so mellow in his old age. "It is on this side of the core, is it not?"

"It is. But unfortunately," Obi-Wan watched his own breath form clouds in the air, "this ship's heating systems are broken."

"Oh no."

"Oh, yes. Obviously they're still somewhat functional, seeing as I'm not an icicle yet," the padawan glared at the red, blinking thermostat, as if by sheer force of will it would smarten it into working order. "but that could change.

"You're far too dramatic, padawan," Ben accused, which only made Obi-Wan roll his eyes. "Have you comm'd me expressly to complain?"

Obi-Wan sighed again, because no, he hadn't, though part of him wished he could. It was all the same in the Force; he had more important matters to inquire after. "No, master. Actually, I wanted to talk about… well, before we left, you and I were talking about Master Dooku." Obi-Wan chewed on his lip, the small wrinkle between his eyebrows making an appearance.

"Ah yes. I remember, you seemed disturbed by something."

"Well… not exactly." Obi-Wan wasn't sure that he'd felt disturbed, per se. Only... "Master Qui-Gon and I were speaking about it recently – about Dooku, that is. I can't tell you everything right now," and there was a lot to tell, "but… it came up about how… Master Dooku is… grey. Like Master Krell. Do you know what I mean?"

A pause. Ben sighed quietly on the other end. "Yes, I know what you mean." Obi-Wan frowned; he'd learned to recognize when Ben knew more than he was letting on. He had not, however, learned how to discern the hidden truths behind those sighs.

"I just… I was wondering what that meant. For Master Dooku. I respect him a great deal," He said it quietly, casting a look over his shoulder in case Qui-Gon was listening too intently, "he seems a
good teacher, an amazing swordsman. I enjoy learning from him. But is that… is that wrong? With him being so…” he thought of Pong Krell, and of Ben's outburst years ago, and of Qui-Gon distrust of Dooku. "…so grey."

Obi-Wan was surprised and annoyed in equal measure to hear his older self chuckle. "You are getting quite ahead of yourself, Obi-Wan. Master Yan Dooku is a skilled instructor and an accomplished Jedi. You should not decry his guidance, especially in Makashi. It is a rare form."

Ben was right, of course. In spite of his reservations, Obi-Wan nodded and rubbed the wrinkles from his brow. "Yes, of course, master. I just… wondered."

"Yes, I know. But it does not do to dwell, especially while on a mission. Keep your focus in the here and now – this conversation will keep until you get back."

"Yes, of course." Of course. Here and now. Mission; Mandalore; a civil war and a duchess. Obi-Wan had read the dossier twice already, and knew it would not be an easy assignment.

No easier than freezing to death in the silent, merciless clutches of hyperspace. He clenched his numb fingers and sighed. "Kriff, it's cold."

Naturally, it was at that moment that Qui-Gon decided to materialize behind him. "Obi-Wan," He reprimanded, flicking the boy in the back of the head for his foul language. Obi-Wan spread his hands defensively at the comm unit. "It's just Ben," he explained. Ben laughed. Qui-Gon rolled his eyes and continued on into the cockpit.

Once his master was gone, Obi-Wan hunched into his cloak more deeply. The ice crystals on the window had grown. "I hope they get it fixed soon. This cloak used to be warm, I'm sure." He dug his hands into his pockets, seeking warmth of even the slightest degree. "I've already forgotten what it feels like… what's this?" There was something in one of his pockets.

"What's what?"

Obi-Wan pulled out the trinket to inspect it, and let out a laugh. "A hitchhiker," he told Ben who could not see. "You know that holocron you gave me?"

"Yes,"

"I've just found it in my cloak pocket. I haven't seen this thing in… well, over a year at least." He levitated it in front of himself and folded open the tiny locks until the old projection flickered into view. "How on earth did it get in there?" He wondered.

"Odd indeed," Ben agreed sagely from lightyears away. "But the Force works in mysterious ways; perhaps you will need it on your journey."

Obi-Wan tilted his head to consider it. Absently, he patted the old, smooth riverstone which he still kept in an inner tunic pocket. Wilder things had happened. "It does. I will meditate on it."

"Good."

Obi-Wan squinted at the small cube. "You don't suppose it could keep me warm, do you?"

Ben chuckled again. "Keep talking to yourself, and the hot air will work just as well." Obi-Wan scoffed, not sure if he was allowed to be insulted by himself. "You ought to get going," Ben said. Obi-Wan didn't want to lose the company, but he knew the master was right. "May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan, and with your master as well."
"I'll send him your regards. Force be with you, Ben."

He hung up the comm and determined to call Ben back when he made it to warmer environs. In the here and now, however, there was nothing to do but grasp his holocron in one hand, his river stone in the other, and sink into the Force's luminescent depths.

On Coruscant, Ben never received a call from Obi-Wan when the boy had reached warmer weather; he was not surprised. With Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan due to be absent for so long, Ben found it easiest to occupy himself with work and friends - sometimes at the same time. He would've despaired had he foreseen how much time he would spend in the Senate building in his new life, but at least this small corner of it had begun to feel like home.

"Dooku?" Bail Organa's eyebrows rose briefly before sinking back down into a smirk. "He's not from Serenno by any chance, is he?" It was meant to be a joke.

"He is, actually," Ben answered. Bail turned back around to look at him, surprised. The Jedi allowed a grin. Not a joke anymore. "As I understand it, there is a sizable Countship waiting for him there, should he ever renounce his vows to the Order." Ben sipped at his whisky with unrushed ease. Bail's glass hovered in between the desk and the senator's mouth, a bewildered limbo as its owner recouped.

"I had no idea," Bail said, with the genuine shock of someone who had met the Dooku family before, and could not imagine them giving up one of their own to the Jedi. "And he taught Master Jinn, you say?"

"Yes. They're not…" how to be diplomatic about it? "The closest of colleagues, but talent runs in the lineage."

"Hmm," Bail had recovered and now took a leisurely sip of his drink before looking back down to the myriad of datapads and notes strewn about his desk. "For all you say about him, I still have no idea what Master Jinn looks like. You ought to introduce me sometime."

Ben smiled. "He's been saying the same thing about you – unfortunately, he and his apprentice are off planet at the moment."

"Your nephew?"

"Yes. They've been sent as emissaries to Mandalore."

"Oh," Bail winced. "Yes, I heard about that mess. I hope they're able to sort it out promptly."

"As do I."

Ben picked at the edge of his glass, trying to distract himself. Bail was shuffling through flimsi and holodisks. Ben watched him a moment and shook his head.

"Bail, it's nearly dark. You oughtn't work yourself so hard."

A deep, heavy sigh. "I can't help it."

"You can. Moderation is a virtue, even in work. We must find peace amidst the chaos."

Bail forced himself to set down his work and folded his hands. He sent Ben a small smile. "Here I was thinking that you've been trying to help me. All this time you've been trying to turn me into a
Ben laughed out loud. "I am trying to help you. As to the second, I do not possess such power; although I must say, I think you would make a wonderful Jedi."

Bail laughed off this compliment, even if Ben had meant it in truth. "My family would convene with the Dookus, then. Alderaan would be a far less controversial place without me," he joked.

"Bite your tongue."

"It's only true."

Ben shook his head, swirling his drink and finishing it off with an appreciative sigh. "Dooku has actually been away for years, I'm not sure where. He only came home recently - after a stop by Alderaan, in fact."

"Oh?" Bail was still nursing his drink. "For what purpose?"

"He was picking up a new recruit; Anakin Skywalker."

"Little Ani?" Bail perked up, and Ben smiled at the nickname. The genuine pleasure in Bail's voice warmed Ben's heart. "So Shmi sent him away after all?"

It was a bittersweet truth for them both. "So it seems. He is settling in well, I've checked in on him when I can." Ben chuckled. "He's found a soft spot in his new crèche master."

Bail's smile was a rare, pure specimen on a senator. "I'm glad to hear it. How long ago did he arrive?"

"Not quite six months."

"Ah," Bail nodded at some answered question. "I've not seen her since then. I shall have to relay your good reports to his mother next I see her."

Ben's eyebrows raised. "You see Shmi often?"

"No, not often," the man amended, finishing his drink and leaning back. "At state dinners, occasionally. She's found a job as a handmaiden to a courtier, you see."

"Well that's wonderful," Ben said, heart full to imagine Shmi Skywalker actually living, working as a free woman. "With what family?"

"With a particular lady, actually. Her name is Breha Antilles. She's from one of the noble families of Aderaan."

It took a very sudden and severe level of control for Ben to keep himself from looking surprised or pleased – both of which he felt acutely at the mention of that feminine, commanding rock of years past. "Antilles," he repeated. Every year that he lived in the past, he grew slightly better at feigning ignorance; and yet every year, he found moments in which he could hardly contain himself. The Force must've seen fit to challenge him doubly this year. "I've heard of them."

"Have you met Lady Breha?" Bail asked. Ben trained his expression and watched Bail's with interest.

"Met her? No. I have heard of her. A keen woman; wise for her age."
"Yes," Bail concurred, and the smile that crossed his face was different than his usual smile. "She is a rare individual. She hired Shmi after making friends with her at the marketplace, apparently. She prefers human company to protocol droids. Calls them witless wirebrains." this memory made Bail chuckle, eyes crinkling. Ben squinted at him just slightly, as if he could see the pieces falling into place. He put his hand over his mouth in mock concentration. It and his beard hid the smile that had snuck its way onto his lips. In his past life, he had not had the privilege of seeing Bail and Breha match wits for the first time. He wanted very much to seize the opportunity, this time around.

"She sounds lovely." He meant it.

"She is, that."

"Hmmm," Ben let down his hand once he'd worked his smile into a diplomatic neutral. "You are lucky to find such allies at home."

"Ally?" The idea seemed to take Bail off guard. "I've only met her once, Ben."

"You ought to meet her again," Ben set his empty glass aside. "If nothing else, to relay my best wishes to Shmi Skywalker." Ben Kenobi, matchmaker. Who could have guessed?

"Of course," Bail nodded, mind lingering for a moment on Shmi – and on Breha. Ben watched with muted amusement. Quietly, Bail picked up a datapad from his desk and began reading

"Bail," Ben snapped.

"What?"

"Stop it."

Bail sighed and poured himself another drink.

Their social evening burbled on with intermittent gossip and banter, advice and talk of the senate. It was good to have this, Ben thought to himself, friends. Bail was not like the Jedi Ben lived his life alongside; he was not seeking advice nor giving it, not concerned with platitudes and ethereal wisdom. He did not know who Ben was; and that, in this instance, was a refreshing, pure gift.

But moderation was a virtue; even good things must come to a close in their time. As Bail put away his decanter and Ben sensed the Force's sociable gold dim into a drowsier shade of purple, he knew he ought to go. They said their goodbyes and wished each other well in the casual way that friends do, assured that they will see each other before too many suns rise and fall.

As Ben rose to take his leave, Bail was reorganizing his piles of work. He found an invitation under an old report and raised a finger in recognition. "Oh, Ben," He called, causing the Jedi to pause in his step toward the door. "There is a committee meeting next month, I wondered if you'd like to attend."

"Oh?" Ben paused and folded his arms into opposite sleeves. "What is the topic of discussion?" The word 'dinner' was misleading; these things never had to do with food, Ben knew.

"We're to discuss the colonization of Alaris Prime – have you heard of it?"

The name tickled a distant memory, hazy and unrefined. "I'm not sure," Ben said.

"It's a moon in the Alaris system, recently discovered. The Wookies have been petitioning the Senate for colonization rights for years, and my coalition is attempting to resolve the matter." He shrugged, not wanting to go into too much detail. "Anyway, preliminary reports suggest the moon might house
remains of an ancient Jedi temple. Your high council should know. Perhaps they'd let you be the
Order's representative?" He smiled. "I'd be grateful for a familiar face."

Ben considered it. Something in the back of his mind told him he ought to recognize some of what
he was hearing; he did not. "I will ask," he said. "I'm sure Master Windu will be more than happy to
relinquish his claim to any senate engagements."

Bail laughed at this. "A shame. I enjoyed it when he moderated the summit talks last tenth month.
His facial expressions spoke for us all."

Ben chuckled. "Our Master of the Order is not one for politics, I'm afraid."

"He's very refreshing in that way."

"As are you, Senator."

Bail shook him off. "Flattery doesn't suit you. Go home, Master Kenobi."

"You should as well, Bail," Ben shook his hand at the stacks of paperwork. "This will all still be
here tomorrow. Go rest."

Bail sighed and sat back, acquiescing. He gave Ben a parting smile. "May the Force be with you,
Master."

"And also with you, senator."

Days passed, and then weeks. Ben did not have an apprentice of his own, but the younger generation
never ceased to keep him busy.

"Good morning, Master Kenobi," bowed the first of his students to arrive.

"Padawan Lechii," He nodded in greeting.


"And to you, Padawan Grat. Catch your breath."

And so the morning began. The group filtered in as classes let out and crowds of junior apprentices
flowed to their next modules en masse. Ben waited quietly, smiling at his young charges in their turn.
Garen, Obi-Wan, and the rest of his inaugural saber class had all since aged out of the group courses,
and were now expected to hone their skills with their masters and individual tutors. Ben had stayed
with them for three years, and had only recently returned to teach another cycle of padawans.
Happily, though he had not planned this when he'd volunteered to lead another course, his new
posse included a familiar face.

"Aola," Ben greeted, forgoing formality to smile widely as the gangly twi'lek came through the door.
"I was wondering when I would see you back in the dojo. How was Alsakan?"

Aola shot him a half grin, and he noticed the dark circles beneath her eyes. "...Tiring, master," she
decided. "I am glad to be back."

Ben nodded in understanding. "Very well. Gather your strength – you'll need it today."

"Yes, Master."
Courses were much the same as they ever were. Ben spent the most time with the students who needed the most help, which would normally have excluded Aola, but today he had to go to her side several times to correct her stance and raise her arms. Her fighting lacked its usual verve, and not once did he have to remind her of mindfulness. He wondered if it had more to do with exhaustion or puberty – or both. He did not let her mistakes go unnoticed, but tried to make his rebukes as helpful as possible.

At the end of class, as other students stretched their aching muscles and shuffled off to lunch, Aola hung back. When Ben was finished answering the questions of one of her peers, Aola approached him. He smiled at her.

"You did well today," He said. She had.

"Not as well as usual," she demurred.

"Pride does not befit a Jedi, Aola," He reprimanded. She nodded.

"Yes, master." Her hands were folded in front of her, a polite position belying her social air. He glanced at them meaningfully.

"Can I help you with something?"

"Yes, Master, I..." she picked at the edge of a tabard. "I wondered if I might speak with you."

"Of course." He frowned at her reservation. "What is it?"

"Well," she glanced to the side, where a dozen or so padawans were still conversing and showing off moves to one another. She wrung her hands, uncertain.

Ben's senses told him that this, whatever it was, was larger than the dojo would allow. He glanced at the other apprentices and then at Aola's hesitant face. "This isn't about sabers, is it?" He asked, quietly.

Aola looked at him, and then at the floor. She shook her head.

Ben gave a slow nod. He uncrossed his arms and took a step toward the door. He jerked his head for her to follow. She fell into step with him and they walked out of the dojo together.

They continued on in silence, following a single hall until the midday crowds began to thin, leaving them alone to their strolling and their conversation. They were in an old hall, full of pillars and statues and quiet contemplation spots. The cloth carpets and tapestries ate up the echoes of their words, wrapping them in privacy, even in plain sight.

"What is it?" Ben asked the apprentice at last.

Aola let out a massive sigh, as if uncorking a bottle fit to overflow. "You have visions, don't you?" she asked in a desperate tone.

Ben glanced at her. "Sometimes."

"I do too. Sometimes." She was still wringing her hands as before.

"Yes, Feemor has mentioned it before." Beat. "I take it you've had a vision?"

"Yes... and... and I don't know what it means."
"They do not always mean anything, padawan."

"No, but this… this one has to." Her tone made Ben's footsteps falter ever so slightly; the Force tilted. "I don't…" She choked mid-sentence and the tilt became a crash. The ambiance changed instantly; Ben realized that she was on the verge of tears. He slowed his step and guided her into a small alcove. He sat on the bench there and guided her to sit beside him.

Face wrought with sudden concern, he face her and asked, "Aola, what did you see?"

"I… I don't know, I don't… It can't be, maybe I saw it wrong," she burbled, wiping frantically at her eyes where tears appeared unbidden.

"Padawan," Ben snapped. It gave her the jolt she needed to regain her composure. She refused to look at Ben while she explained,

"It was while we were on Alsakan. I… It was like a dream, but… more."

Visions often were. "What happened?" Ben coaxed. Aola sniffed.

"I saw a man… A… I guess it was a man. I was looking at him in an alley. It was dark. He was hunched over, and I could sense pain. I thought he needed help, that he'd been hurt. But when I stepped toward him, he stood up to look at me. His eyes were red - but not like a chiss or a duros. They glowed, bright red. He…" Her face scrunched in sudden emotion and she ducked it further down. "He had a red lightsaber."

Ben went stiff. His fear made her suck in a breath and sob. "He said something in some evil language and attacked me. That's… that's when I woke up." She put her hands over her mouth to stop herself crying. "I'm sorry, Master Kenobi," she mumbled embarrassedly through her hands.

"There now," Ben reached out and took her by her arm, stroking a bare, freckled shoulder with his thumb. "No need for that, it's just a vision," he said, though his heart was racing and it was only through a heroic effort that he was able to shield his shock from her.

"But it can't be," She said, wiping her face. "It's never just a vision," she insisted.

"Sometimes, padawan, it is just that, take it from someone who knows."

"But…" She scrambled. "But why, then? It happened the same way both times, and I-

"Both?" Ben demanded. "What do you mean, both?"

She looked down, sinking lower as she shrugged. "I had the vision twice. While we were away."

Ben was reeling, hand still on her arm. He blinked rapidly and took a breath. "What did your master say about it?" He asked reasonably. Aola shrank further in his hands.

"I haven't told him," she whispered in shame.

Ben let go of her and leaned back. "Aola," He snapped. "Why not?"

She winced. "I'm sorry," she managed.

"Do not give me an apology, give me an explanation."
Her face was locked in a grimace, and her mouth raced to beat out her thoughts before the tears returned: "Master Gard's never had a vision in his life. It freaks him out, I know it does. He never knows what to do when I have visions, and I've never had one like this, and I just... I didn't know how to..." She was breathing fast, her hands shaking. "I'm sorry, I didn't... I was scared, and I didn't know how to tell him, and Obi-Wan said that you get visions sometimes, like he and I do, but he's not here, and I thought if I told Master Gard he might..." she hesitated.

"He might what, padawan?"
"Might... regret me."

Ben stared at her for several silent seconds in bewilderment. "Regret taking you on?" He asked. She nodded. He could not comprehend the thought. "Aola," He began, resuming his touch on her shoulder, more gently this time, trying to imagine how she must feel and trying desperately to find a way to communicate the truth to her. "Aola, Feemor would never," He began. "You're like his daughter."

The idea made her look up at him in surprise. Ben met her gaze and held it for the first time since her confession. "He's told me that he took you on after you saw it in a dream." She nodded. "Do you really think he would've done that if he wasn't prepared to have an apprentice gifted with foresight?"

Either she hadn't considered this, or she had not considered it in the same light. "But... that's just it. He only took me on after I said I'd seen us in a vision – I had. But... but what if he felt obligated? Like if he hadn't, it would've been wrong? What if I was wrong? I... Why would the Force give me a master who doesn't know what to do with visions? They're getting worse every year and I don't know what to do, and now this one keeps coming back, and I'm scared it'll come back again, and I don't know what it means, and..."

"Aola," Ben held a hand out by her mouth, and she quieted. She was shivering. Ben would have offered her a cloak, but they were both fresh from the dojo; there was not a cloak to be had. "Fear leads to anger, young one." He reminded. "And here, it is entirely unfounded." She nodded, but her face remained taught. Words only did so much for a scared, insecure child. Ben pulled her into his shoulder and she clung to him. It was a gesture sure to be frowned upon by all Jedi except perhaps the crèche masters, and even they would say she was too old for coddling. But they were alone, so Ben Kenobi and his heresies would remain a family secret.

"Feemor worries for you out of compassion; he does not regret you in the slightest," Ben told her, beard brushing her temple. "You must get that out of your head – Force only knows how it got in there to begin with." He pulled away and was glad to see her calmed somewhat. "You must not withhold this from him, Aola, he will be able to help you more than I can."

"But he doesn't get visions," Aola protested. "He said so himself."

"And you will be better for it. Let your master help you gain perspective." He gave her a smile. "When I was growing up, my master was the same. It was the best thing that could've happened to me."

Aola frowned, confused. "But... I thought Master Yoda was your master."

Ben gaped at his misstep. "Master Yoda saw me knighted," he said – which was not a lie. "But I was raised by someone else."

"Like... like Master Gard was?"
Aola gaped, studying Ben in a new light. "Oh. Who was it?"

Ben shook his head. "It doesn't matter now. He was a man who knew absolutely nothing of the Unifying Force. Openly disregarded it, in fact. Infuriating – be glad Feemor isn't of that strain." She chuckled, and he counted it as a small step forward. "But it was good for me. I had night terrors almost every week, visions of horrible things. Most of them never came to anything, but they terrified me. He and his doubts kept me rooted in reality." He fixed her with a wizened gaze, and made sure she was listening when he said, "the future is always in motion, padawan. You must not center on your anxieties."

She took a shaky breath and breathed it out more steadily. "Yes, master."

Ben smiled at her. "Good girl. Now," He took his own deep breath and brushed her tabards straight. "You are going to find your master straightaway and tell him everything that you've just told me. Then he will give you his thoughts, and you will meditate. And then, and this is very important," He paused for effect, "you will drink no less than a full cup of jeru tea and sleep for the rest of the day. Understood?"

Aola nodded, drooping from exhaustion and confusion but still standing. "Yes, Master. Thank you."

But all was not as simple as that; Ben fixed her with a sternly cocked eyebrow. "You must trust your master, Aola. It is highly inappropriate for you to not tell him these things – it is even more inappropriate for you to tell me before you tell him." He let the seriousness of her misdeeds sink in before saying, "he will do his best to understand – even if he does at first - how did you say - freak out."

Aola, head drooping in shame and eyes dark and puffy, gave him a miniscule smile.

"Go along, then," He gestured. She nodded and scurried away, bowing deeply at the last moment.

Ben's smile disappeared as soon as she was gone. He leaned against the wall and let his heart feel the shock he'd been hiding for Aola's sake. The wrinkles in his brow felt heavier than before.

A red lightsaber.

Oh, he had a very bad feeling about this.

Ben was unsurprised when Feemor arrived at his apartment later that evening.

"How is she?" Ben asked upon opening the door. Feemor let out a pent-up breath.

"Asleep," He said, and let himself in to sit on Ben's couch. "For which I'm glad." He fell silent and Ben said nothing. The visitor was still swimming in tumultuous thoughts, tossing up the Force in restless patterns. He shook his head. "I should've known. She was distracted on Alsakan, I wrote it off as a growing spurt, youthfulness. I should've sensed she wasn't sleeping. Force." He tossed himself back in his seat. "What kind of master am I?"

"A very typical master, I suspect," Ben said, bringing over a cup of caf and setting it on the table. Feemor stared into the curling steam, as if the fleeting images would give him revelation.

"I'm too typical," Feemor said, clenching one hand over the other. "I'm just… I don't know about visions, Ben," His bottled anxiety burst. "I've never had a vision in my life. I don't even understand
the living Force, but I sure as hel don't know about the unifying Force. I'm just... I'm too damn ordinary. I'm below ordinary. Visions? Jar'kai ataru? I studied Nimian, for Force's sake." The master rubbed at his temples, shaking his head softly. He looked at the cup of caf that Ben had made for him but did not reach for it. "She deserves so much better," he whispered. "I don't know what I'm doing."

Ben smiled softly. "You don't give yourself enough credit."

"But I don't," Feemor insisted.

"No one ever does, Feemor. But you are not ordinary, I do hope you realize that."

He scoffed. "Pardon my skepticism. Between time-travelling messiahs and visionaries and the crown prince of the living Force, I think I cut a rather forgettable figure."

Ben shrugged. "Well... perhaps in those respects," he allowed. Feemor shook his head in a slow, resigned rhythm.

"I don't mind it," he said, finally picking up his cup and looking into its depths. "Truly. Not for myself. But Aola... I'm in so far over my head."

Ben watched the man's face and was saddened to see the same shades of fear and shame in his expression as those he'd seen in Aola only hours before. How was it possible, he wondered, for two people so close to each other to grow blind to their mutual, unfounded anxieties? He supposed it was part of raising a child.

"Feemor, I spent most of my youth scared to fall asleep for fear of my own dreams. I understand what Aola is going through. And I can tell you from experience that there is absolutely no one in this temple more suited to the task than you."

Feemor looked thoroughly unconvinced. Ben took the silent critique with a smile.

"You forget who raised me." Feemor considered it, and sighed. "Qui-Gon was nothing if not baffled by my visions. He wouldn't tell me, that, of course. He just ignored them most of the time. We spoke of them, we meditated on them, but he never let me become preoccupied, as some counselors do. He made sure we ignored them; sometimes to a fault."

"And that was... helpful?" Feemor asked, confused.

"Immensely." He met Feemor's eyes and when the elder remained resolute in his befuddlement, Ben allowed his expression to soften further. "You don't see it, do you?"

"See what?"

"You're not ordinary, Feemor. You may not be a sabermaster or a disciple of the living Force, or match my own... exceptional circumstances. But you are..."

"What?" Feemor demanded, tired of this patronizing game. Ben sighed.

"You're so... good. You don't see it, but you're absolutely rooted in the light. I'm envious of you sometimes, you know."

"What?" The notion was absurd.

Ben was squinting at him, eyes boring into his soul and the place where it lay against the greater cosmos. "Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, myself... we all live very dramatic lives. Eventful. Our paths are full
of twists and turns, and we've all nearly fallen off the tracks multiple times. You haven't. For your lack of what you call exceptionality, you are steady. You are an anchor in the light, Feemor."

"All Jedi are, Ben," Feemor reminded. He appreciated the man's kind words, but could not take them to heart.

Ben was still watching him, an odd look in his eye. "Have you ever been tempted by the dark?" he asked.

Feemor frowned. "What?"

"Have you ever been tempted to turn?"

Feemor's frown intensified, and he shook his head adamantly. "Of course not. Why would I?"

Absurdly, Ben laughed. "You see?" he asked, proud and gleeful and sad all at once. "Who is the greater man? The one who wrestles with temptation and overcomes," He tapped his own chest. The next comment was directed at Feemor: "Or the one who looks temptation in the eye, turns his back, and walks away the happier for it?"

Feemor's incomprehension was evidence of his own merit. "You are a rock in the light," Ben told him. "Aola is being tried, perhaps for the first time, by the dark." The notion was a daunting one, but a surge of paternal resolution made Feemor take it in stride. "You have to remind her to keep her head above water. Aola must not dwell on her visions. If she's allowed to stew with visionaries like me, she'll go mad. I know I would. Keep her busy. Do not lean on your understanding of visions; lean on your understanding of the Light. Then, let her lean on you."

Feemor sighed heavily. "I will try," he sipped at his drink.

"Do or do not, padawan, there is no try." Ben smiled when Feemor snorted into his cup. "I'm shocked you'd forgotten."

"Oh, none of us forget that old troll's maxims. We can only hope to repress them."

Ben laughed. They drank in silence for a while. Eventually, swirling the last of his caf around in its porcelain bowl, Feemor said, "She said he had a red lightsaber."

Ben paused. "Yes."

"What does it mean?"

"It could mean nothing."

"She saw it twice, Ben."

Ben hesitated for one, two, three seconds. He sipped at his tea. "It could mean nothing," he repeated.

"But it could mean something," Feemor insisted. Ben glanced at him.

"Yes."

Feemor let out a breath. He'd been holding out hope that Ben would ease his fears. No such luck, it seemed. "No one has a red lightsaber, Ben," He whispered. "No one we've seen in centuries."

"No," Ben agreed, so easily that it set Feemor's teeth on edge.
"Something is coming, isn't it?"

"Yes."

Feemor watched Ben carefully. He burned with questions. He wanted to know what was coming, how he could prepare, how he could prepare his apprentice, his Order. He knew that any answer Ben gave would not be good enough. He turned his back and walked away. "The Force did not send you back to play errand boy, did it?" He joked.

Ben laughed, his mind replaying the looped image of a Sith stalking toward Aola, the same fragmented thought tossing around in his skull as it had been all afternoon. He wrestled with it, neither victor or defeated – not yet. "No," he said. "Not really."
Anakin Skywalker was four years old, and he fancied himself a storyteller. He squirmed in Ben's lap, whole body moving in order to capture the essence of his tall tale.

"And then, and then, and then," dramatic pause; exploding arm motions. "It blewed up,"

"Really?" Ben gasped, putting on his most surprised face. He hoped it would be enough to quell his smile. "That is fascinating. Then what happened?"

"It, it, it, and then, and then," Anakin continued on with his retelling of the Second Battle of Althir, "it flew back to the, the hyperspace, and did a… a jump, vrrroooommmmmmmmpCCOOOHHWWFFFF," Anakin dodged to the side, miming a pretend spaceship.

Ben chuckled. "Your enthusiasm does you credit, young one. But why on earth has Master Zyrha let you study such atrocities?"

"Trocites?"

Ben smiled. "Who told you this story, Anakin?"

"Madster Doolu," he explained.

"That would be Dooku, my young friend, as I've reminded you many times before." Yan Dooku's bass voice said from the door. Ben looked up, surprise now entirely genuine. Anakin waved. Dooku gave Ben a tiny smile. "I'm afraid I've never had a taste for bedtime stories."

"Boooom," Anakin percussed to some unheard narrative, falling backward off of Ben's lap so that the older Jedi had to catch him. Dooku chuckled.

"Master Dooku," Ben said, hoisting Anakin upright so they could both stand. "I was unaware you occupied your spare time in the crèche."

Dooku cocked an aristocratic eyebrow. "I might say the same of you, Master Kenobi. I was under the impression that the only juvenile company you kept was that of your nephew."

Ben crossed his arms. "I might say the same about you, Master."

They exchanged humorless smiles.

Anakin, ignorant of grown-up nuance and politic, spread his arms like a starcruiser and vroomed his way past Ben, tripped on a meditation cushion, and kept going. Dooku watched him and shook his head disapprovingly.
"The Second Battle of Althir is a perfectly relevant topic for any Jedi."

"Of a certain age," Ben allowed, watching as Anakin ran into Master Zyrha and let her stoop to wipe spittle from his lip. "I'm not sure young Skywalker is ready for such matters."

"You harbor a soft spot for him," Dooku surmised, watching the gentle way Ben looked the boy. "Attachment."

Ben turned away from the youngling to peer at Dooku. "I find that it depends greatly on one's point of view, Master." He tipped his chin to look Dooku in the eye; no small feet, as the elder man had nearly twenty centimeters on him. "From where I stand, I do not appear alone in my fixation. Although," Ben cast a look behind him, where Anakin was now regaling his clanmates with Dooku's stories, war stories that he would not learn in classes until he was a junior padawan at least. Ben cast an accusatory eye on his grandmaster. "I do not make a habit of corrupting the younger generation."

"From a certain point of view," said Dooku, tone clipped with a duelist's sense of respect. He conceded defeat to open a new match. "I admit, I have missed the company of my grandpadawan these past weeks. I am glad to see the wit of one Kenobi does not fall far from its family tree." He swept his cloak aside to resume his walk down the creche's halls. "Though I daresay it grows more palatable with age. Perhaps you would like to join me for lunch, Master Kenobi?"

Ben enacted a smile of Dooku's own ilk; polite, aristocratic, nanometers wider than genuine feeling would allow. "I would be honored, master."

"Good," replied the elder, bass voice resonate with sincere pleasure. "I know just the place."

Ben had never been in the habit of leaving the Temple district on social calls. On those very rare occasions, he'd usually found himself amok in the redlight district, consuming carcinogens and synthetic grease from a heaping plate whilst listening to Dexter Jettster's invaluable galactic gossip. Ben wondered absently if Yan Dooku had ever met Qui-Gon's old friend Dex. It was unlikely; the two gravitated toward completely opposite sectors of Coruscant's diverse community. Even so, he could not dispel the amusing image of Dex greeting Dooku with a besalisk's four-armed hug. Ben sniffed in order to keep himself from smiling. Smiling flippantly would hardly do in such a pristine environment as this.

"I've never been to this establishment," he said, glancing around himself at the finely appointed restaurant. The room was replete in fine materials, from the silverware to the tablecloths, the glass bar and plush carpeting. They loomed hundreds of floors into the Coruscanti atmosphere, surrounded by glass windows and a million-credit view. The dining hall was busy, but not noisy. Most of the patrons wore their wealth as extravagantly as they ate it.

Ben was used to servers and clientele staring at him in public; Jedi robes and lightsabers were always a point of conversation. But the waitstaff and patronage around them either did not care about their occupation or were too engrossed in themselves to notice. Such was the upper class.

"A pity," Dooku rumbled, swirling his stemmed glass of wine with an aficionado's grace. "The head chef is one of the best in the galaxy; trained on Orto. His broiled quekka has my particular commendations."

Ben raised his eyebrows slightly, and he took a sip of wine to avoid commenting. Dooku caught the unspoken opinion anyway.
"Moderation is the heart of virtue, or so we are told." He sighed. "And yet many Jedi would recommend abstinence instead." He eyed Ben keenly over his wine. "Fine things, in moderation, can make a fine Jedi."

"In moderation, of course," said Ben.

"Of course. And besides, it never hurts to brush shoulders with the rich and powerful; Force only knows what you may learn."

They took simultaneous sips of their wine. A waiter came to their table and took their orders; Ben's choice was, predictably, more humble than his companion's.

"At a state dinner, culinary taste is its own form of diplomacy," the elder advised. "If you wish to impress your committee next week, I would recommend a more adventurous palate."

Ben was surprised by the unsolicited advice and the knowledge it entailed; he felt more disappointed in himself for not having seen it coming. "You keep a close ear to the ground, Master Dooku."

"I have acquaintances in the Senate. The cabinet of Serenno and I are… close."

"Ah yes," Ben nodded. "Your second cousin, isn't it? I've met her." It was Dooku's turn to hide his surprise. "I admit I was thinking of your former colleagues on the High Council." He sipped at his wine. "Master Yoda must pass along some gossip to his former apprentice, must he?"

Dooku smiled. "You've done your homework, Master Kenobi. I'm flattered."

"I have my own acquaintances, as you know."

"Yes. Senator Organa has become something of an upstart, thanks to you." He peered at Ben askance; Ben gazed out of the tall, frameless windows to the Corsucanti skyline below. "I am surprised I'd never heard tell of your political graces before. You are quite adept for a novice."

Backhanded compliments felt much like a makashi parry - scathing, inviting a better offense. "I've been away a long time; my foray into politics is a new venture."

"It only begs the question, then," Dooku turned his full attention to Ben and waited for the younger man to reciprocate. "Why?"

Ben held Dooku's gaze while he formulated an answer. "I act as the Force guides me, Master," he said, smile deliberate and contrite.

Dooku scoffed politely. "As do we all, Master Kenobi."

Their food arrived. They ate in silence, but not without conversation. Every tilt of their forks, every angle of their arms and turn of their heads spoke volumes. It was a duel of propriety and nuance. Dooku took a long sip of his wine; Ben partook half as much. Dooku finished his plate; Ben left a last portion untouched.

"You are wary of me, Master Kenobi," Yan determined at their meal's close.

"I am wary of many people."

"Then you may have found your niche in politics," Dooku chuckled and wiped his mouth.

"And you?" Ben stepped into a careful fleche, "is your niche in politics, the council, or the crèche?"
Dooku nodded, conceding a hit well placed. "I have been a sentinel for the past many years,"

"A shadow, I thought."

That hit touched too far below belt. Dooku fixed Ben with a stern glare. "I have returned to
Coruscant by whim of the Force itself. What do next will be a new venture, as you say."

"Teaching the padawan of your padawan? Hmm," Ben sipped at his wine, well aware that he was
pressing his luck. "Yes, that's very novel."

Dooku ignored the barb and turned to gaze out the window, squinting down his nose at the
thousands of bustling lives tracing their intricate webs on the horizon. "Obi-Wan is a good student. It
would be remiss of me to ignore his potential. I do not mean to undermine Qui-Gon's efforts, only…
supplement them. I've found other motivations for staying at Temple."

Ben wanted to frown; he restrained himself. "Anakin," he guessed.

Dooku finished off his second glass of wine pensively, without the slightest cloud of intoxication in
his eyes. If anything, he looked more alert than ever. "He is powerful," he said. "Extremely so. I
could sense it when I brought him here, and it grows every time I see him. You've noticed it too,"
Dooku pointed out. Ben made no comment. "I intend to take him on as my apprentice."

Ben was not surprised, but it not stop his blood pressure from rising. "He's little more than an infant,"
he reminded with sharp intent.

"He won't be forever," said Dooku. "I am growing old, Ben. It's about time I invested my hard-
earned wisdom in the younger generation. It would be an honor to invest in such a gifted pupil as
Skywalker."

"Honor," Ben smiled, every crease in his face leaking with unspoken bile. "Some would say that it is
dangerously close to ambition."

Dooku smiled back at him. "Everything in moderation, Master Kenobi," he finished off his wine and
left the remainder of the bottle untouched. "Everything in moderation."

Ben tried to shake the feeling of Dooku's threats as he went about his business over the next several
days.

He had told them that he would meet them before they left, but Feemor and Aola still seemed
surprised to find Ben waiting for them at the loading dock.


"Where're they sending you off to now?" He asked the pair. Feemor answered for both of them.

"Corellia. Some infighting has arisen in the Selonian mine guilds. Apparently it's threatening some of
the subterranean settlements there. CorSec has asked for our assistance."

Ben nodded. "I see. A diplomatic squabble, then?"

"Aye. If all goes well. If not," Feemor shrugged and patted his saber. Ben nodded his understanding.

"I think you'll like Corellia," he smiled at Aola, who was more subdued than normal. She mustered a
grin.
"I've heard it's very nice," there was something irrepressibly noble about her mustering enthusiasm despite herself. "Even underground."

"It is. Attend to your Master, I have no doubt you'll learn much on this assignment. May the Force be with you, padawan." Ben bowed lightly to her. Sensing the dismissal, Aola bowed to him more deeply and scurried onto their ship.

Away from his apprentice, Feemor let out a massive sigh. "I'm surprised they're sending us back out on the field so soon," he confessed.

Ben nodded, recalling the lessons he'd learned after years on the council. "Busy teams learn to trust each other more easily. It's standard practice for young apprentices. Nothing too trying, of course." Ben watched his friend's conflicted expression with sympathy. "Did you tell the council about her visions?"

"I told Master Yoda. That she'd had visions, anyway. He said the specifics were for her alone to tell."

"They are. And what did he say?"

A sigh. "Much the same as you." He smiled, and shook his head. "So I suppose nothing has changed. I don't know if I'll be able to do right by her."

"You will," Ben put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Feemor was not quite as tall as Qui-Gon; it was easier to look him in the eye. "You know… assuming this Selonian business wraps up neatly enough, I think you might consider staying on Corellia for a while after."

"Oh?"

Ben's smile was impish. "It is a stunning environment, full of all sorts of nasty creatures. A romp with a sand panther or two ought to cheer Aola up immensely."

"I'm sorry, sand panther? What in the hels is a sand panther?"

"I'm sure your apprentice will be able to point them out to you on sight." Ben smiled, and openly laughed upon seeing Feemor's alarmed expression. "Safe travels, Master Gard. May the Force be with you."

Feemor sighed and turned to his ship. "And also with you, Kenobi." He jogged up the ramp.

"Enabling bastard."

Ben laughed out loud, and watched until the ship was out of the atmosphere.

Later in the week, Ben washed and combed his hair, brought out fresh robes, and made himself as presentable as a Jedi can hope to be for an appointment in the legislative district.

"Ah, Ben, good, you're here," Bail Organa was the first to spot him. He went over to shake the Jedi's hand in a businesslike gesture. Two other senators and their attendants stood nearby, and now turned from their conversations to the newcomer.

"Master Kenobi," Bail led Ben over to the group, "I'd like you to meet Garm Bel Iblis, Senator of Corellia, and Mon Mothma, Senator of Chandrila."

"I am glad the Jedi could send a representative, Master Kenobi," Mon Mothma said with an even, serene smile. "What an exciting prospect this must be for your people."

Ben graced her with a smile. "Indeed, Senator. I look forward to hearing more detailed reports concerning the ruins."

"You aren't here to support the coalition, then?" Asked senator Iblis, more to the point.

"I am here at Senator Organa's invitation, in place of my august superiors. But necessarily, I am duty bound to remain a neutral party. So no, I'm afraid not."

"No matter, lad," smiled Garm, who was by far the eldest in the group. "If nothing else, your presence will incentivize those neimoidian businessmen to play nice."

Ben frowned deeply. "Neimoidians?" He looked to Bail for explanation. The Alderaanian senator nodded.

"This dinner was arranged as a bipartisan negotiation; our Sentient Rights Coalition, representing the interests of Attichitcuk and the Wookies of Kashyyk, and the Neimoidian representatives, along with their allies, lobbying for the interests of the Trade Federation. Vice Chair Mas Amedda has graciously agreed to moderate."

"I see," Ben said, expression grave. Because he was a last minute addition to the party, he had not been thoroughly briefed on the dinner's agenda. Beyond Bail's cursory remarks and the report given to the High Council - which had been primarily concerned with the Jedi ruins – he hadn't known what to expect when he stepped in the door. Hearing the words 'Trade Federation' was not a possibility that had crossed his mind. Even so, he knew he would have to seize opportunity.

"Are you alright, Master Kenobi?"

"Hmm?" Ben looked up from his thoughts to find Bail looking at him with concern. "Yes, of course. My apologies. I have had limited dealings with Neimoidian cartels in the past, I was trying to recall their habits."

Garm snorted derisively. "Habits, if you can call them that. Vices, more like. Any insight you can give us would be appreciated, Master Jedi – all in neutrality, of course."

Bail chuckled. "I'm sure Ben could talk them into buying mud huts, if he had to."

Ben spared him a doubtful look. "You flatter my abilities, Senator."

"Senator Organa speaks very highly of you, Master Kenobi," Mon Mothma shared a look with Bail, and Ben wondered if he'd become something of an inside joke in the Senate. Regardless, both Bail and Mon remained smiling about it. "I'm sure we all look forward to seeing you in action."

Ben chuckled and put his hands out humbly. "As I said, senators, I'm here as an accessory, if anything. I am neutral in this debate." At least, on paper. But… *Trade Federation. Attichitcuk. Alaris Prime.* This was all beginning to seem very, very familiar. He'd read this before. He was sure of it. He'd read a report on it – no, a dossier.

"Senators, the Lord Speaker has arrived. We'd best get started," said an attendant. They began escorting the party in to the dining room.

*It had* been a dossier. An assignment? Yes, a mission, he remembered. A mission to Alaris Prime, after the Wookies had begun colonizing it. He and Qui-Gon had been meant to go, but he'd had to
stay home after coming down with a nasty virus. Qui-Gon had gone solo and returned with the most fascinating report of something having to do with the Trade Federation.

"Senators, Master Jedi," the Chagrian Vice Chair greeted the party. Ben allowed himself to be led to his seat, mind occupied with the task of excavating antiqued memories.

Of course it had all been so many years ago, years before Ben would've remembered to listen for that name, years before Naboo, and Qui-Gon's death. He hadn't been there, he'd only heard Qui-Gon's report, but he hadn't been listening, because he'd been jealous of Qui-Gon's health and ability to work, and he'd been too tired from the virus to focus on what his master had said, and the words Trade Federation would've put him to sleep anyway. Ben hated getting old, his memory would've been much better at Obi-Wan's age about now, but Force dammit, he surely had to have remembered something that would inform his tactics in the here and now, something to go off of-

"Excuse me," Said a polite voice from across the table, very distinctly not Neimoidian. "Master Jedi, I don't believe we've met."

Ben shook himself from his reverie to look up at the speaker. He froze.

"Ah," Bail intervened as Ben's closest acquaintance. "Master Kenobi, may I introduce Senator Sheev Palpatine of Naboo."

Numb from shock, Ben shook hands with the enemy; words failing, blood freezing.


"I'm well, Senator," Ben choked out eventually. Palpatine smiled at him, surprisingly genuine for a politician.

"Marvelous. We are privileged by your company, Master Kenobi. I heard about the ruins – how fascinating!"

Ben forced a smile. It was impossible to think that a Sith Lord could mask himself so expertly so that even a Jedi would see only his better graces; but here they were, seated across from each other, drinking the same wine, flanked on either side by the imminent founders of the Rebel Alliance, the Separatists, and the Empire itself. They were all smiling. All unsuspecting – except for Ben. And Palpatine? It was impossible to say.

Ben's shields had slammed into place at the first provocation of Palpatine's presence, but he now refortified them with adamantine buttresses, his entire mind screaming in pure shock. He took as many calming breaths as he had to in order to quiet the pounding of his own heart. With herculean effort, he redirected his attentions from his mortal enemy to the dainty Coruscanti appetizers being dished out by the waitstaff. It was by the Force and the Force alone that his hands did not shake as he took a bite.

"I appreciate the committee's willingness to meet this evening," said Mas Amedda from the head of the table "Chancellor Valorum tells me that this matter has encountered not a few delays. He will be gratified to hear of its resolution, as I'm sure we all will." The seven senators present nodded at each other, eyes shifting with passive aggression. "And we are honored by a representative of the Jedi Order," Mas nodded at Ben, sitting across from Palpatine, beside Gram Iblis. Ben bowed from his seat. "As moderator, I must ask, Master Kenobi, if the Order bears any sympathies for either half of this committee?"

All eyes on him. Ben set aside his flatware with practiced gentility. "The Jedi Order sympathizes
with keeping the peace, Lord Speaker," which in this case meant locking out Palpatine and his cronies from whatever business they thought they had – not that he could say that. "I am here primarily to discuss reports of temple ruins. I may offer a weighted opinion if it upholds the peace, but not before."

"Very well, Master." The senators gave him approving nods – Bail even flashed a smile. The senator from Neimoidia – Lott Dod, Ben recalled, looked annoyed. Mas shuffled through his notes and took a drink. Silverware and porcelain clinked sociably as appetizers and small talk passed around the table. This culinary buffer allowed the senators to silently establish their insecurities and gambits. Palpatine consumed his entire helping. Ben, not wanting to bare himself to the Emperor as he had to Dooku, cleared his plate in an assured fashion. It did not escape his notice that Dod hardly touched his plate.

After the waiters reappeared to collect the first course dishes, Mas Amedda raised his tall head and cleared his throat. "We shall start the discussion beginning chronologically. Since the petition from Kashyyk predates this committee, I shall ask Senator Mothma, as the leader of the Sentient Rights Coalition, to remind us of the motion put forward by Attichitcuk on behalf of his people to colonize the moon, Alaris Prime."

Mon took a calm sip from her glass and sat up straight, shoulders low and steady. "Thank you, Lord Speaker. Three years ago, the Wookies of Kashyyk, led by Chieftain Attichitcuk and his son, Chewbacca, petitioned the Galactic Senate for colonization rights on the moon of Alaris Prime. Currently uninhabited by sentient life, this moon was recently rediscovered by chance by a party from Kashyyk. The environment of Alaris Prime is exceptionally similar to that of Kashyyk, particularly in its vegetation. The Wookies, pressed for viable farmlands on their homeworld, wish to Colonize this nearby moon as an agricultural venture. Without it, their civilization may be crippled by a nonnegotiable ecology within the next century.

"Alaris Prime is in many ways a godsend to the Wookies, who have long been seeking out new farmland near Kashyyk. Because this moon has not been claimed as sovereign territory by any Republic world, and is currently uninhabited by sentient life, the Sentient Rights Coalition puts forward a motion to grant Attichitcuk's petition and allow the Wookies full colonization rights effective immediately."

Bail and Garm nodded their agreement. Their opponents sipped their drinks quietly. Mas Amedda nodded. "Thank you, Senator Mothma. Senator Dod, if you would enlighten us on the bid of the Trade Federation?"

"Of course, Lord Speaker," the Neimoidian said in halted basic. He stood to his feet at the table; a tactless move that made even Palpatine raise his eyebrows. The reptilian continued anyway:

"The Trade Federation contests the Wookie's claim to the moon called Alaris Prime on the grounds of Republic interest. In addition to the flora that Senator Mothma pointed out, this moon is home to an infestation of Gundarks. It is not fit for sentient life. If the Wookies attempt to colonize this moon, they will call on the Senate to grant them resources and assistance to overcome the fauna. This will be an expensive venture for all Republic worlds; why punish the taxpaying citizens of the Republic for sake of the Wookie's farms?"

"The Trade Federation offers an alternative to this committee. The Federation has grown a great deal over the past century. We have expanded our services across the galaxy, and provide reliable commerce to more than a thousand systems. Unlike the Wookies, our interests on Alaris Prime do not necessitate outside resources. We seek room for warehouses, not farms. Our goods and our droids are more suited to the inhospitable environment of the jungle and its gundarks. It will cost the
Senate less and will benefit the whole Republic, not just one system."

"Thank you, Senator Dod," the Vice Chair nodded. The two senators on either side of Dod – Ben did not know their names, though he did recognize them as representatives from Caarimon and Filordis, two major players in the Federation Directive, if he recalled – seemed satisfied by their colleague's pitch. Palpatine reserved any outward judgment beyond a politic smile.

"And finally, if you would, Master Kenobi, remind us of the Jedi's interest in Alaris Prime."

"Of course, Lord speaker." He smiled up at the committee. "It is quite simple, I will not beleaguer the point. Although Alaris Prime was recently re-discovered, initial geographic scans indicate that it was once home to a Jedi temple. Our archaeologists and archivist-counselors have interests in examining these ruins, in order to collect data and, should the Council deem it amenable, establish an outpost there. I should emphasize that the Order's stake in this motion is independent of Attichitcuk's petition," though Ben's stake was hardly that, "but the High Jedi Council asks both parties to consider our presence in their plans moving forward. I believe – and correct me if I am wrong, Lord Speaker – Chancellor Valorum has already approved a tentative schedule for excavation for the ruins in question."

Mas nodded. "Indeed he has, Master. Is that all?"

Ben bowed. "It is, sir."

"Thank you," the Vice Chair nodded. A door opened, and the second course parade filed into the room. The Chagrian smiled at his table. "Senators, discuss at your leisure."

Polite smiles were the currency of the moment as plates went about the room. Ben watched as a spectator, letting his Force signature blend with the background. Bail and Mon Mothma sat in a harmony of gold, determined and confident. Garm was wrapped in a pensive, edgy green as he eyed the Neimoidian senator, whose uncertain purple told Ben that the a Jedi's presence was having the desired effect on the sniveling trader. His associates on either side glanced hither and thither with suspicious shades of blue. On the end of the table was Mas himself, a neutral sort of brown. Ripples of muddy emotion and unspoken vice floated about the room in currents that only politicians could stir. It was a cacophony to watch in the plane of the Force, and it was only through years of experience that Ben could decipher the chaos.

Even so, Ben's sharp eye very nearly missed the most important piece of the puzzle. Across Ben was Palpatine, sitting quietly, unobtrusive and utterly colorless in the Force. He was a vacuum of feeling, an absence of sentiment. He was the exact opposite of what a Sith ought to look like in the Force. He was a non-entity - a lacuna so thick, so opaque that Ben could've easily missed it, had he not known to look for what wasn't there.

It was no wonder he'd won last time, Ben thought. The Jedi stewed, nervous and angry and unable to say anything about either.

"Are you quite alright, Master Jedi?" Palpatine asked kindly, eyeing Ben when his brows drew too close together. Ben jolted up form his musings, and made himself smile. "Yes of course, Senator," He said reactionarily, which at least made Palpatine smile and look away. Ben turned his focus to the lively discussion over dinner.

"The Wookies are hardier than you give them credit for, Senator Dod," Garm was saying. "I realize that Neimoidians may balk at an infestation of gundarks, but having met with Attichitcuk and his clan, I daresay they will see as a challenge."
"A challenge that will invite undue causalities," said the Filordian senator called Tasso. "If your coalition is truly invested in the rights of sentients, how do you conscience the inevitable slaughter of Wookies that awaits them on Alaris Prime?"

"Until you are able to calculate a arguable disadvantage between a clan of heavily armed and experienced Wookies against a hoard of gundarks, I do not believe the Trade Federation's argument holds merit," Bail cut in. "A chip of doubt in a plan of steel does not place droids and warehouses pre-eminent over sentient populations."

"Here here," Garm raised his glass.

The representative of Caarimon spoke up. "The Federation would clear the land more quickly for higher efficiency. The Wookies are hardly a sociable people; would you allow the Senate to sink their money into a venture doomed to benefit only one system?"

"What you suggest is discrimination, Senator Daklan," Garm reminded. "One might argue that the Federations' interests are hardly more diversified than the Wookies."

Uproar. Garm was the spearhead of the coalition, though Bail had been swept into the fray as much. All three Federation senators spoke over one another, trying to swipe a rebuttal across the table. Jedi and Sith quietly watched from the end of the table.

The lone female in the room, Mon Mothma sighed and sank back into her seat, eyeing the landscape over the rim of her wine glass. She shared a look with Mas Amedda, who nodded at her. She took up a fork and tapped it on her glass for attention. "Gentlemen," she announced, slowly bringing the uproar to a stall. "Our tempers get the better of us. Perhaps a constitutional before third course would do us well." She eyed Garm in particular, who shrunk back into his seat with pointed dignity.

"Well said, Senator," Ben put in helpfully. The table reluctantly agreed.

In the hall, Ben sidled up to Bail without prompting.

"What stake does Naboo have in this Federation scheme?" He demanded, perhaps too harsh on the senator, who had no gift of foreknowledge.

"I admit my confusion over that as well," Bail admitted in an aside. "I inquired at their offices earlier this week; apparently the southern hemisphere of Naboo shares a ecology similar to that of Alaris Prime; trade and agricultural interests, you see. They see a future of trade and exchange with the Federation, not the Wookies." Bail allowed himself a snort of humor. "I can't say I blame them in that respect. Wookies can be difficult if you don't know them well already."

Ben stuck to business; Palpatine. "Naboo's southern hemisphere is ruled by the Gunguns, I thought," he said, crossing his arms. "Why not let them handle their own agricultural affairs? Why does Theed need to be involved?"

"The Gunguns don't have a seat on the Senate," Bail told him, as if this should've been common knowledge. "Theed speaks for the entire globe."

Ben sighed heavily through his nose. "Convenient for him."

"For who?"

"For them, I mean."

Bail watched the Jedi chew on his lip and frown for a moment longer. Glancing around them to see
that no one was watching he asked, "What is it, Ben?"

Ben was not sure how much he could tell Bail. He was not sure how much he should tell Bail. He was especially not sure of what Bail would believe even if he were told. "Something is off about Senator Palpatine," he warned, shaking his head. "It can't be that simple. Naboo is on the opposite side of the Core from Alaris Prime. If they're interested in trade… why now? Why here? Their sector neighbors are a better bet, in biology as well as proximity and cost." Ben frowned and shook his head. "There's more to it. There has to be." He pursed his lips. "I don't trust him."

Bail laughed. "He's a politician, Ben, what do you expect?"

Ben did not laugh with him. Bail's smile faded. "Well," he ventured, "if the coalition can secure a grant for Attichitcuk and Chewbacca, we won't have to worry about it at all."

"Not for a while, at least," Ben muttered under his breath. Bail heard him, but did not understand what he meant. The senator looked up when a protocol droid appeared to inform them that the dinner party was reassembling. "I realize the Jedi Order must remain impartial, Ben," Bail said as he turned back toward the dining hall. "But I wouldn't complain if you… bent the rules a bit."

Ben raised one eyebrow at him. "I'm surprised at you, Bail." Bail smiled mischievously.

"You forget how me met, Master Kenobi. I waited for nine months to hear back from a knight under censure. Do you really think I'm above all of your tricks?"

Ben smiled despite himself. "You're a shrewd wit, Organa."

"I used to be honorable, before I met you."

"Incorrigible," Ben accused, as they reached the dining room. "I act as the Force guides me, Senator, I can do no other."

"That sounds like a cop-out to me."

As they shuffled to their seats, Ben leaned over and whispered, "Just drink your wine and look diplomatic, or isn't that what you do all day?"

Bail smiled and said nothing. He did, however, take a very deliberate drink just as his eyes passed over Ben. The Jedi refused to roll his eyes.

Mas Amedda called the table to order. The third course filed in, and the politicians went to work.

Ben waited until the opportune moment to cast his gambit. It was a not a Jedi's gambit. It was a negotiator's gambit. Happily, Ben knew how to bear that mantle better than anyone.

Discussion had worn past dessert, and things were at a standstill. So dire was the stalemate that Mas Amedda himself had resorted to casting his opinion, shaded slightly in favor of the Wookies – balanced on the technicalities of precedence and due process, of course. It was at this slight advantage that Ben cast his pebble of influence. Any graduate of Master Yoda's absurd balance exercises could've told you that a single gram could upset the balance of a mountain.

"Senators, Lord Speaker," Ben glanced about the table, even to Senator Palpatine, who had been unexpectedly quiet this whole time, "If I may. At the outset of this dinner – which has been most enjoyable, by the way – I reserved the right to assist in negotiations if necessary. With leave of the Speaker, I will do just that."
Mas nodded his assent; all seven senators eyed him, some more confidently than others. They were not in a position to refuse his advice.

"On the letter of the law, I must agree with Lord Amedda, the Wookies have a legal right to Alaris Prime that precedes that of the Federation. Furthermore, the ruling members of the Jedi Order have a longstanding relationship with Attichitcul and his clan on Kashyyk. Should the need arise, the Jedi could easily assist the Wookies in their colonization efforts, minimizing the damage dealt to Senatorial funds." Bail and the coalition members seemed pleased to hear this. The Federation representatives were shifting angrily in their seats. Even Palpatine clenched his jaw. Ben waited until they were stewing so his synthesis would have the desired effect.

"That being so, I believe we can all agree that the Federation has a solid claim to this moon despite the Wookies' petition. I would argue that it is in the Federation's best interests to allow the Wookies opportunity to clear the land first." He addressed Dod and his assembly directly "If the Federation wishes to negotiate cohabitation of the moon with the Wookies at a later date, that is their business. Any arrangements made form such negotiations would be far more streamlined that the rough exploratory sketches made here." He let that sink in, and sat back in his seat.

"I cannot direct the verdict of this committee, senators. I merely suggest diplomacy and civility."

"Well said, Master Jedi," said Palpatine. His genuinely penitent tone made Ben turn and stare. He wished, he ached for the man to show his true colors. But such was the guise of a monster; invisible, even to those who knew him for what he was.

"Thank you, Master Kenobi," Mas Amedda nodded. "With those wise words, I think we may conclude our evening. Senators – Master." The Vice Chair rose, and his company rose with him. "Stay and discuss if you like, but the record on this evening is closed. A good evening to you all."

They bowed as one.

Ben dismissed himself straightaway after a brief word with Bail. However, Plapatine managed to catch him before he was entirely gone.

"It was good to meet you, Master Jedi."

The effort that Ben put behind his smile was worthy of knighthood. "As with you, Senator. Good evening to you." He bowed and made his escape.

The others hung back for the ulterior conversations of career politicians.

At length, Sheev Palpatine approached his Alderaanian colleague. "Senator Organa," His smile was warm and soft, typical of a good-hearted old man. "Am I to understand that you found this Jedi for our negotiations?"

"Ah, yes, Senator. Master Kenobi and I are old acquaintances."

"He's quite the negotiator. Wherever did you find him?"

"On Herdessa, actually, during the Rylothian refugee crises several years ago."

"Is that so?" Palpatine seemed impressed. "I remember there were several Jedi involved in that episode."

"Yes," Bail nodded. "None moreso than Master Kenobi. Were it not for him, I doubt that we would have ratified the bill at all. He did a great service for us that day – us and the refugees."
"Remarkable," Sheev chuckled appreciatively. "It is so rare to find a Jedi so gifted in the realms of politics," He shifted his gaze ever so slightly to look at the doorway through which Ben had left. Bail would've seen empty space; Palpatine saw planes of existence that normal men could not. He drew careful notes on the signatures he saw. "I appreciate his presence here," he said, quietly, still staring.

"As do I, senator. If you'll excuse me."

"Of course. Good night, Senator."

"Good night."

Palpatine remained staring out the doorway for moments more. "Kenobi," he repeated to himself. "Most interesting." He smiled to himself, a real smile, not warm or soft. He chuckled and turned back to his colleagues, mask falling back into place.

The following week, Bail called Ben to excitedly announce that the coalition's efforts had been rewarded; Palpatine had announced his party's agreement to the Coalition's terms. Attichitcuk and his son would be granted their petition within the twomonth.

"Agreement?" Ben had asked. "Palpatine? But surely he has the least stock in all of this. Why did he declare the motion?"

Bail had sighed. "I know you distrust him, Ben, but we must count this as a victory. I will keep an eye on him, I promise. But I will not complain when opponents see reason."

Reason was not what Ben would call it. He wondered what loophole Palpatine had sniffed out for himself, what rock he'd found to hide under. Was he abandoning Alaris Prime? Washing his hands of the Trade Federation's problems? Avoiding this mess landing on Valorum's desk? Despite these dark wonderings, Ben had saved face and congratulated his friend. There was nothing to do about it at present. He had to do what he had been doing for months; watch and wait.

He reoccupied himself with reviewing Senator Palpatine's career over the next several months. He learned little that he hadn't known before, but he kept at it anyway. There was an itch under his skin that he could not scratch; the need to finish things, the need to change things. Time did not move fast enough.

And yet, it moved anyway, slower than a drunken snail. Four months after the dinner and Ben's fateful meeting with Palpatine, Feemor and Aola returned to Coruscant.

"I cannot tell you how much I look forward to sleeping on my own bed," Feemor told his friend from where he was stuck in Coruscanti rush hour traffic.

Ben tsked at him, going to sit on his meditation cushion by the window. "A homebody. Frivolous comforts. You ought to be ashamed, Master Gard."

"Says the man schmoozing rich politicians every day. I've been roughing it in the mountains for the past four months, you can stuff your fancy cocktails where the stars don't shine." Ben laughed. "Anyway, I heard about your stint with the Alaris Prime negotiations – congrats on that."

Ben shrugged. "There's no need. We come to serve, after all."

"You Kenobis are so humble," Feemor scoffed. "Speaking of, where's Obi-Wan and his master these days? I've missed their incessant bickering."
Ben wasn't sure how to say it; of course he wasn't surprised, but... "They're still away," He said plainly. "Mandalore's crisis has been extended.

Silence. "...oh," said Feemor at last. His sigh was drawn out and adread. "Aola will be disappointed," he said quietly. Ben frowned.

"How is she?"

Feemor's voice suddenly sounded just as tired as he claimed to be. "She was doing well. Our mission, long as it was, went well, we had time to explore, meditate. She's grown a lot over the past months, physically and mentally. But..."

"But?"

"Our last night on Corellia, she had that dream again." Ben closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "She was hoping to speak with Obi-Wan about it. Someone closer her age, you understand."

"Yes," said Ben, because he knew the feeling exactly. "I'm so sorry. Was it the same as before?"

"Not exactly," Feemor said, a tremor of real fear in his voice. "He no longer has a red lightsaber, it seems. He has two."

Ben's breath hitched in his throat, but he would not allow it to stay. "I see," he said. Feemor did not reply. There was nothing more to say over a comm. "You both ought to come over for tea, when you're feeling up to it." He paused. "Well, caf for you. I've some jeru tea for Aola."

The slightest sound of relief. "I'm sure she'd like that. ...I ought to go, Ben. We're finally moving."

"Very well. Force be with you both."

"And with you, little brother."

Ben put down his comm, knelt on his cushion, stared out the window, and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

As the sun dipped down and the change he so longed for came at him one miniscule second at time, he sighed, ducked his head, and fell into meditation. He begged the Force to show him how to act. As it had for so many, many years, it asked him to wait.

He could do no other.
Chapter Notes

We interrupt your scheduled programming to bring you a special edition of angst.


One year, two months, and five days after they left for Mandalore, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon returned to the Jedi temple.

Their homecoming was, in the grand scheme of things, a small annotation on the face of their combined history, destined to be remembered only in the quiet moments of life after the passing of years dampened the immediacy of the Here and Now. But that was the trouble with the present; it was here and now, pressing, merciless, raw and unaided by the buffer of retrospection. Time was the antidote, but its medicinal drip came at an agonizing, quotidian pace. Tick. Tick. Tick. Tock.

"Qui-Gon," Ben's surprise made him look like a boy again. It was past dark, and even on the neversleeping capital, the halls of the Jedi Temple were quiet and still. Qui-Gon's robes were new and creased from the laundry press, his hair still damp from a shower. Dark circles framed his eyes. He smiled, weakly.

Ben recovered and stepped aside. "Please, come in."

They sat in silence. Qui-Gon was too tired to make tea or ask for it.

"You're back," Ben observed at length.

Qui-Gon raised his eyebrows. "It took long enough." He sank into Ben's sofa in a manner suggesting he had not seen real furniture in a while. He eyed Ben. "I suppose that does not surprise you."

Ben was unsure how to answer, so he looked at his folded hands. He wished there had been a better path to arrive at this point. "How is he?" He asked, head ducked.

Qui-Gon drew in a long breath and let it out at the same pace. "You asked me to be patient with him. I've done all that I can - the rest is with the Force."

Ben nodded. After several long moments, he said: "I hope you do not blame me for allowing it to happen the same way twice."

Qui-Gon smiled, but it did not reach his eyes. "I do not. I cannot say the same for my apprentice."

Ben had only ever done as he must; even when it felt like cruelty. "Some of the most valuable lessons are the hardest to endure." He glanced up at his master, hesitant for both himself and for Obi-Wan. "He won't tell you, but I will: thank you, for all that you said and did."

Qui-Gon seemed surprised. "All of it?" He chuckled incredulously. He gazed at the wall, pulling out exhibits of memory. "I smacked him several times, you know. Don't know if that's something you'd remember."

"Oh, it is."
"Embarrassed him. Sometimes on purpose. Sometimes in… compromising instances."

Ben cleared his throat, going slightly red in the face. "Yes. Well." An awkward beat. "But you also told him what he most needed to hear. I still remember it."

"Oh?"

Ben looked up, referencing the imparted wisdom from the last year of decades ago. "'The Code is not perfect, but allegiance to imperfect understanding is the price we pay for efficacy in our calling.'"

Qui-Gon was touched. "You make it sound far more eloquent than I," he complimented. "I can only hope Obi-Wan shares your affection for it. Unfortunately, I am not sure if your holocron made it easier or harder a truth for him to swallow."

"Hmm." Ben had to admit; he had not considered the potentially negative ramifications of it in great detail. "I had hoped it would help him see it… see her from a healthier point of view. But it's been so long since I was his age." He frowned, the thought just now hitting home that he could have made this all much harder for his younger self. "Perhaps I misjudged."

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon shrugged, "Perhaps not. He will overcome. Eventually."

"Mmm." Ben's brow remained drawn in taught lines, uncertain shades of regret casting shadows and creases on an otherwise young face.

Qui-Gon's sudden chuckle brightened the room. "I must hand it to you," He said with a smile, "You certainly know how to pick them."

Drawn from his thoughts, Ben looked up at him, bewildered. "How do you mean?"

The master laughed again, eyeing his former pupil with amusement. "I'd never met a woman who could make you shut up like that – who could debate you on ideology and win." He snorted softly at the memory. "Of course you'd fall for her."

Ben laughed with him, freed from the awkwardness of years past. "What can I say?" He shrugged, cheeks only slightly pink, "I have a type."

Qui-Gon shook his head, still smiling. "And good taste. I am glad to have met Satine, this whole mess aside. She's a remarkable person – I have no doubt she will go on to do great things."

Ben was gratified to hear him say it. "She will," he assured, tone soft with affection and pride.

Qui-Gon stretched out his legs, propping up his feet on the low tea table. He nearly knocked over a pair of potted plants as he did. "Force," he caught himself just in time, "are these mine?"

"Ah, yes, I'd nearly forgotten."

The elder man stroked the leaves and branches with a hint of sadness in his eyes. "I hardly recognized them."

"A year is a long time to grow."

"It is." Qui-Gon leaned back into the couch and began picking at his beard. Ben recognized it as a rare but telling tick of stress.

"Qui-Gon, you ought to go rest," he said. "They'll still be here tomorrow."
Qui-Gon looked up. "Of course." His hand faltered suddenly, as if he'd only just now realized that it had been fiddling at his chin. "Yes, of course." After a brief hesitation, he pressed his hands against his knees and stood, joints popping. Ben stood with him, offering a small smile.

"Thank you for looking after them," he said. Ben crossed over to the other man for a fond embrace.

"It's good to have you back, Master."

Warm reciprocation floated between them. "You as well, my friend."

Ben escorted him to the door and saw him out. "If you need me to talk with Obi-Wan, just let me know."

Qui-Gon paused at the door, casting an uncertain look back at the elder Kenobi. "I'm not sure that would be wise. Not now. The time for patience has not quite passed." He ticked an eyebrow in chagrinned apology. "He's stubborn that way."

"So am I."

"Color me shocked." They both chuckled, though there was little feeling behind it. "I'll let you know. He needs more time."

"I understand," Ben shuffled back awkwardly. "Good night, then, master."

"Good night."

Few people at the Temple actually saw Obi-Wan until he showed up for saber practice days later. Feemor and Aola happened to be training at the time, and Aola very nearly took off a lekku when she dropped her saber in shock and bolted for her fellow apprentice.

"Obi!" she launched.

Obi-Wan was momentarily nonplussed, but when his brain processed who it was charging at him and the pure joy rolling off of her, his face split into a grin. He attempted to say hello, but she hit him at full-speed and knocked the air out of his lungs as he caught her. She was taller than when he'd left. With her arms about his neck her toes still touched the ground, an improvement from last year. He smiled.

"Missed you too, Aola," he said. She hugged him tighter.

Unrushed footsteps came to stand near them. "Aola, you can't just hug someone in the middle of a fight. If this were a real skirmish-"

"But it's Obi-Wan," she protested. Face still pressed against Obi-Wan's shoulder, she couldn't see Feemor's grin. Obi-Wan could. He gave a little wave with the portion of his arm that he could still move behind Aola's vice grip.

"Hello, Master Gard."

Feemor smiled at him and nodded. "Good to have you back, lad."

Obi-Wan's face darkened with sadness for a split second, but he nodded back. "Yes, it's good to be back," he said, hollowly. Aola pulled away from him, beaming. Obi-Wan mustered a smile for her, but only Feemor saw the veneer for what it was.
"Alright, back to work," the master kicked at her heels. "Less hugging, more sabering." His eyes lingered on Obi-Wan for a moment longer, wondering what could've happened over the course of a year. A lot, he supposed.

"Obi-Wan," called a new voice – Qui-Gon, who'd just arrived in the dojo. "Ready?"

Obi-Wan's saber was out in a flash, eyes and shoulders itching for a fight. "Of course, Master."

Obi-Wan's year on Mandalore had given him dark circles under his eyes, new wrinkles in his brow, and stolen about fifteen pounds from his already lanky frame. But his fighting style emerged from the fray more vicious than ever, with all the fire of his initiate days and ten times the skill.

Qui-Gon would only fight him in small bouts before reprimanding him for his aggression and sending him to practice serene katas. It drove Obi-Wan to madness. After their reports were filed and the team transitioned back into Temple life, the web of hairline fractures that their mission had wrought in their relationship began to show under the stress. They seldom smiled. Their bickering turned sour. Once in the privacy of their apartments, they'd devolved into a series of arguments – full blown, vicious arguments – that were never fully resolved. Obi-Wan was under discipline most days. They were not a broken team; they were, however, a very strained team. They avoided each other when they could.

Dooku took it as an opportunity to snatch his grandpadawan aside and spend nearly every free moment schooling him in makashi. It was a brutal, magnificent spectacle.

Their duals usually entailed Obi-Wan getting his ass handed to him while Dooku walked away hardly winded. Even so, Obi-Wan always came back for more, charging blindly into a melee without looking both ways, running through the motions on nothing but muscle memory, dulled wits, and pent up frustration.

Ben sometimes caught the tail end of a duel – if you could call it that – after one of his junior saber classes. It had been a little over a week since their return, but he still hadn't spoken to Obi-Wan. Once in a while, Obi-Wan would do a double take to see his older self watching the fight, but he would always look away, pretending he hadn't seen. Ben knew that the extended mission had put Obi-Wan one step closer to understanding who Ben was, and why, but Obi-Wan didn't see it that way. In time, perhaps. For now, they could only look at each other from across a vast chasm of breached trust.

Patience, Qui-Gon had said. Hell, Ben had been the one to tell Qui-Gon to have patience. He hadn't predicted that it would be so relevant for himself as well.

It was actually quite shocking to see how gracefully Dooku triaged the situation. Obi-Wan was angry, moody, and unstructured. His stint in Mandalore had seen him living on the run in a warzone for an entire year. His body had paid a price as much as his mind. This, mixed with Satine's trials on his heart, turned him into a chemical, emotional bomb waiting to explode. No one, not even Qui-Gon, knew quite how to handle him.

Enter Dooku. The man was unflappable. He assessed Obi-Wan's situation at a glance, grabbed him by the proverbial ear, and tossed him into the dojo to throw his tantrums and earn a whipping at the same time. Exhausted, confounded, and too weary of his own apprentice to say anything, Qui-Gon let it happen with only cursory complaints.

However, Ben doubted that it was doing any good, and confronted Dooku on the point after a particularly ruthless show that saw Obi-Wan smearing bacta on his chest for a week.
"You oughtn't goad his anger," Ben reprimanded his elder in the hall outside of the dojo. Dooku continued walking, prompting Ben to jog to catch up.

"Goad? I hardly need goad him, Ben. He's done that himself."


"Hate may be the enemy, but anger is not the problem. So he's angry – let him be. He's been careless with his affections, is paying is paying the price, and is furious about it. But if he can't walk straight and he's too tired to move, he won't act on his anger." Dooku paused his step to turn and look at Ben, arms crossed. "You're close with him, Ben, aren't you?"

"Close enough."

"Then tell me; since I've begun goading him, has he been sleeping any better?"

Ben was speechless. "I…" he began, and thought about it. "I suppose… he's been sleeping more.

"As I say," Dooku tipped his head, reminding Ben that despite all his suspicions and distrust, Dooku had been training headstrong apprentices since long before he'd been born. "He's a nineteen year old boy. He needs time – but he also needs a good whipping to keep docile for that long." Dooku swept away, leaving Ben to ponder this wisdom. "Let him work himself to shreds, then he can meditate on how childish he's been."

Ben opened his mouth to object, but shut it with a snap. The point was aptly made.

Dooku was not a visionary – but he was, apparently, a prophet. It was a matter of weeks before Obi-Wan wore himself to exhaustion. Between dueling and katas and a workout routine designed to help him regain the weight he'd lost on Mandalore, Obi-Wan pushed his body as far as it would go and farther. And then, in the middle of a spar with Qui-Gon, he crashed. He fell to his knees, and then the floor, surrendered, and did not attempt to rise for nearly fifteen minutes.

Unfortunately, the slump that followed did not have the contrite flavor that Dooku had anticipated. Anger had melted away, but it was not followed by any kind of recovery. Depression was the only word for it – deep depression. Obi-Wan could not fight, so he retreated instead. The arguments with his master became silent stares and cold shoulders. The tantrums in the dojo became jerky, slow katas performed in solitude. He withdrew even from his friends, unable to speak of what he'd lost and why it was so important.

"I did not expect this," Dooku confided in Ben one afternoon after Obi-Wan failed to show up for saber practice. His voice was unexpectedly soft, devoid of its usual highbrow acerbity. Ben watched his expression very carefully as he asked,

"Expect what?"

Dooku's jawline tensed into a sharp line of annoyance, but there was something unmistakably sympathetic in his eyes. "A Trial," he said, and left the dojo.

Obi-Wan had been through many trials in his life, but none quite like this one. Ben recognized the stage of grief from his own experience, but was unsure of how to address it. He and Obi-Wan still hadn't spoken since the latter's return.

As it so often did, the Force intervened. As he so often did, Ben found himself – and his younger self – in level B-459.
Ben found Obi-Wan sitting alone, perched atop the high bannister of an old balcony. There did not appear to be any accessible stairs, so Ben leaped and climbed his way up to join the apprentice. He took his time settling into a seat beside the boy.

"Hello," Ben said at last. The word echoed off the chamber walls and faded into the raging quiet. Obi-Wan only glanced at him because there was nothing else to glance at.

"Hi," he said, too quiet to make an echo. The inches between them were like a chasm.

"Obi-Wan… I'm so sorry."

"Don't," Obi-Wan snapped, glaring out of the corner of his eye. His upper lip twitched, a snarl itching to make itself known. The Force boiled with emerging anger. "Just… don't."

Ben bit his lip. There was an absurd kind of terror in being spruned by yourself without knowing the exact reasons behind it. He was struck by the thought, ever more common in his daily introspections, that Obi-Wan was a very different man than he'd been.

"Is there anything I can say?"

"Apparently not," Obi-Wan shot back, the harsh edges of his words ringing off ancient stone. "Not now, anyway. I suppose it would've killed you to have said something last year."

"You wished I had warned you about all that waited for you on Mandalore."

"I could've used a warning."

"Why?"

"Why?" Obi-Wan turned to face the older man, face aghast. "Why do you think? So I could've braced myself, prepared or, or, or… done something." His hands were clenching into fists, which he shoved into his lap to restrain himself. "This is all your fault."

Ben absorbed this in chagrined silence. I blame you. There was real venom there. He eyed his younger self keenly. "And what would you have done?"

"Well there's know way to know now, is there? No thanks to you. I just know that if I could go back, and do it differently…" he floundered, unable to articulate what was in his heart. "And you did. But you didn't."

"I did. I gave you that holocron."

Obi-Wan squinted at him, disgusted. "What?"

"I made sure you had it with you on the trip."

"You?" He spat. "But… you… we talked about that – we talked on the kriffing ship, and you didn't say a damned bloody thing about it!"

A torrent of anger swirled about them, but Ben remained at the eye of the storm. "I said that the Force works in mysterious ways. It was all the help I could offer you."

"Bastard," Obi-Wan launched a fist straight at Ben's jaw. Ben caught it one-handed before it could hit. Upon impact, Obi-Wan's abused shoulder seized and he cried out in pain, drawing back to cradle his aching body and stretch his arm.
Ben regarded him with an unfeeling gaze. "You should have that looked at."

Obi-Wan glared at him.

With his opponent incapacitated and held in captive attention, Ben decided to appeal to the one facet of Obi-Wan Kenobi's mind that he knew would persist even in his anger: rhetoric.

"Let us suppose," began the Negotiator, "for the sake of argument, that I did warn you about Mandalore and Satine. Let us even suppose that you would have believed me. That I told you every gory, wonderful, horrible detail of that assignment and gave you ample time to prepare a strategy for coming out of it unscathed. What would you have done differently?"

"I would've avoided her," Obi-Wan said immediately.

"Which you would have done out of fear – and ended up suffering more than you are now."

This logic blindsided the padawan's argument, but Obi-Wan remained determined to corroborate what was in his heart. "Well then maybe I would've forgotten to Code altogether and left," he said.

"Left the Jedi Order?" Ben deadpanned.

Obi-Wan shrugged with deliberate nonchalance, hiding the tenderness of his right shoulder. "There's already one of me here, isn't there? They don't need me."

"That's not true, and you know it. Besides," Ben watched him for a moment. "You and I both know you could conscience leaving, Ben."

Obi-Wan's jaw tensed as hard as a rock, and if his shoulder were not spasming in pain, he would've thrown another punch. "Do not call me that," he hissed.

Ben said nothing for a moment, taking the time to draw up his knees and assume a serene reflection of Obi-Wan's brooding pose. "She did," he said. Obi-Wan looked away, holding his arms close to restrain his anger. "I chose to go by the name years ago, because it reminded me of happier times. One day you will look back on this similarly."

Obi-Wan said nothing, but the silent I don't believe you did not need translation. The Force had shifted slightly, fading from anger into confusion and hurt. Ben took it as a cue to press on, more softly this time:

"You do not have to stop loving her, Obi-Wan. You do, however, have to let her go."

"What does that even mean?" The apprentice frowned at him in frustration. Ben had no doubt that Qui-Gon had told him something similar, but if memory served, it had been little comfort. As an old man, Ben could see the truth in it; but the problem with truth was that it often hurt, and in that hurt, offered no immediate help.

He'd attempted to help his younger self with the Code that he hadn't known on Mandalore. It seemed insignificant in light of Obi-Wan's tumultuous state, but perhaps it would provide a seed of wisdom that, when the storm had passed, would grow into something more.

"Emotion, yet peace. Passion, yet serenity. Chaos, yet harmony," Ben picked the lines that seemed most pertinent, and waited for Obi-Wan to glance his way before he said, "There is a huge difference between love and attachment. Unfortunately, that difference is made up almost entirely of the ability to let go."
"It is the only evil that a Jedi must overcome," Obi-Wan remembered from Ben's holocron. The master gave a small smile.

"So it did help."

Obi-Wan huffed, frustration still bubbling below the surface. "I wouldn't call it help exactly, but…" he rolled his sore shoulder and ran his left hand through his hair. "I suppose." After a moment of thought, he said, "Qui-Gon said something similar."

"Qui-Gon is a wise man."

Obi-Wan sighed.

They sat in silence for a while, enjoying the solitude, the isolation from everyday life. Thousands of people bustled above their heads, Jedi personalities pressing big and bright upon the surface of the Force. But down here, the thick and ancient pulse of the living world was for them alone. Contemplation needn't be still or peaceful for the sake of communal propriety. Obi-Wan's brow wore the deep furrows that Ben knew from his own reflection.

"Does it ever feel absurd to you?" the apprentice burst at length.

"What?"

"Destiny. Changing things. It must, mustn't it? It's just…" Obi-Wan struggled with the words, weeks worth of thought fossilized by anger and frustration and grief. "I meditate, and… and for just a few seconds, it all makes sense. I'm at peace. I can see everything the Force wills for my life. I understand. That's why I'm still here in the Order. But then I wake up and I still have to…” he shook his head and shrugged, desperately. "To brush my teeth, and fold my clothes, and Qui-Gon's probably nagging me about something. I have a burn on my left thumb that won't heal and I've fallen so far behind in my coursework that I don't want to think about it." Obi-Wan wrapped his arms about his knees and sunk his face into them up to his nose. Mumbling through the thick muslin sleeves, he said, "It's all so grandiose and clean until I have to live it. Then it just hurts."

Ben smiled, though part of him would've liked to cry. Wisdom was a prize won at high cost. When he spoke, he spoke softly, because he knew the weight of words could bruise. "No life in history has ever been lived in grandeur. Not my life, not your life, not any life you or I may have lived with Satine or outside of this Order." He turned his head to look at Obi-Wan, though the younger refused to reciprocate. "You only have one life to live, Obi-Wan. Don't let your heart trick you into forgetting that."

The anger and the confusion melted from the Force, its light fading into a deep, resigned and hurting hue. Obi-Wan blinked rapidly, face now sinking deeper into the crook of his arm. He sniffed loudly and shuddered.

Without saying anything, Ben put a hand on his nephew's back, then a whole arm. Obi-Wan sobbed quietly and Ben's heart ached for him. Suffocating emotion pooled around them in a writhing flood, burning blue and thick before dissipating into the endless Force. In the stillness left in its wake, for just a few seconds, the world made sense. When Obi-Wan lifted this head, the only scars left were dried tears. He wiped crusts from his cheeks and had to blow his nose. He looked terrible.

"We ought to go eat," Ben said. "You need to rise early tomorrow for class."

Obi-Wan smiled and let out a mirthless scoff. "Yeah," he croaked, unfolding his bones and standing by some borrowed strength. "I suppose."
They shuffled out together, hoods drawn high.

Recovery was long and hard. Obi-Wan's ascent from the trials of Mandalore was arduous and awkward. His identity as a Jedi was in flux; his relationship with Qui-Gon had shifted; his understanding of Ben was evolving, and everything he did he second-guessed.

And yet, amid the chaos, some good came to the lineage.

Obi-Wan was alone in the dojo, running through the kata he'd been trying to master for weeks. It was a lower level exercise, and should have been a cinch. He was stumbling through it like a youngling. Qui-Gon was watching from the observation balcony, hanging back behind the half-wall banister so his apprentice would not notice him.

Dooku had been doing the exact same thing some meters away. Quietly, he stepped over to his former pupil's side. Qui-Gon did not acknowledge him. They remained indifferently close, both watching the apprentice below. Dooku's brow had developed an unusual line, easily missed. "How is he?" he asked, the finest edge of his normal tone clipped away. "Truly."

Qui-Gon finally glanced at the speaker, not sure he'd heard the whole question. "Not well," He admitted. "I am afraid it is a true trial for him. I've never seen him like this."

Obi-Wan's movements were sharp and jagged; emotion leaked off of him in waves, starting and stopping in time with his tenuous composure. He stumbled in the same spot as he had three times already, cursed, and began again.

"He will have to get over her eventually," Dooku said.

"He will," Qui-Gon defended, "in time."

Dooku nodded and let out a sigh, soft enough and elongated just so that, for a moment, Qui-Gon thought he could see a specter of sympathy standing at his side. Moments ticked past.

"He will be a great Jedi," Dooku said at length, still watching Obi-Wan. "You mustn't let him down."

"I do not intend to."

"Good." The aristocratic airs were back, and Dooku brushed his cape aside to allow a graceful exit. "If you should need me to take him for an afternoon or two, do let me know."

"Yes, Master," Qui-Gon said. Just as Dooku was at the door, he wrestled with his pride and opened his mouth before he could think twice about it. "Master?"

Dooku turned in the doorway to look at him with that authoritative, condescending eyebrow. Qui-Gon bit back years worth of grudge to say, "Thank you."

Dooku's brow rose, expression softening - if only by a nanometer. He chuckled. "Now there's something I never thought I'd hear from you," he gave a half smile. "It is my pleasure, Qui-Gon. Force be with you."

"Also with you," Qui-Gon muttered, and watched him go. He sighed to himself and turned back to watch Obi-Wan finish his drills.
Progress was slow, but time alone wrought much improvement. It had been some weeks since his confrontation with Ben, and Obi-Wan was struggling to find a new normalcy in which to dwell.

Presently, he was sitting cross-legged on the sofa doing homework. Mandalore had originally been slated as a three month-long assignment, and the extra time away had set him back in his studies. Since returning to Coruscant, he had begun completing his remaining modules with individual tutors. It was a time-consuming, lonely process, but he was plugging along at the work with as much dedication as he could muster.

As a senior padawan, Obi-Wan had very little actual coursework left to do. The two classes that he was currently taking would be the very last of his apprenticeship before he began preparing for the Trials and, Force willing, knighthood. Engrossed as he was in the finer points of Huttese grammar, Obi-Wan did not think about this. Qui-Gon, who was watching his padawan quietly from the doorway, did.

Obi-Wan was growing up – he had grown up. All that remained was a little polish, a little experience, a little time. Qui-Gon was embarrassed to acknowledge the burst of paternal sentiment that welled up at the prospect. There was still much for them to learn. The future could wait; the present moment was the only one that mattered.

As Qui-Gon passed the sofa on his way to water his plants, Obi-Wan took a break from his reading to straighten his spine and roll his shoulders. He winced at the motion, rubbing at his right shoulder, which, weeks after the encounter with Ben, still pained him. Qui-Gon glanced up.

"Did you hurt yourself?"

Obi-Wan remembered the attempted punch and felt guilty. Cheeks slightly pink, he avoided eye contact. "A bit."

"Hmm." Qui-Gon finished with his plants and went to stand behind his apprentice. He grabbed the shoulder in one hand and gave an experimental squeeze, to which Obi-Wan winced but said nothing. Qui-Gon shook his head. "You overdid it." He pulled at the neck of Obi-Wan's tunic so he could get at the shoulder's bare skin and prod directly at the knotted muscle.

"Ow," Obi-Wan complained, only staying put because he knew that it would help.

"It's your own fault." It was true, and he knew it, so Obi-Wan stayed silent as his master played masseuse. When Qui-Gon was done working out the worst of the knot with his thumbs, he rubbed out the tension from the rest of the shoulder, up into Obi-Wan's neck. He finally let go and watched as the younger man rolled his neck and shoulder experimentally. "Better?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. It was not completely repaired, but was a definite start. "Thank you."

Qui-Gon nodded, observing Obi-Wan from above. The boy was far quieter than he used to be, but there was understated wisdom forming in that quiet. They'd not spoken of Satine or Mandalore in several days, though Qui-Gon had seen Obi-Wan meditating often; he knew it had been about her. He glanced around the collection of open holobooks and datapads. He spotted Ben's holocron scattered in with the upper level seminar readings.

"How is it going?" he asked, setting his hands on either of Obi-Wan's shoulders and giving an encouraging brace.

"Better than before. It's still slow going." He was transfixed by the intimidatingly expansive reaches of his Huttese homework. Qui-Gon's attention remained directed at the innocuous holocron on the
cushion next to him.

"You'll prevail, I'm sure."

"Yes, Master."

Qui-Gon glanced at the padawan braid that brushed against his hand. He drew it back over Obi-Wan’s shoulder to examine it, neat twists of hair shining in the light.

"When was the last time you cleaned this?" He asked. Obi-Wan frowned.

"Earlier this week. Why?"

Qui-Gon examined it between thumb and forefinger, pausing at the end of the braid. "Take it down."

The master retreated to his room to fetch his hair kit, leaving Obi-Wan to frown at his braid, trying to spot the flaws that would prompt Qui-Gon to say anything. The man was hardly a paragon of keratin hygiene. He carefully unwound the various colored markers from along the length and unbraided the hair.

"It wasn't so bad," Obi-Wan said when Qui-Gon returned with a fine-toothed comb.

"No," said the master, focusing his attention on the task at hand, "but there is always room for improvement." Not a typical Jinn mantra, but Obi-Wan let it slide. There was a definite lulling experience in having your hair combed – even if a small part of your hair.

"This is far longer than I remember," Qui-Gon observed as he combed small tangles out of the unbound braid, which fell past Obi-Wan's collarbone and onto his chest. The apprentice glanced at it.

"Yes… I admit it's getting more and more in the way."

Qui-Gon smiled. "Well, you'll not need worry about it for toomuch longer," he said. Obi-Wan's eyes grew wide and he looked up in horror. Qui-Gon raised an amused eyebrow. "I said too much, padawan, calm down." He chuckled, brushing the hair ends with a finger. "It's got a ways to grow yet."

Obi-Wan nodded and said nothing more. After he was done combing, Qui-Gon rebraided the hair in a slow, deliberate dance, quietly reminding his apprentice of the meaning of the braid and what it symbolized. The master, the padawan, the Force; bound as one. One by one, he replaced the colored thread markers that tracked progress and growth over the course of years.

There was a purple marker for his loss of innocence on Bandomeer. Yellow marked the trial of mind that had seen him nearly brainwashed on Phindar. A black marker for the first life he'd claimed on Melida-Daan stood alongside its neighbor, a red marker for a trial of body. There was a green marker for wisdom shown in helping another, and blue for exceptional diplomacy and heroism. White marked the first time he'd saved a life, and brown the first time he'd failed to do so. The markers were thin on their own, but repeated several times on the length of his braid, creating a pattern, a code entirely unique to Obi-Wan Kenobi. The last band, a yellow marker put in place after Ben had appeared four years ago, marked the end. A long stretch of naked, unbraided hair followed.

Qui-Gon reached this last marker and continued braiding. Nonplussed, Obi-Wan watched at his master drew out a small spool of grey thread.

"Grey is a passionless color, but it symbolizes the hardships our hearts must face because of passion. The heart can be a fickle friend, and we must often overcome it in order to serve the Force." He very
carefully wound the thread about the end of Obi-Wan's braid, binding it into place.

"Master," Obi-Wan protested uncomfortably, "I don't think… that is…" he fiddled with his thumbs even as Qui-Gon worked. "I've hardly learned my lesson on that."

Qui-Gon smiled, eyes crinkled in a bittersweet way. "No, neither have I. We are never done learning, Obi-Wan, and you are not done yet. But you have grown a great deal through this already. I will not leave it unrecognized."

"Yes, Master," Obi-Wan let the man finish, humbled. When he was done, Qui-Gon ran the braid appreciatively through his fingers. "I am sorry you must wear this color at all, but I am thankful that it is not higher up on your braid."

Obi-Wan smiled sadly at that. "Thank you, Master."

Qui-Gon stood, using Obi-Wan's good shoulder as a prop and giving it a squeeze as he collected the hair tools. "Well done, padawan."

Slowly, very slowly, Obi-Wan came back to himself. He was not the same person as he'd been before Mandalore, and he was not quite who he wished he could be. But he made progress. His saberwork recovered its usual grace and improved greatly for his renewed dedication. He trained with Dooku and Qui-Gon simultaneously, and for once the two masters did not bicker about it. He was able to spend time with his friends, fighting with Garen and laughing with Bant. He meditated more often and more easily now. Things made sense more often, for longer amounts of time.

He remained subdued most days, preferring company in small numbers and quiet settings. His favorite companion of late was Aola, whose irrepressible smile and nonstop chatter distracted from his own troubles. She enjoyed regaling him with stories of her travels in Corellia, discussing at length the many animals she'd seen and their various modus operandi for destroying things. Obi-Wan had always thought that she'd outgrow her fascination with deadly wildlife – Feemor thought similarly, he happened to know – but she hadn't, and it was deeply uplifting to see the sheer joy on her face as she described the intricate, deadly dental mechanisms of the Correllian deep-see sniper shark.

It was this habitual exuberance that made her mood swings so jarring. Obi-Wan had gone to visit the Gard/Tarkona apartments one thirdday evening, as he'd made a habit of doing every week, only to find Feemor gone and Aola in a solemn, severe mood.

"Aola?" He asked upon finding her curled up on the couch, worrying the edge of a pillow rather than pouring over her advanced xenozoology coursework. "Are you alright?" He went to sit next to her.

Aola tried to speak up several times before she found the right words. "You have visions, don't you, Obi?"

Obi-Wan wasn't sure where this was going; he knew from experience that it would be nowhere pleasant. "Yes." Obi-Wan knew by hearsay that she was gifted with foresight, like him, but they'd never really talked about it. "Did you have a vision?"

She nodded.

"What did you see?"

She looked up at him. She'd wanted to talk to him about her visions ever since he'd come back, but
when he'd showed up so distraught over Satine and withdrawn, she hadn't wanted to trouble him. And by the time he'd begun coming around, the visions had stopped. She hadn't had a dream in months. But now, while Feemor was away subbing a class and Ben was Force knew where helping Bail Organa run errands, she'd been struck by a vision not at night in her sleep, but in the waking hours of dusk.

She told him about the vision, and how many times she'd had it. The man. The red lightsabers. The glowing eyes. "But this time, it changed again," she said, voice cracking with worry. "It wasn't… it wasn't two lightsabers this time. It was like a lightstaff – like the ones Master Krell uses, you know?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan was frowning deeply, trying to imagine the scene she described. "And the blades are red?"

She nodded, knees tucked up to her chin.

Silence reined in the small apartment space. The aircon came on with a small hum; the new breeze made Aola shiver. "What do you think it means?" she asked the older, wiser apprentice.

Obi-Wan felt neither older nor wiser. "I don't know," He said, truthfully. "It… could mean nothing." It was something Qui-Gon would say to him, but the words tasted like a lie. "What does master Gard say to do about it?"

"He says to meditate. But he won't be back until late tonight."

"Alright. Would you like to meditate with me?"

"I guess," she said, one lekku in her hands, fingers fiddling with the end in a nervous tick. She did not even look at the meditation cushions sitting across the room. "Obi?" she asked quietly. Obi-Wan looked over at her, face filled with concern.

"Yes?"

She shivered and tucked her feet inward. "I'm scared."

Obi-Wan's intimate experience with the unifying force gave him a sense of sympathy that neither of their masters would ever be able to comprehend. Without hesitation, He put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a hug. "I know," he said. "I'm sorry."

They meditated fitfully there on the couch until they fell asleep, Aola curled under Obi-Wan's protective arm, neither apprentice able to understand the warnings the Force afflicted on their minds.
A huge, huge, huge thank you to my lovely friend en-shaedn, who is now not only helping me plan out this story, telling me what ideas work and which ones are rubbish, but is also proofreading this thing to the letter and adding a few pieces of her own. Several of the more straightforward, elegant sentences in this chapter come courtesy of her. Thank you, Master Editor, for reminding me that showing is better than telling and that not every description needs to be dripping with flowery eloquence. You're the best!

Within the Jedi Order, celebrity was a vice frowned upon with the stiffest consternation. It was considered immature and inappropriate to seek out celebrity for one's self, and inexpedient to afford celebrity to others. The latter sin was, admittedly, harder to avoid, particularly for the younger generation for whom role models and celebrities often existed as a single entity. However, it could be argued that the Temple's younglings weren't technically sworn-in Jedi yet, and thus, could not be held to the same rigorous standards as their elders and betters.

"MASTER BEN!" The master in question had not yet darkened the door of the Wolf Clan dormitory, but the Zygerrian boy called Sarsan had a knack for precognition. With the alarm raised, the entire clan chittered with excitement, some charging forward to the door in rapt anticipation. Master Zyrha stood, towering mightily above her charges as she strode to meet the celebrity at the door.

"Master Kenobi," She greeted above a chorus of "Master Ben!"s and "Hello Master Ben!" and "Can you play today, Master Ben?". She roved her eyes over the excitable younglings before swiveling them back around to peer at her visitor, whose face was puckered by irrepressible dimples and crowsfeet. Somehow, the grey hairs at his temples made his smile all the more endearing. "Your adoring fans await. Is it fourthday already? I'll fetch the holobooks-"

Ben was still smiling, but put out a forestalling hand. "No no, no history lessons today. I've actually come by to let you know you'll need to find a replacement. I'm being sent back out in the field."

"Oh?" Zyrha's ears turned, whiskers flicking upward in surprise. "Not just out to the Legislative District, I assume?"

"No, not this time," Ben chuckled. "They've found an errand for me off planet. I do not know the details yet. Perhaps the senate is finally growing weary of me."

Zyrha chuckled, beady eyes softening as she grinned, exposing rows of pointed teeth. Quietly, so that the initiates wouldn't be able to hear, she said, "I doubt that. I know of a dozen or so Jedi who will miss you sorely."

"Hmm," Ben's grin was bittersweet. He kept his voice down to match Zyrha's whisper. "Attachment won't suit them later in life."

"No. Perhaps you would like to soften the blow?" She gestured to her roomful of hopeful younglings.
"You employ me to do your coddling for you?"

"You would not have come in person if you wanted to avoid coddling. " She glanced back into the room, looking beyond the throng to a closed door. "Skywalker is meditating at the moment."

Ben snorted. "What did he do this time?"

"He was given a remote droid and asked to predict where it would move next without looking at it."

"And?"

"He disassembled it. When I asked him what he'd done, he said 'I predict it is going to go nowhere.'"

Ben barked out a laugh. "And now you have him meditating on the vice of cheating, I assume."

"Cheating? No. He did the whole thing with his eyes closed – didn't even use his hands. Impressive really, if not for the heroic overshow of cheek. I sent him to meditate on the definition of insolence. It's a new word for him, but by my oath if it isn't apropos." She shook her head in that longsuffering way that only creche masters could, and stepped back into the room. "Regardless, I know he'll want to see you before you leave. I'll fetch him."

"I appreciate it, Zyrha."

"Younglings," Zyrha gave a single clap of her paws, bowed head turning this way and that to meet the gazes of her clanmembers, who ranged from three years to eleven, a hodgepodge of age and species. "Master Ben cannot stay for long today, but as always, we should make our brother feel at home. I need to step out for a few minutes – Yuni," the oldest youngling of the group, "look after them, and listen to Master Kenobi."

"Yes, master," Yuni smiled, bowing gracefully first to Zyrha, and then to Ben.

"Master Ben, why can't you stay?" Asked the very young Cosian called Fauli, tugging on his tabards. Ben bent over to try meet the boy on his own level.

"I've business elsewhere today, I'm afraid."

From his other side: "But can't you stay for just a little bit?" Asked a nautolan with huge, shining eyes and two missing teeth. "Can you tell us a story? Like the ones Master Dooku tells?"

Ben chuckled. "I'm not sure Master Dooku's tales are entirely wholesome for-"

Fauli again: "Pleeeaaase?"

Ben floundered looking up at the dozen or so others watching him with hopeful, excited faces. The master sighed. There were too many of them; too many round cheeks and huge, shining eyes. He was outnumbered. He surrendered. "One story," he announced to a chorus of cheers. He summoned a meditation cushion from a corner and lowered himself onto it cross-legged.

He told them a story from the life of one of his favorite Jedi scholars. It was a tale set some two thousand years ago, when a revered togruta Jedi master had found herself stranded on an uncharted planet and had to rely on the assistance of an untrained Force-user to help guide her home. The story itself was apocryphal and likely untrue; but the moral, that the Force offered aid in unexpected people and unconventional methods, was one he hoped to impart on the younger generation.

When he was done, the younglings begged him for more and he gently but firmly refused. "I thought
Wynn Ra'alscha was deemed a heretic," said Master Zyrha, returned from her errand. From his cushion, Ben had to bend his neck almost backward to look up at her.

"You can still find her biography and memoirs in the archives. I find that orthodoxy is largely dependent on one's point of view."

Zyrha looked skeptical. "I should like to pick your brain on that later. But for now, there's someone rather anxious to see you."

"Master!" Anakin Skywalker, five years old and absolutely fearless, charged into the room and dove straight for Ben's lap.

"Oomph," Ben caught the boy with a huff. Anakin giggled, righting himself to sit on Ben's knee.

"Restraint is the way of the Jedi, Anakin," Ben said around a sore gut. "A bow would surely suffice, you're getting far too big for such behavior."

Anakin laughed at this, as if it were the height of humor. "No!" He insisted, and hugged Ben's arm.

Ben smiled down at the boy. As he aged, Anakin came more into himself, looking and acting and speaking more like the boy that Obi-Wan had known in another life. Yet there was something cleaner in this incarnation, something untainted by the Huttese soot and sand of slavery. Anakin's overaffection might again prove to be his downfall, but just now, to be acknowledged by Anakin Skywalker without any hint of resentment was a gift too pure to spoil with speculation.

All that being so, he retained his persistently Anakin way of doing things. Ben brushed an untidy heap of blond hair out of Anakin's face to sit by the mussed lock of hair that would one day become a padawan braid. It had grown not quite long enough to brush his shoulder. "I hear you've gotten yourself into some trouble, Anakin," Ben said in a stern voice. Anakin dipped his head toward one shoulder, mouth shifting into a stubborn pout.

"I didn't cheat," he insisted.

"I never said you did. But you did disassemble a remote. Did Master Zyrha ask you to do that?"

"No," he admitted. "But I did do what she asked me to do!"

"That you did," Ben allowed. Anakin did always exceed expectations – though not necessarily in the best of ways. "But you must remember to consider every possibility – what if disassembling the remote caused Master Zyrha grief? Or had hurt one of your clanmates?"

"But it didn't," Anakin insisted.

"But it could have. What would you have done?" Anakin hid his head, playing with his own fingers. Ben bent his head to look the boy in the eye. "Anakin?" He pressed.

"I'nno," the child mumbled.

"Then you must be mindful of it in the future. Impudence is not becoming of a Jedi."


"Ani!" Interrupted an excitable voice. A very small Pantoran girl charged toward them and enveloped Anakin's arm in full-body hug. "You're back!"
Anakin smiled at her in a moment of untainted, childish affection and patted her on the head. "Hi Mira," He said. When she did not let go of his arm, he tried to shrug her off. "I wasn't gone that long." When she finally let go of Ani, she spotted Ben, and her lavender skin flushed violet. She promptly ran off and was adopted into a game of blocks with Sarsan.

"Who is that, then?" Asked Ben, watching the gentle way the Zygerrian played with the girl.

"That's Mira," Explained Anakin, "she's new. Me and Sar play with her. She's good at lift-feather."

"I see. That's very kind of you, Anakin. I'm sure you two take good care of her."

Anakin didn't seem to register the compliment. "Will you play lift-feather with us, Master Ben? I'm sure Mira would like it."

Ben chuckled. "Maybe another time, little one."

They spoke for a while, about Anakin's friends and his escapades in the gardens, and his excitement that he'd finally be allowed to train with wooden sabers when he turned six. At length, Ben finally had to reveal his reasons for visiting.

"Leaving?" Anakin was crestfallen. "Why?"

"Because I am a Jedi, and I have duties outside of this temple." It was something he'd told Anakin on more than one occasion.

"Oh." Familiar as it was, the boy still pouted at the reminder. He patted at Ben's tabards, holding the edges as if it could make the master stay longer. "You can't come by and tell us stories?" he asked pitifully.

"Not for a while. Master Dooku will still be around, I'm sure." This seemed to console Anakin somewhat (which did not console Ben in the slightest) but he remained sullen. "Come now, little one. I'll not be gone for long."

"Promise?"

Ben had learned years ago not to make promises. But… do or do not, there was no try. "I promise," he said, wondering if he would regret it.

Anakin nodded and hugged him, little arms splayed across the elder man's chest. After a brief moment, Ben pushed the small body away, gave his last goodbyes, and rose to his feet. The children chorused well-wishes at him, and he left for the door. Master Zyrha saw him out.

"I will keep him well until he's old enough to follow you out," she said. He turned to her, surprised. Ben knew that he had hardly made a secret of his fondness for Anakin, but her forwardness took him off guard.

"I will keep him well until he's old enough to follow you out," she said. He turned to her, surprised. Ben knew that he had hardly made a secret of his fondness for Anakin, but her forwardness took him off guard.

"Well," he recovered his senses, "You may need to find a way to split him up. I am not the only interested party."

"Yes, I know," She nodded solemnly. "Yan Dooku. I'd noticed."

Her tone was a giveaway. "You disapprove."

"Most vehemently. The man is..." She eyed her younglings and shook her head, unable or unwilling to reveal her thoughts in mixed company. "...unsettling," she decided.
Ben understood completely. But there was nothing to be done. "It will be his choice, when he's old enough."

"Then I can only hope to raise him with enough sense to know the better path." She turned to look at the boy in question, and did a double-take to find him and Sarsan teaching innocent little Mira how to launch blocks at unsuspecting clanmates. "Which in itself will be a miracle. May the Force be with you on your travels, Master Kenobi."

"And also with you, Master Zyrha, and Anakin."

She smiled at him. "Indeed."

Ben had been confused by the summons to Master Yoda's quarters in lieu of the Council Chambers, but he followed orders and dutifully arrived at the sequestered rooms at the appointed time. Just outside the doors, he ran into Aola Tarkona, who was walking in the opposite direction.

"M-Master Ben," She stuttered, sounding shaken. Ben looked on her with concern; it had been weeks since he'd seen her smile. She watched him brush his robes back into place. "I'm sorry, Master."

"Don't be." He took a second look at her face and gave her shoulder an encouraging squeeze. "Courage, young one."

Aola tried to smile for his sake and ducked away.

"She's not doing well," Ben said after the door was closed. He winced at the characteristic odor of Yoda's abode; it was a matter of debate whether or not the ancient master had cleaned his rooms in the last century or two. Moss grew in patches along the floorboards, illuminated by bars of light filtering in through the blinds. Master Yoda was pouring tea.

"Troubled by visions, she is," he said, not looking up. "Saddens me it does to see such burdens placed on the young. Such are the times." He set the teapot and two full cups of tea on a tray.

"Feemor tells me they're becoming more frequent. Can she not control them?"

"Control the voice of the Force we cannot. Know this well you do, Obi-Wan." It had long been Yoda's custom to call Ben by his true name in private. "No longer changing, the vision is. Steady. Repetitious. Hmm." He levitated the tea tray toward the two meditation seats in the middle of the room. Ben followed the small grandmaster at a shuffle, ducking under the low ceiling beams.

"Repeating visions… alarming they are."

"But not necessarily omens," Ben said, settling into a seat across from his great grandmaster.

"No. But not necessarily falsehoods," Yoda frowned at the steaming teapot for a long, pensive moment, but eventually let out the tension with a sigh. "In the hands of the Force, young Aola is. No more, no less." Both Jedi drew their cups to themselves and drank, no apparent rush at hand.

"How fares young Obi-Wan?" Yoda asked conversationally. He was not ignorant of the fallout from Mandalore.

"Better than before. Your old padawan has kept him busy."

"Hmm. Adept at Makashi Obi-Wan is – or so I hear."
"Dooku says he's a natural at it."

Yoda chuckled. "Resentment I hear in your tone, Obi-Wan. Jealous for your own form, you are, as Qui-Gon is for his."

Ben shrugged. "Perhaps. I never learned much Makashi."

"No?"

"No, master. Ataru was my focus, and later Soresu."

"Hmm, yes," Yoda let a smirk overtake his mouth, a rare show of pride in his lineage. "A natural at all saberform - excel in whichever form you happen upon, you do." Yoda sipped at his tea, chuckling to himself. "Works in mysterious ways the Force does. Perhaps, need Makashi in this life young Kenobi will."

Ben had to admit that he hadn't thought of it like that. He'd needed the rock solid defense of Soresu in order to make it through the Clone Wars in one piece. But what in the galaxy could require the use of Makashi this time around? It was a duelist's form, a form of precision and conservation. After a few rather foreboding abstractions, Ben gave up the chase with a shake of his head, focusing his attentions instead on his company.

Master Yoda poured himself a second cup of tea and took no rush in drinking it; sniffing it, swirling it, enjoying its warmth before he even lifted it to his lips. He shifted into a more comfortable spot.

"Are we waiting for something, Master Yoda?" Ben asked at length.

"Someone," the grandmaster clarified, and summoned a new tea bowl to the tray. He filled it to the brim, and no sooner had the last drop of yarba plopped into place than did the door slide open with a hiss.

"Late you are," accused Yoda.

"Apologies, Master," said Mace Windu, striding unfazed past the darkened mess of Yoda's apartments and ducking under the low ceiling with practiced ease. "Master Kenobi," he nodded respectfully.

"Master Windu, a pleasure to see you." Mace did not reciprocate Ben's smile, and while it was not out of character, it still hurt.

"Have you begun?" asked the Master of the Order in a businesslike tone.

"No," Yoda sipped at his tea loudly. "Discussing other matters we were. Come, sit."

Mace moved a third seat into their circle and assumed the lotus position atop the cushion, as Yoda and Ben had done. Former master and apprentice shared a look, and Mace took the lead.

"The Council has a mission for you, Master Kenobi."

Ben nodded. "I did see the summons, but I admit my confusion, masters. Am I not to meet with the whole council?"

"No. It's not needed; the council has already approved the assignment, and considering the source of the petition, a full briefing seemed excessive."

"The source of the petition?" Ben raised an eyebrow.
"The Senate. Already briefed you are, from a certain point of view," Yoda chuckled at his own mockery of Ben's favorite phrase. Ben frowned in puzzlement, and glanced at Mace for clarification.

"Trouble has arisen on Kuat," the Korun master explained. "A district of resettled Twi'lek in Kuat City is being terrorized. We need you to get to the bottom of it."

"Resettled? From the Herdessan crisis?" Ben neglected his tea in his concentration, shadows passing over his furrowed brow as skycars flew past the lofty temple windows.

"Yes. You'll remember how much opposition the resettlement act faced from Kuat. The Twi'leks' journey there has hardly been smooth, but we – along with the whole senate – were led to believe that it was, at least, going safely. That is not the case.

"Instances of violence, ranging from robbery to murder have been reported from Goc Fiyao, the town established by the refugees some years ago. Unfortunately, these reports are only now garnering attention. Senator Damaera Thane has been accused of a cover-up."

Ben glowered at the wall. "Of course she has."

Mace's frustrated eyebrow tick was entirely sympathetic. "She'll be wrapped up in the bureaucratic cogs for a while. Regardless, Chancellor Valorum wants to amend for her neglect with swift and decisive action. We haven't a moment to lose."

"The situation is truly grave, then."

"Murdered, dozens of Twi'lek have been." Yoda broke in, summoning a small holopad to rest on the tea tray. He opened it and a blue projection of Kuat's surface emerged between the three. A temperate planet, orbited by the massive Kuat Drive Yards, an artificial planetary ring of shipyards and ports. Intricate webs of light depicted cities and roads, stretching over continents and islands. The brightest sphere of light indicated the capital, Kuat City. The projection magnified to show the city in its entirety. In the southeastern quadrant, on the fringes of the city borders, a series of red markers began to appear.

"All of the murder victims have been Twi'lek," Mace informed. Ben watched the animation loop around and around. The series of crimes began in a scattered pattern, disparate in both time and geography. As the animation continued, the red dots began to appear more rapidly, closer and closer together, until one neighborhood in the city was almost entirely covered.

"This pattern suggests some kind of serial killer," he said.

"Perhaps," Mace watched the map. "Or anti-Twi'lek insurgents, or terrorists. Force only knows what their motivations are. It is your mission to determine who is behind the strikes and why."

"And why covered it up has Senator Thane?" Yoda added. "Her corruption, we cannot ignore."

"This is a reconnaissance mission, then?" asked Ben.

Yoda watched the man sagely, chin perched atop his gimer cane. "If required reconnaissance is, yes. If required action is, act you must."

Ben nodded, stroking his beard pensively. The Council was going in blind and so was he. At first glance, the whole thing reeked of the prejudice and disdain that Demaera had demonstrated toward the refugees years ago on Herdessa. Ben could easily believe that she would cover up any violence directed at the Twi'lek, and he could even suppose that some of her more extremist constituents might be behind the crimes. And yet… there was something about the situation that gave him pause.
"You know," he said after a while, "I was not the only one on Herdessa. Alara Dahn has been far more involved with the aftermath of that mission than I was – on account of my censure, you remember. I think she would be better suited to this task than I, masters."

If the barbed humility was meant to make either of them feel guilty, it had the opposite effect. Mace fixed him with a stern glare. "You might be right about that, Master Kenobi, but Knight Dahn is otherwise occupied at present. Besides, your assistance in this matter was requested specifically."

Ben cocked an eyebrow. "By whom?"

Yoda chuckled. "Who else? Senator Organa."

Ben was actually surprised. "Bail? What business does he have on Kuat?"

"A rising member of the Sentients Rights Coalition he is. The Coalition, it was, that drew the matter to Chancellor Valorum's attention. Remembered your actions on Herdessa he did, and recommended you for this mission."

"I see," Ben gazed into the still-looping projection of Kuat City and the red dots. He counted thirty-six in all. "When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow. We will send you the details of your transit," Master Windu said. "I have a short dossier for you which I will also send, though I think most of it will be familiar."

"Thank you, Mace."

Mace bristled at the use of his name. Ben tried not to look hurt. Yoda sighed.

The grandmaster powered down the holodisk and clambered to the floor. He hobbled to a shelf and put the disk away, cane tapping softly on the floor. "Careful you must be, Obi-Wan. Grow too entangled with the Senate and wrapped up in all of their politics you may become."

Ben stood and carried the tea tray back to its spot in the messy, cluttered kitchen. "In all due respect, Master Yoda, the Senate must remain the focus of my actions at present."

"And why is that?" Mace asked, irritation carrying through in a fierce glower. Ben's persistent reticence toward sharing still kept him on Mace's bad side.

"They dictate the future of the Republic," Ben offered, in the most generic tone conceivable. Mace disguised his eye-roll by blinking and looking away in one gesture.

Yoda was not concerned with Ben's secretive habits; if anything, he would rather not know about the man's machinations. "Envy you, I do not," He said in a mood far more amiable than that of his former pupil.

Ben snorted softly, ignoring but distinctly aware of the waves of disapproval coming from Mace's direction. "Nor does anyone else I know, Master."

The trip to Kuat was mercifully short. Conveniently, traveling from one Core World to another was a simple business. They landed on the Drive Yards, orbiting some two thousand kilometers above the planet surface. Here, he left the Jedi escort ship and it's emblazoned republic insignias behind for a more discreet landing vessel. It was a two man ship, so as soon as he climbed aboard he came face to face with the pilot.
"Master Kenobi," Smiled the squat blue female Twi'lek at the con. She spoke with a thick but fluid accent. "It's good t'see you again."

Ben stared at her, some inkling of memory stirring in his mind. When he finally recognized her, his face burst into a smile. "Captain Ky'elee," he said, and shook her hand as he climbed aboard. "By my oath, it's been a long time!"

She laughed to see his face. "Likewise, Master Jedi! Last I saw you you had blood all over your face. You clean up nicely."

Ben laughed. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Buckle in, then. We'd best get moving if we're going to make good time to Goc Fiyao through rush hour traffic."

Once they were in the atmosphere and its packed airtraffic lanes, it was slower going.

"I'm glad to see you again, Ky'elee, but I admit I'm surprised." Ben spoke up once he was sure he wasn't distracting the pilot from her task. "How in the galaxy did you end up here?"

She shrugged. "We were allowed to express preference on where we would like to settle as a part of customs. No guarantees, o'course, but it was a kind gesture. I chose Kuat because of their shipyards – and because I knew no one else would want to. Folk don't like Twi'lek here."

"Yes, I know. I wonder sometimes if strongarming Thane into ratification only made it worse."

Ky'elee tsked in a nonchalant way. "You underestimate my people, Master Kenobi. We grew up waiting for solar flares, sandstorms, and predators to reap us off the planet every other day. A few pettish Kuati are nothing more than flies."

Ben smiled. "I admire your fortitude. Do you live in Goc Fiyao?"

Ky'elee's spitfire wilted. "I do," she said, gloved hands gripping the controls. "It's been… nightmarish. Our children are terrified. They can't even walk to school without watching their backs. It'a'nt right," she shook her head, ghosts in her eyes. "This planet is a dream – cool, temperate, safe, all the things Ryloth wasn't. But now there are people, thinking beings out there picking us off one by one…" She shook herself. "I was grateful t'see it was you who was coming, sir."

Ben was frowning at the shift in mood. "And you have no idea who could be behind this? Have there been any witnesses to the crimes?"

"None. It's always night when the worst happens. A lot of us think it could be gang violence, but there hasn't been any spice or credits to account for. It's just… it's slaughter. Just slaughter. T'a'nt another word for it."

"I see." Ben stroked his beard thoughtfully, wondering where in the galaxy he should begin. If this was some sort of conspiracy that did lead all the way to Demaera's cabinet, how should he go about it on the ground? From the beginning, said his inner Qui-Gon Jinn, simplistic and rational in his thinking. With the people. "If I'm going to get to the bottom of… whatever it is going on, I'm going to need to better understand the crimes. Do the police have records of the crimes? Surveillance footage, witness interviews?"

Ky'elee shook her head with a sigh. "No, sir. Incidence reports were filed, but not detailed ones. The Kuati police don't patrol Goc Fi'cept but once or twice a month. Say it's its own town, even though it's part of Kuat City. We have some holo-cameras out and about at night, but none of them have
seen anything. Whoever it is doing this, they know how to stay out of sight."

Which in and of itself was alarming. That meant that whoever – whatever was doing this was professional. Deadly. Targeted. The bad feeling that had plagued him during his meeting with Master Yoda and Mace came back a shade darker than before. "I will need something to go on. Is there anyone who can give me information on the crimes?"

Ky'elee hesitated, and then sighed. "Well… I might be able to get some of the families to talk to you," she eyed him and added quietly, "but no guarantees."

Ben nodded solemnly. "Of course. I understand."

After a silent moment between them, the captain shook her head sadly. "It's a bad business, Kenobi." She turned onto a deserted traffic lane, beelining for the southeast quadrant of the capital. "The sooner we root out this mess, the better."

"I couldn't agree more."

Goc Fiyao was a remarkable place, particularly for being so new. Much like the various immigrant neighborhoods Ben had grown up around on Coruscant, the Twi'leks' niche in Kuat City had a distinctly Ryl flavor to it. The tall, mismatched buildings stacked on top of one another reminded him of the canyon cities he'd seen in the craggy mountains of Ryl, while the squat, square huts called to mind the homes first designed by the Twi'lek of the Western Steppes. Unfortunately, the state of the town belied the respect - or lack thereof - that the local authorities held for their newest neighbors. Makeshift power patches and pumps could be seen installed outside of shops and homes alike, supplementing the insufficient city resources. Some of the power generators were older makes and models, chugging along as best they could.

Ben was disgusted by the government's intentional oversight, and knew he would put in a very long report about it later. Still, he was impressed by what the Twi'lek had managed to accomplish in just a few short years. This was a town of survivors - Ky'elee had said it herself. They had made it this far, and Ben knew that if they could establish themselves despite their troubles, they would become a permanent, important fixture of Kuat City and, perhaps in later generations, Kuat as a whole.

But survival was longterm. In the short term, death loomed.

"It's my fault," the aging Twi'lek cried, wiping her nose. "I burned dinner, and asked her to go buy groceries. I knew it was past dark, but I didn't think that… I…" Her chin quivered and she sobbed. Her husband wrapped an arm around her and looked apologetically up at Ben.

"It is not your fault," the Jedi said softly. "You could never have known; especially in a town surrounded by your friends." This was his eighth interview with a victim's family today. They seemed to grow progressively harder to bear. "Was Yoj'cije involved with anyone socially? A boyfriend? Social clubs? People from school?"

"No," her father insisted, absentely stroking his wife's back. "No, she's always been shy, reserved. She is…" he paused, and blinked several times. "...was still learning Basic, there is nowhere she could have gone outside of Goc Fi. She had few friends. She helped run the bakery, that's all." He shrugged helplessly. "She just… she just helps me bake the bread. Helped. The customers all loved her smile." Now his chin was trembling, too. "I'm so sorry, Master Kenobi." He ducked his head to wipe his tears.

"Ei ch'eo ch'acah," his wife said softly, taking her husband's hand in both of hers and leaning into
him. They cried against each other, unable to restrain their grief. Ben, with years of Jedi training, kept his own at bay. The weight of three days' worth of identical interviews pressed on his heart. Death hadn't been like this in the Clone Wars. The legions had been trained as warriors; they all knew the risks. There had been no families to tell, no parents to grieve the lost. Maybe that was part of the problem, Ben thought. The foreignness of this burden made him feel guilty, and the lack of information he'd gleaned from these painful encounters made him feel entirely helpless.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. and Mrs. Olan. I understand how hard this must be for you. I promise, I will do everything in my power to bring your daughter's murderer to justice." Do or do not, there is no try. "You have my solemn word."

The devastated couple nodded at him through tears. "Thank you, Master Kenobi," Mrs. Olan said. After Ben bowed and quietly stepped away to the front door, he heard Mr. Olan tell his wife, "I do not know how to bake alone."

Ben closed the door behind him and sighed out the air that had settled in his lungs, heavy with the sadness of parents who had lost their only child. He breathed in the air of the city; it didn't help.

"Anything?" Ky'elee was his guide, his translator, and his pilot. She'd waited outside during the interview. Ben sighed heavily, rubbing his face. He wished he could wash the grief off of him like dirt, but it clung to him.

"There's no patterns, nothing to go on," he lamented. "They didn't do anything. None of them. Some of them didn't even know each other. They didn't work together, didn't live together, they were all different ages..." He scoffed, tossing his hands in a desperate gesture. "Some of their bodies still haven't been recovered. It's absolutely senseless."

"As I said," Ky'elee muttered quietly, looking away, "it's a bad business."

A solemn silence passed between them, there on the Olans' porch. A pair of young Twi'lek men passed them on the street, and one perked up upon seeing Ben. He frowned vaguely, as if trying to remember something. He nudged his friend and pointed. The friend said something in Ryl that Ben could not understand, but he did catch the words Jedi and Kenobi. The man smiled and waved. Ben mustered the effort to smile and nod in return.

"You know them?" Ky'elee asked.

"Not at all. Quite a few of the townspeople here seem to recognize me - the Olans did, too."

"Ah," Ky'elee pushed herself up off the doorframe and dusted her jumpsuit. "There's a handful here who were aboard the Juclima. They remember you, Master Ben." Ben made a halfhearted effort to smile at her, and she sighed. She patted his shoulder and strode toward the ship. "Where to next? If it's another family, I want to stop and eat before we go. I could use the break." The unspoken words hung in the air. You could use the break.

Ben chewed on the inside of his lip and eventually followed Ky'elee to the ship. "My rooms," he said. "I need to make a call."

"Master Kenobi," sneered that familiar, haughty voice. "It's been a while."

"Senator Thane. You should know why I'm contacting you."

The holographic senator paused, glanced offscreen, and accepted a datapad from an unseen attendant. She skimmed its contents and let the pad drop on her desk. "The Twi'lek town
"disturbance," she said, nonchalant. "I see."

Ben had his arms crossed, which helped him disguise his clenched fists. "You've known of the murders for some time," he said. Thane didn't even blink.

"I'd heard of it. My advisors assure me that it is gang related activity, well under control."

Ben's temper sparked. "Under control? The robberies have been replaced entirely by murders - thirty-six of them, to be precise, with no leads and no end in sight. How exactly do you consider that under control?"

Thane's shoulders had fallen back, spine straight. She looked genuinely surprised, and it gave Ben pause. "Thirty-six?" She repeated, in a more human voice than Ben had ever heard from her. "Are you sure?"

If she was playing him, she'd have to be an incredible actress. "I have verified every report - barebones as your inspectors seem to be in this city."

"Send them to me," she clipped. Ben watched her face carefully. Although the hologram interfered with the finer nuances of expression, he could see that she was shaken.

"Right away, Senator." He picked up his own datapad and began transferring the files. "I hope you find them enlightening. If you have any more information pertinent to this investigation, I would be glad to hear it. In the meantime, I must contact the mayor about your little disturbance," he spat out the word like an insult. "Kenobi out."

Away from the prying eyes of the holodisk, Ben glowered, hand stroking his beard. She had heard of the murders - but she hadn't heard how many there had been. It did not change the fact that she had done nothing to act. The whole city seemed to be stacked against Goc Fiyao, from the city services to the police all the way up to the Senate. But Thane's shock upon hearing the actual numbers changed the shade of corruption. If she had been orchestrating a real cover up, she would not have been shocked. She would have pretended to be, for sure. But she would have denied knowledge, she wouldn't have asked for the reports.

Something was not right.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Ben said to the air, rubbing his temples. Bracing himself, he turned his holodisk back on and dialed the mayor's direct frequency.

Across the city, locked in her office and clutching a comm angrily in her fist, Damaera Thane was hissing at an unseen audience.

"Thirty-six? You said it'd stopped at twelve. Do you want me impeached?"

"If you don't calm yourself, you'll impeach yourself. Leave it to me,"

She sighed in exasperation and marched to the large bay window of her office. "And there's another thing," she said, glaring out the window toward the southeastern corner of the city, buildings burning orange in the light of a hot sunset. "They've sent a Jedi to investigate."

"Who is it?"

"His name's Ben Kenobi. I've dealt with him before - believe me, he's trouble."
A quiet, amused chuckle. "Of course. As I said, senator, leave it to me."

"All of the most recent murders have taken place here," Ben gestured to a holomap where he'd detailed the dates, locations, and victims. Ky'elee frowned at it.

"But none of these Twi'lek are from that neighborhood," she pointed at the town square where Ben's investigation centered. "This isn't even a residential block. It's a major thoroughfare."

"Exactly. This murderer, whoever they are, isn't an opportunist. They're waiting for their victims to arrive. They target them, wait, and ambush."

"But…" Ky'elee struggled with the mental picture. She may have been a freighter captain back on Ryloth, but she'd run with enough smugglers and pirates to know a thing or two about strategy, and what made a very good - or very bad - ambush. "It's too busy. Too open. How in the nine hels did they dodge the holocams? Or other people, for that matter? It's not possible." She looked to Ben for explanation. "And even then… they're targeting specific victims, staging an ambush, and killin' them out in the open? What in the galaxy for?"

"I don't know," Ben admitted. He stroked his beard, staring at the collage of red dots on the map. "But I intend to find out."

Ky'elee eyed him, skeptical. "And how do you suppose you're going to do that?"

Ben shrugged. "Well, I know their favorite haunt," he gestured at the map. "I thought I might drop by and ask them myself."
As always, a huge thank you to en-shaedn, who has edited this chapter and made sure I didn't get too longwinded.

One or two people have accurately guessed what is going to happen in this chapter – but even the ones with the most accurate guesses did not predict everything that is going to happen in this chapter, so buckle up.

In was quiet in the Jedi Temple. Even on Coruscant there existed a nightly hour, somewhere around two or three standard in the morning, when the civilized world slowed to a lethargic crawl, a respite to circadian species everywhere.

It was at this point in the morning when Master Zyrha woke up and wondered why she had.

Her room was quiet, and she could sense that the adjacent dormitory was equally so. Skycar lights strobed through the blinds at unhurried intervals, helping her to count her steady breaths as she concentrated on whatever had awoken her.

Pat. Pat. Too quiet for other species to hear, the Selonian could just barely make out someone very small tip-toeing across the dormitory. Quietly, she rose from her bed and went out to see who she already knew it would be.

"Anakin," she whispered, and the youngling spun to look at her. He was still in his nighttime clothes, and looked like he'd prefer to be asleep. "Did you have a bad dream again?"

Anakin rubbed his eyes and nodded.

Zyrha went over to the collection of cushions in one corner of the dormitory and lowered herself onto one, dark fur glinting in the artificial moonlight. She crossed her legs and let the youngling climb into her lap and bury his face in the softness of her coat. "Do you remember anything about it?" She asked, as she always did.

"Nu'uh," slurred Anakin, as he always did. "It was bad. Couln' sleep."

Zyrha rubbed his back in soothing circles, exuding a suggestion of calm. "Alright, then," she cooed, hoisting him a bit higher against her so she could rock him gently – a handy trick for viviparous species – and hope that he would fall asleep more quickly than last time. "Bad dreams are nothing to be afraid of. They pass in time." Anakin, eyes already closed, nodded against her.

She had not informed any of the Council about Anakin's propensity to bad dreams. Everyone knew that Sarsan, Anakin's joined-at-the-hip Zygerrian brother, had been having precognitive visions since he was too young to understand them. But he'd also learned very young how to control them. Anakin's dreams were never so substantial. They were not visions; he never remembered anything. He would wake with no recollection except a strong sense of unease, fear, or sadness, and it would keep him awake for hours. Anakin was an emotional sponge, holding on to bad feelings for days at a time. He needed to learn how to let go. He also needed sleep.
Zyrha heard his breathing even out into nocturnal puffs, but she kept rocking the boy to be sure. Then, unexpectedly, he asked in a very quiet, very drowsy voice,

"Master?"

She pretended it hadn't startled her awake. "Yes, Ani?"

"Where is Master Ben?"

She smiled slightly, wondering if he was sleep-talking. "I don't know, little one. He'll be back before you know it."

Anakin did not register the lightheartedness of her tone, and drew his sleepy brow into a frown. "I hope he's okay," said the youngling, nuzzling deeper into Zyrha's fur. The master frowned, but said nothing. She rocked the boy until he fell asleep and put him back in bed.

The question about Ben stuck with her through the night like a tug on her sleeve.

First light had not yet broken on Kuat. The planet was a small one, and had short, twenty-hour days. At the moment, Ben Kenobi thought they felt much longer.

He shifted in his cloak, hoping to find new warmth hiding in its folds. It was no use. Rainclouds had appeared overhead some hours ago, unleashing their payloads in light but neverending currents that chilled the nighttime air. The shops on Uru Square were all closed, windows shuttered, doors locked. Because of the rain, Ben had relocated his stakeout to a shop lined with awnings. A stream of water ran off one corner of the slope and pooled next to his right boot. It smelled like garbage. He scooted slightly further away from the edge and sighed.

This was the third night of Ben’s attempted confrontation, and it was just as boring, nerve-wracking, and fruitless as the first two. The rain was new. Ben attempted to hide a yawn, realized that there were no other Jedi around to judge him for it, and then let it split his face. The air tasted of ozone, only slightly stale from the city streets, and it made him tired.

He would have liked to call in a replacement, but the only person who knew he was here was Ky'elee, and she was likely asleep by now. He was on his own. Years of training allowed him to stay awake; he could almost hear Qui-Gon's reprimands from years ago. *We are luminous beings, padawan. We do not rely on our bodies alone; we rely also on the Force, and it is a powerful ally.* Ben fell into a meditative trance, eyes closed and senses stretched out beyond himself.

Hours passed. It was still raining and not quite dawn when something trod on a finger of his senses. His eyes snapped open and he turned his head to look across the square. The four inbound streets were empty, the rotary circle and its centerpiece garden abandoned. But somewhere, someone lurked - someone afraid. Ben drew up the hood of his cloak and stepped out into the rain.

The roads of Goc Fiyao were web-like in their construction, branching out in interconnected angles and circles, creating oddly shaped buildings and criss-crossing paths. Ben weaved through one corner of the maze, following his senses to a darkened street some blocks away from the square.

"Please, please! I don't know what you're talking about!"

Ben's hand shot to his lightsaber; he did not recognize the voice, but he could recognize fear. Another voice said something unintelligible, tone low and threatening. Slinking along the edge of a building, Ben followed the sounds to the opening of an alleyway. It was dark - too dark to see faces or weapons, but the silhouettes were unmistakable. A man - by its height and wide shoulders, it
could only be a man - held a Twi'lek aloft by the collar. Heels kicking the wall, lekku flailing, he clawed at the hands holding him. "Please! I don't know anything - I-I have credits, what do you want?" The assailant's grip tightened, and the Twi'lek began to choke.

Ben turned the corner and ignited his lightsaber. "That's enough - put him down."

Both heads turned toward him. Holding the Twi'lek with one arm, the assailant waved his right hand toward Ben, the outline of a blaster shining in the blue light of Ben's weapon. Dots of light reflected off of the man's eyes, peering at Ben with menacing intent. "And who are you?" He snarled.

"My name is Ben Kenobi, Jedi Master. Now put him down." The Twi'lek was going limp.

The would-be murderer did nothing at first, frozen in his pose. He blinked, momentarily obscuring the glint off his eyes. "Very well," he said at last. He let go of the Twi'lek, turned, and shot him in the head. The body slumped to the ground.

Ben recoiled, aghast at the sudden action and the fact that he hadn't been able to see it coming. The fear of the Twi'lek had brought him here, but the villain's intentions were muffled, as if hidden behind a thick curtain. A shield, Ben realized. He is shielding. With the Force. Ben brought his saber out in front of him, anticipating blaster fire that he might not be able to sense coming.

Instead, the man tossed his blaster away into a puddle and raised his right hand. Something flew up from his belt and smacked into his glove. A familiar, unexpected screech split the night air. A red lightsaber blade launched from its hilt, sizzling against the rain. Another joined it from the opposite side. In the double halo of light, Ben could make out the features of a young Zabrak warrior, tattooed red and black. His eyes glowed.

The shields collapsed. Violent waves of rage and anger shot through Ben's chest, flooding his mind with a presence he had not felt in over thirty years. In thrall to his emotions, Ben could not move. Maul advanced, undaunted.

It was just before dawn on Coruscant, and some of the more dedicated masters were already waking up and beginning their contemplative morning routines. Feemor Gard did not possess such habits. He was fast asleep until his apprentice began screaming.

"Aola? Aola!" He barged into her room to find her awake and panicking. Tears were streaming down her face as she untangled her legs from the coverlet, kicking as if it were a villain. "Aola, what's happened?" He went to her and grabbed a stray wrist, trying to bring her under control. "Lass, lass, calm down - what's wrong?"

The frantic girl grabbed his arms in a vice, eyes wet and staring at some unseen horror. "It's Ben," she cried, voice hoarse so early in the morning, "It's Ben, Master, it's about Ben, he's going to kill Ben!"

"What are you talking about? Who's going to kill Ben?"

"The Sith," She said, sobbing from shock, "the man with the red saber; he's a Sith."

Ben's guard was reflexive, and it was by the grace of the Force that he found presence of mind to hold it steady. Maul's staff slammed onto Ben's saber with enough force to push him backward.

"Kenobi," Maul hissed through the whitehot clash of the blades. For a moment, Ben forgot that he was in the past. Here he was again; his nemesis, the deranged madman who would not die, would
not let him rest. "You were the one aboard the Juclima," the Zabrak said.

Ben was nonplussed. "What?"

Maul rebounded with the other half of his staff and dug through Ben's left bicep. The Jedi screamed and fell back, recovering his grip. Maul leaped through the air, falling into the fight with predatory gusto. Whirling through the air in threatening loops, the saberstaff reflected off of Ben's desperate parries and nearly took off his already injured arm. Ben's shock had made him slow; his confusion had made him clumsy. He ducked beneath an overhead swipe with centimeters to spare, coming up with an underhanded strike that Maul saw a mile away. The Zabrak caught Ben's swordhand in an iron fist, using his saber to press Ben's own blade closer to his face.

"You were there," He hissed, spittle flying from his lip. "Now tell me, what happened on Tatooine?" He pressed against the saber even harder, scalding hot rain spitting up on their faces and tunics. "What did you do?"

It suddenly occurred to Ben that Maul had not yet been to Tatooine; that, in this timeline, he might not ever go to Tatooine. Anakin was not on Tatooine. Qui-Gon certainly wasn't on Tatooine. There was no treaty, no blockade, no reactor core. And yet, somehow, the Sith knew about Tatooine.

"They were all on that ship," Ben realized aloud, "you interrogated - you killed all those people because they landed on Tatooine." He shook his head, grunting when he had to use his left arm to brace his grip on the saber. The hum of his own blade was deafeningly close.

"But none of them know what you know," said the Zabrak. He stomped on Ben's foot, causing the Jedi to cry out and nearly jerk into the cross of their blades. "Tell me what happened on Tatooine," he growled.

Ben was choking on the steam their blades left in the air and the pain from his arm and his foot. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"There was a shift in the Force itself, and you were at the center of it, on Tatooine. Now tell me what you did, or I will-"

"Or you'll what?" Ben interrupted, "kill me?"

Maul glared into him, staring him down like he had all those years ago on Naboo, pacing behind rayshields with murder in his eyes. "You have a weakness," threatened the Sith, "I will find it, and it will bring you to your knees."

Ben thought immediately of Qui-Gon, of the split second before the man's death when he'd realized what was going to happen. His face; the wound; the smell of burnt flesh. It was this saberstaff, Ben realized, blinking through the brightness of the blades to see the long hilt. It was the same one that had killed - that could kill and… would?

They knew about Tatooine. They knew about Ben. They could, in the unknown future, use either to find Qui-Gon. Or Anakin. Or both.

A surge of dormant rage exploded from beneath thirty years of grief, compounded by the newfound hope Ben had discovered in this life, in knowing Qui-Gon as he'd always wished to, in bringing Anakin home, in fixing things. It was a righteous rage, white hot, but tainted by his heart's possessive intent. "We all have weaknesses," he hissed, mustering strength with his left hand to dislodge Maul's fingers from his wrist. "I already know yours."

Knowledge of the future was a powerful thing. Power a Jedi craves not; but sometimes, Jedi must
use it all the same. Ben dislodged Maul's hand and sent him barrelling backward with a Force shove. The delay gave Ben a moment to regroup, to shake off the pain in his arm and his foot and plant himself in the Force. Light and dark swirled around him in an undisciplined version of Vaapaad, lending an edge to Ben's sanddune Soresu.

Maul's fighting style was just as Ben remembered it. He slashed downward, and Ben caught it with an upward parry. Immediately, the Sith spun and rebounded, aiming for Ben's knees. Ben caught it and pushed the blade high, so the inevitable second rebound would hit the ground. It did, carving a jagged welt in the pavement. Maul kicked a boot at Ben's face, but the Jedi knew to expect it; he ducked, came up face-to-face with his opponent, and dashed the lightstaff in two.

One of the lightsaber crystals exploded with a loud bang, spraying sparks and bits of hilt all around the alley. Maul yelled and took up the second, still-operable blade. He charged with renewed bloodlust in his eyes, launching strike after strike, ducking Ben's retaliations, face alight with the determination to win.

Ben did not see each strike arrive individually. He took them on in a blur of light, a series of moves and parries that he had played and replayed in his mind a thousand times. It was the face and the encounter of his nightmares, resurrected in the most unexpected moment to seize him with fear.

_Fear leads to anger_, Master Yoda's words reminded him of his rash decisions on Tatooine. But what could he do now? Surrender? Die? _Anger leads to hate_. Maul's blade was cutting close at him, but he was not in danger. He would only lose if he let himself lose. Hate. Passion. There was no passion, there was serenity. _No_, Ben thought, mind hot with memory and heresy. _Passion, yet serenity_. He aborted his thought process here, abandoning whatever other virtues the Old Code might have demanded of him. His serenity was defined only by the feel of cold rain on his skin. His passion was the fight, the sight of the Sith who'd killed his master, punctuated by the piercing memory of the last duel, the last death.

He only emerged from his well of memory when he realized that the fight was his. Worn down by Ben's relentless defense, Maul was attempting a falling leaf dive, blade high above his head, vulnerable and desperate. Ben caught the hilt of his saber on the way down and tossed it away, where it sputtered out and landed with a splash. Without the red light, everything seemed oppressively blue. Maul landed and faced his opponent in the sudden realization that he was weaponless. Ben did not hesitate. He sliced his saber through the air to claim victory; Maul's head fell to the ground. The rest of his body followed.

The rain continued to fall. Ben watched new rivulets of red run through the street's currents and brush against his boot. Blinking, as if out of a trance, he looked at the fallen Sith. He thought of Qui-Gon, of Adi Gallia, of Satine. What had ever become of Maul, after the Purge? Ben had never allowed himself to wonder. Gazing at the corpse, he could only think: _he's so young_.

Soaked through, bleeding from his arm, and limping from the cracked bones in his foot, Ben disengaged his saber and leaned against a wall. It was only after the hum of the lightsaber was gone that he realized he was heaving for breath. The air was too thick and humid for his panicked lungs. He looked again at Maul's body, as if to assure himself that it would not reanimate.

_Force, he's hardly more than a boy._

The Sith's robes were soaking and black, blending in with the dark, wet street. His head cast a garish silhouette against a moonlit mirror of rain. Suddenly, the Jedi felt as if he was going to be sick. He stumbled to the opening of the alleyway and fumbled for his commlink.

"Ky'elee," he said into it, not caring that it was hours before dawn, "Ky'elee," he said, louder.
Eventually, she answered. "Master Ben? You're out in this storm?"

He ignored whatever she had to say. "Call the local authorities. I've found him."

"Stars and moons almighty - I'll get them right away. Is everything?"

"They'll need a coroner for the body - both bodies." He winced when he realized he'd forgotten all about the poor Twi'lek victim. Yet another family who had to grieve. Yet another soul lost to the whims of the Sith. But not Qui-Gon, part of him said. It will never be Qui-Gon. Paired with his handiwork on Maul's person, that sentiment was too dark a conundrum to face.

"You said you found him," Ky'elee said, voice thin with alarm.

"I did," Ben told her, and closed his eyes in conflicted shame. "And I killed him. But not before he killed someone else." He rubbed sweaty rain from his eyes. "I'm sorry."

Ky'elee said nothing for a moment. "The local police are on their way. Are you alright, Master?"

He was bleeding and injured, and it would be unwise to stay out in the rain. "Contact the Jedi Council immediately," he said, eyeing Maul's fallen saber. "Tell them I'm returning to the temple."

"Sir, it's very early morning on Coruscant, will they even-"

"Immediately, please."

"Yes, sir," Ky'elee said uncertainly, and cut off the transmission. In the aftermath, the rain was simultaneously too loud and too soft. The first light of dawn was seeping across the sky, illuminating the gore of Ben's victory. Ben looked at it and grimaced, feeling no gratification in any of it. He felt only fear; fear of himself, fear of the future. You have a weakness, the voice echoed in his head. It will bring you to your knees.

His sense of duty kept him there until the police arrived. If not for this, he would have fled.

They collected the remains and identified the last murder victim. They interviewed Ben for his account of the fight, and relinquished the lightsaber into his custody, as galactic jurisdictions demanded. Ben had no choice but to use the word 'Sith' in his account.

He thought of Thane, of the Senate, of Palpatine. He thought also of Bail, who had apparently been the one to send him into this mess. A coroner droid pushed a repulsor-stretcher to a shuttle, the head an awkward lump to the side of the body. Sith. There would be repercussions.

"Master Kenobi," Ky'elee appeared, jogging up to him from her ship. "Stars' light, man, you look terrible." She picked at his sopping robes and eyed his charred-through sleeve. "Do they not have first aid?"

"I need to leave," he said softly, mind whirring. "Did you contact the Council?"

"Yes," she was watching him with mounting concern. "Master Ben, you're in no shape to leave, you need fresh clothes and medical attention."

"I need to go. Now."

Something in his voice must have struck a chord with Ky'elee. Whether it was a good or bad chord, no one could say. "Alright," She said at length. "We're holding a service for Rortu tonight. Will you stay for that, at least?"
He didn't want to, but it was his failure to bear. He bowed his head. "Yes."

After the service, Ky'elee took Ben to the Drive Yards, where a Jedi ship was waiting. Ben's solemn countenance almost stopped her, but at the last moment the pilot turned back and enveloped him in a hug. "Thank you, Ben," she said. "You've saved my people again."

"Not all of them," Ben reminded, sadly. She pulled away and fixed him with a stern look.

"You cannot do everything," she told him, unaware of the weights on his heart. "You saved many, many lives last night. Do not dwell on what is not."

Ben mustered a smile for her. "I come to serve, Ky'elee. I wish you and Goc Fiyao all the best." He bowed. "May the Force be with you."

She smiled. "May the Force be with you, Master."

The trip to Coruscant was mercifully short. Ben wrote a report for the Council, but he did not send it in. He gave it to a droid at the landing dock and went on into the temple. Everywhere, Jedi of all ages continued on as though nothing were amiss. Initiates laughed at their inside jokes, Masters spoke in quiet, unrushed tones. All was well.

Ben wondered where along the grapevine his report currently lay.

He arrived at the Jinn/Kenobi apartments without having to think about where he was going. Qui-Gon answered the door.

"Ah, Ben, you're back. You're… your arm."

"Can I come in?" Ben asked, and he must've used a tone of voice that Qui-Gon recognized from Obi-Wan, because the master stood aside without another word. Ben came in and began pacing.

"You're limping," Qui-Gon observed. He glanced up and down Ben's singed, haggard mien.

"Master, I…" Where to start? He chewed on his thumbnail, which made Qui-Gon frown more deeply. "Where is your apprentice?" Ben asked.

"Training. It's Dooku's day with him."

Ben nodded and continued biting his nails and pacing.

After watching this display for several tense minutes and receiving no explanation, Qui-Gon said quietly, "Obi-Wan,"you're frightening me."

"I've killed a man," Ben confessed suddenly, "and I'm not sure if it was out of revenge or not."

Qui-Gon absorbed this. "Revenge for what?"

"For your death."

Master Jinn's eyebrows rose. "Ben…" He reminded, "I'm still very much alive."

"I know that," Ben hissed, rounding to face the master, "you don't think I know that? But he… It was just the same as… You can't understand," he lamented - not patronizing; only alone. "He was just the same. It was the same damned weapon and everything. All I could see was you… The last
Qui-Gon's expression was conflicted. "Did you want to kill him?"

Ben shrugged, helplessly. "Of course I did. He killed you - he killed Satine, he killed so many people…” He frowned and rubbed his brow. "Could have. Would have killed. He attacked me first. But I didn't exactly hold back, did I? I couldn't… I had to kill him, didn't I? He was a murderer. He was a Sith - he was going to-"

"He was a Sith?" Qui-Gon burst. "What do you mean, a Sith?"

"Force," Ben cried into his hands, "he was so young."

Qui-Gon was reeling from the revelation. "Have you spoken with the council? Do they know?"

"Not yet." Ben looked up. "My report will get to them within an hour, maybe two." He paused to frown deeply. "He said he would find my weaknesses and exploit them. I already knew his, and I used them to kill him." His face screwed up in confused grief. "Am I going dark?"

Qui-Gon sighed out of stress, knowing that the same brooding that was bad for Obi-Wan was bad for Ben. "Have you been to the healers yet?" He asked, eyeing the swollen bicep and the foot that Ben favored.

"What?" Asked the apprentice, still lost in his own thoughts.

"Alright then," said the master, coming over to put a gentle hand on his former pupil's shoulder, "let's go."

The examination room in the healer's wing was exceptionally quiet. Qui-Gon had stayed by Ben's side out of habit, and perhaps a little bit of concern. Vokara was handling Ben's bruised foot with ginger hands.

"It's not broken," she pronounced at length, "though you've several hairline fractures on your metatarsals, and some nasty bruising to boot. Stay off it as much as you can, sleep with it propped up, and it should heal fine on its own. Now. What about that arm?"

When Ben took off his shirt and uncovered the wound, Qui-Gon winced. It was a deep cut, slicing through skin and muscle. The edges were already beginning to grey, charred skin and blisters left behind by a deadly hot weapon. Vokara stared at it, a cold feeling in her lungs.

"Ben," She said, "This is a lightsaber wound."

"Yes, it is," said Ben, unalarmed.

She looked him in the eye. He looked back, and shrugged. "I've had worse."

Qui-Gon and the healer shared a look, both of them thinking of the day, now years ago, when they'd discovered the sai-cha scar on Ben's neck. "Regardless," Vokara demurred. She produced a small laser tool and began to cut away the dead skin. Behind Ben, Qui-Gon's commlink chirped at him.

"Excuse me." He stepped out of the room. Vokara watched him go.

"What happened?" She asked when they were alone. Ben sighed.

"Qui-Gon's murderer." She paused in her work to look him in the eye. "I killed him."
She took out a sizable container of bacta and scooped it onto the wound. "He had a lightsaber."

"He was a Sith." A huge blob of the bacta slipped from her hand and fell to the floor. She fixed him with wide eyes. "So yes, he had a lightsaber. In fact..." Ben glanced over to where his tunic and belt lay in a heap. He used the Force to uncover a hidden pocket in one of the tabards. The jagged edge of a lightsaber peaked out. "I still have it."

Vokara was wrapping up his arm in bandages. "You need to speak with the Council," she told him, haunted by the memory of all he'd told her years ago. Sith. War. Death.

Ben clenched his jaw, mind whirring in disturbing circles, as it had been since he'd left Kuat. *I've left this too long.*

"Ben," Qui-Gon appeared in the doorway, as if on cue, holding his commlink. "It's the Council. They've tried contacting you directly. They want to meet with you."

"When?"

"Now."

Ben took a shaky breath and nodded. Vokara finished with her bandages and let him put his clothes back on. He wouldn't have time to change his waterstained, scorchmarked clothes.

"Thank you, Master Che," he gave her a sweet smile despite the pain. "As ever, I am in your debt."

They watched him limp out of the Halls. "I've never seen Obi-Wan be so nice to you," Qui-Gon teased, hoping to lighten the mood. Vokara only shrugged.

"I gather he's been through enough to change his tune," she said.

"Like what?"

"You saw the wound, Master Jinn. You've seen the scars." She walked around him to the hall. "Excuse me. I have patients to attend to."

On his way to the council room, Ben heard a loud gasp. He turned to see who it was, but Aola was already halfway to him. She slammed into him, hugging him as tightly as her growing arms would allow.

"Master Ben," she said against his chest, "You're okay."

Wincing for his arm, Ben looked up above Aola's head to see Feemor jogging up behind her. "Yes, Aola," He laid a reassuring hand on her back. "Yes, I'm fine."

"I thought he was going to kill you," She whispered. Feemor had caught up, and Ben looked at him, surprised.

"She saw," the master explained, face grim. He glanced at Ben's singed sleeve. "I'm glad to see you in one piece."

Aola refused to relinquish her hold. Ben patted her again. "Padawan, I must appear before the Council."

"He was a Sith, wasn't he?" She asked. Ben could see Feemor tense behind her. He studied her face for a moment, savoring this last moment of innocence.
"Yes," he told her.  

Even though she'd seen it, hearing it aloud was jarring. "Did you… kill him?"

Ben thinned his lips, unable to look either of them in the eye. "That's what the Council wants to speak to me about. I need to go."

"Force be with you, master," Aola said, brushing his sleeve. He smiled for her, and nodded at Feemor. He was going to need it.
Confidant

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to en-shaedn. There are several lines here that are entirely her concoction – and if you see references to Ky'elee and Breha, you can thank my lovely editor for reminding me to follow up on those threads.

The Council was quiet. There was no protocol for this; no precedent. Even Grandmaster Yoda had not been alive long enough to remember the last rise of the Sith.

"Master Kenobi," began Mace Windu, solemn and agitated, "we have received your report on the situation in Goc Fiyao on Kuat. Insofar as the Twi'lek are concerned, the Council considers the matter closed. Your report and those we have received from the Kuati authorities and Ky'elee Fenn have provided sufficient information for the Council's records." Ben did not nod or bow. He took a deep breath and braced for impact. "However," the Master of the Order glared, "there remains another matter."

A pause, as if everyone did not already know why they were here.

"The Sith," Yoda spoke the words looming in all of their minds. The other council members watched the Grandmaster carefully, but Yoda had eyes only for Ben, and they stared into his soul. "Why you are here this is. The darkness that you spoke of this is."

Ben drew in a breath and let it out slowly. "It is the beginning." Only, not as he remembered it.

"The beginning of what?" Ki Adi Mundi asked.

Ben eyed him, not entirely sure what to say. "Last time, it was the end of this Order," subdued alarm over that, "but now..." It was too early. The Sith were sniffing him out, and they'd blown their cover. Would they run? Would they advance? The future was no longer recognizable. I've left this too long. I've left it too long and I've killed Maul, and Force only knows what comes next. Ben swallowed hard. "I don't know."

"Know the future none of us can," Yoda pointed out, squinting at Ben, "know only possibilities. Follow the Force we must."

"But we will not follow blindly for sake of one man's ego," Mace cut in. Ben bit the inside of his cheek. Yoda's squint intensified.

"Saw this Sith months ago in a vision, Aola Tarkona did."

Ben closed his eyes. He could tell where this was going. "Yes, Master."

"Recognize her visions for what they were, you did."

"I... suspected, master."

"And said nothing you did," Yoda snapped, genuine anger leaking through. Ben's hands, folded into opposite sleeves, dug into his wrists. He bowed his head low.
"That is correct, Master." He felt like a youngling standing accused. He could've melted right into the floor.

Master Yoda had nothing else to say. He leaned back into his seat, craggy face scrunched in severe disappointment. Receiving such a look by itself would have been punishment enough.

Mace Windu took over. "Master Kenobi, you have held this council in contempt for too long. You have withheld information about the future, about the Sith, about everything you have experienced and how it may pertain to this Order and this Republic. We have suffered your secrecy for over four years, out of respect for your perception of the Force's will, and on the advisory of Master Yoda. However." Ben knew what was going to come next. In some ways, it was a relief. It would be a humbling blow, aimed at the jugular, but even now the Force reached out to him and whispered the first inklings of a response. It was high time. "In light of recent events, we cannot allow you to withhold such vital information from this Council any longer."

Mace took a breath, winding up for what was no doubt a well-rehearsed, scathing, unequivocal argument. To his surprise, Ben Kenobi forestalled him by nodding gently and saying, "Yes, I know."

The Korun master actually stopped short. "I'm sorry?"

Ben looked up, sheepish but determined to overcome it. "I cannot hope to keep what I know to myself any longer. Since I've… arrived here, I had thought…" He gestured with his hands, unfamiliar with the sensation of speechlessness. "When the future was clearer, when nothing had changed, I was confident in my decision. But now… everything has changed. I cannot see clearly. I know I am not alone here. I must not act like I am."

"You intend to share information with the Council, then?" Mace asked. Ben eyed him keenly.

"I…" he began, uncertain to his core. "I'm not sure how," He confessed.

"If this man you killed was in fact a Sith Lord, we need to know more, we need to act," said Saesee Tiin.

"I understand that," Ben replied, "but you must understand that I cannot - I should not tell you everything right now."

"And why not?" Asked Mace Windu, with venom.

"Because you will be afraid," Ben snapped. "You will all be afraid of the future I've seen, as I am. That fear will infect this Council just like it did the last time, and will destabilize this entire Order from the top down." Ben shook his head. "Just like last time."

A brief silence as the Council absorbed what he'd said. Eventually, Plo Koon leaned forward and said, "Your logic is sound, Master Kenobi, but you forget that we are not here to upset your mission. We are here to help you. If you truly wish to subvert fear, you must not keep it clutched so closely to your own chest."

The Kel Dor master always had been gifted with insight. "Master Koon is right," Eeth Koth concurred. "We are on your side, Master Kenobi. But we must know what you know in order to help you."

"I appreciate your confidence, masters," Ben began, mentally wrestling his own doubts into submission to project his words with a councilor's authority. "But I did not arrive at my decision lightly. I know that all of you are on my side - in another life, we were all very good friends. I myself was a member of the High Council. I know your inner workings, I understand your concerns." He
glanced about the room, wishing in this moment he could see his friends, not his Council. "So please hear me not as an upstart, but as a colleague: it would be extremely unwise to entrust all that I know to so many powerful people at once."

Several councilors seemed surprised and impressed to hear that Ben had once been a councilor. Mace Windu, who already knew that particular secret, was unmoved.

"Then what do you propose to do, Kenobi?" The Master of the Order asked, growing weary of the Negotiator's soapbox. "Do not let your own fear cloud your judgement."

Ben took a deep breath, glancing at Master Windu and then the rest of the assembly. "I am prepared to offer the Council a choice. I can either share incomplete knowledge with the entire Council right now," he paused, "or I could entrust all that I know with one individual, a representative who can keep me accountable, and give me much needed advice as we move forward." His eyes pleaded clemency from his superiors. I've left it too long. Ben wondered if he should have done this months ago, or years. Had it been wise to wait until the Sith reappeared? Do not center on your anxieties. This was the here and now. The past was done.

"An intermediary?" Master Rancisis asked.

"Yes," Ben nodded. "To whose judgement I will defer on what knowledge to share with the Council and when."

Even Mace Windu seemed intrigued by that idea. As the rest of the councilors considered his proposal, Ben filled the silence with a humble disclaimer. "I am sorry that I have postponed this dilemma to such an extent."

Master Yoda peered at his great grandpadawan, considering the intent behind his words. At length, the venerable Jedi said: "Already have a candidate in mind you do." It was a statement, not a question.

Ben bowed to him. "Yes, master."

"It would have to be Grandmaster Yoda," Adi Gallia presumed. Others nodded their heads in agreement.

Ben tilted his in a diplomatic 'no'. "As I have told you, masters, the future that I have seen is darker than anything any of you suspect. I can only share my experience and knowledge with someone who I know can carry the weight of it. Someone who has proven themselves time and again against the dark, who knows how to use the currents of darkness and not become a part of them." He let his gaze wander over the assembly of taciturn faces until finally his eyes found those of Mace.

"Master Windu," he said, respectfully. "Inventor of Vaapad, way of the vornskr."

Mace looked genuinely shocked. Yoda seemed pleasantly unsurprised at the verdict, and his ears dipped in sage agreement. The august councilors eyed each other, some more pleased than others. Coded looks flew around the room, silent conversations already underway. Yoda took stock of the muddled atmosphere and hummed. "Deliberate on this we must," he said, tapping his gimer stick on the edge of his seat. "Leave us you will." A softer look, coming from Yoda the great grandmaster and not Yoda the councilor. "Go, rest your injuries."

Ben obediently retreated from the chambers and pulled up his hood. When he returned to his own chambers, he found that he'd missed several calls from Bail Organa. He returned them immediately. As he'd suspected, the topic for conversation was the Sith Lord.
"I'm so glad you're alright," Bail breathed when he answered the comm. No need to consider the might-have-beens; their focus was on the now. "Are you sure it was a Sith?"

"As sure as anything," Ben said, blandly. He'd seen this particular Sith too many times, in life and in dreams. The image of his corpse was already haunting him, providing what was sure to be a new image in his nightmares.

"What will the Council do? Surely they'll have to forward this information to Chancellor Valorum."

"I'm not sure. I've just been in to see them. They are still deliberating."

"Of course. Will you let me know what they decide?"

"If what you suspect is accurate, Senator, I won't have to."

They exchanged a few more pleasantries to diffuse the tension. Bail asked after Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon, and teased Ben for still having not introduced them. Ben asked about the rumors he'd heard circulating in the secretaries' breakroom, and was gratified when Bail confirmed that he and Breha Antilles were in fact courting. Eventually, Ben's arm twinged, he winced, and Bail brought their conversation back around to the matter of Kuat.

"I was surprised to hear that Senator Thane has authorized a reward for your on-planet guide, Ky'eelee Fenn. Probably attempting to mitigate the damage from the whole mess, but at least it is benefiting someone deserving of every credit."

It was a silver lining. "I'm glad to hear it. I'm only sorry it took such a catastrophe to teach her a sense of diplomacy."

"It's a lucky thing that you were there," the senator said, no doubt wondering what would have happened if a younger or less experienced Jedi had been assigned to the case. Bail chuckled. "Hell, I wouldn't have even known about the problem if Senator Palpatine hadn't mentioned it to me."

Ben froze. "What?"

"Sheev Palpatine - you met him at the Alaris Prime dinner, I think. He's the one who brought Kuat's situation to the Coalition's attention. I understand he's close with Senator Thane. At any rate, he's the only reason I heard about it. He mentioned you, actually."

"Did he?" What happened on Tatooine? Maul had asked - no doubt at the behest of his master.

"Yes, apparently he'd heard about your work on Herdessa years ago, thought you might be a good fit for the job. He was right, of course."

"Of course," Ben parroted, feeling cold.

Bail seemed to pick up on it. "Are you alright, Ben?"

"I'm sorry… I need to go, Senator. Thank you for your call."

"Of course, Ben. May the Force be with you."

The transmission cut off, leaving him with a knot of unresolved tension in his gut.

Ben waited all day for another council summons. None came. There was, however, a knock at his door. He opened it to find Mace Windu on the other side.
"Master Windu," He said, training his expression of surprise into something less revealing. "Is this the council's decision, then?"

"They left it up to me to decide," Mace told him. There was an unusual emotion in his eyes, a mixture of vindication and humility. He let out a long, pensive sigh. "I've waited for over four years to ask you why the hell you're here and get a straight answer. Are you going to try and talk yourself out of it again?"

"No," Ben said, stepping aside so Mace could come inside. "No, I'm glad it's you."

"You brush me off for all this time, and now you change your mind?" The other Jedi scoffed. "You never cease to surprise me, Master Kenobi."

"As I've told you before, Mace," Ben ignored the inevitable flinch at the familiar moniker, "in another life, you and I were very close friends. I would be glad for you to understand that properly."

Ben made tea while Mace waited on the sofa. He watched Ben's every move, and Ben pretended not to notice. As soon as Ben brought the tea tray to the low table and sat across from him, Mace leaned forward and perched his fingers into a determined angle. "Start talking," he said.

Ben watched his tea with sad, relieved wrinkles showing under his fringe. Sapir leaves shifted against the bottom of his glass, and for the first time in a long time, the changing shapes gave him relief. "The man I killed is a Sith. A Zabrak, son of Mother Talzin of Dathomir. His name is Darth Maul. Last time… he killed Qui-Gon while I watched."

Mace's expression twitched in surprise, but only slightly. "Are you sure he is a Sith?"

"I have faced enough of them to know a pretender from the real thing," which in and of itself was a foreboding notion to accept. Ben gave Mace a meaningful look. "He is a Sith."

"Which one?"

"The apprentice."

"And the master?"

Ben paused mid-sip and wondered how he ought to explain. There was too much for words. "I should start at the beginning. But… perhaps it would be better if I showed you." He set down his teacup carefully. Mace's frown surprised Ben with a shade of concern.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

Ben nodded. "It would be easiest - for me, at least. I can't say the same for you."

"You seemed to think that I could handle it," Mace reminded.

"Where no one else can. Not even Master Yoda." It was a heavy judgement, and gave the Korun pause. "You'll want to brace yourself."

Mace considered the warning with appropriate gravity. "Very well," he said. The two Jedi drank deeply from their tea bowls before setting them aside on the tray. Atop their respective seats, they drew up their legs into the lotus meditation pose, closing their eyes and relaxing their shoulders. They rested their hands on either knee; the left they kept bent, palm facing toward themselves. The right, they let fall out over their right knee, palm outstretched toward each other.
Memory sharing was an incredibly simple, incredibly intimate exchange between Force users. Jedi learned how to do it, sometimes by accident, in the creche. It made storytime more interesting and helped agemates bond. But after the simplicity of childhood had passed, such communion was, if practiced at all, used only between master and apprentice or perhaps very close friends. Or, in this case, between unforeseen confidants.

They closed their eyes. "I will start at the beginning," Ben said, as they both built up their shields. He carefully arranged the mental chronicle he'd replayed in his mind so many times but never once shared. "In the year twenty-five aught twenty-two. Qui-Gon and I had been sent to Naboo to negotiate a treaty between Theed and the Trade Federation."

Eyes closed, Mace frowned. "Twenty-five aught...That's still four years off. You said that this Sith was the beginning?"

"He was. Things have changed," Ben's frown intensified, "for better or worse."

They plunged ahead. As they fell headfirst into another time and place, Mace's breath hitched in his throat. Ben only sighed.

Hours later, after much time meditating and talking in hushed tones, Ben Kenobi and Mace Windu appeared before the Council. Mace did not sit forward in his seat as he normally did; he lounged back, eyes faroff, a pensive finger pressed to his lips. When he'd taken his seat, the other councilors could not help but watch. Master Yoda in particular watched his former pupil with interest, but Mace's reaction to his newfound knowledge was inscrutable.

Daylight was fading into dusk by the time the council had assembled. Without preamble, they dove into their discussion of the Sith, quietly deferring judgement to Mace Windu, the newly-appointed time traveller-confidant.

"We must bide our time," Mace was saying before the rest of the council. "This Sith and his master have spent decades planning their moves against the Jedi. Ben has thwarted one part of their conspiracy," he nodded at Ben, who stood once again in the middle of the assembly, "but we cannot assume that they will not have contingencies in place."

"You suggest that we do nothing?" Asked Saesee Tiin, baffled by such a change of sentiment in their Master of the Order.

"On the contrary, Master Tiin," Ben cut into the conversation. "We cannot do nothing. But we must not over-react."

"A Sith is hardly something a matter to consider lightly," said Adi Gallia.

"No, master. But provoking fear is something we must avoid - especially from within our own Temple."

"Master Kenobi is right," Ki Adi Mundi chimed in. "The Sith may be our Order's oldest enemy, but fear is older and more powerful still." He turned to look at Mace. "What say you, Master Windu?"

"I agree." The other councilors said nothing. "We cannot ignore the Sith, but we must not give them a spotlight."

"We must be as wise as vipers and as docile as shaak," Ben quoted.

Mace gave a nod. "Exactly."
"Tread carefully, we must," said Master Yoda, ancient eyes peering past the seen world into an intricate, invisible realm of thought. "Prepare, we must. Fear, we should not. Ignore the Sith we cannot, but center ourselves on their lies, we must not."

"We must be mindful of the Force, and the Light," Mace Windu spoke up. "Especially now that the Dark is growing stronger."

Sounds of agreement went about the room, followed by a pregnant pause.

"Master Kenobi," Adi Gallia spoke up at length.

Ben turned toward her. "Master?"

"Is there nothing else you can share with us today?"

Ben glanced at Mace Windu, who shook his head softly. "Only this, Master," Ben said, and drew out the broken-edged saber from an inner pocket. At the prompting of master Yoda, he ignited it. The red beam made several of the councilors draw in sharp breaths, unused to seeing their sacred weapon lit in such harsh colors. Master Yoda remained unaffected. Once Ben had deactivated the weapon, Yoda reached out a clawed hand and levitated the saber to himself.

"Luminous beings we are, not this gross matter," he reminded in a familiar and comforting tone. "Disturbing this is. Grim omen of the future this may be. But not unprepared are we." He nodded to the assembly, and then looked back to Ben. "Entrust this with the Sentinels I will, for study and safekeeping."

"Of course, Master," Ben bowed.

They adjourned on that note. The councilors slowly filed out of the room, each going to his or her affairs. Four members left together as a group, appointed to the task of composing the Council's official release on the matter of the Sith. Eventually, only Ben, Yoda, and Mace Windu remained. Silently, Yoda glanced between his two pupils, bowed slightly to both, and left.

It was dark out, as dark as Coruscant would ever be. City skyscrapers shone like sparkling lamps against a hazy navy-blue sky. Mace Windu's robes caught a soft gold outline as he stepped closer to Ben. The two Jedi watched each other, a new understanding only just budding between them. They hadn't had time to talk about all of it. They'd spoken of the Sith, and of Maul, and briefly of Qui-Gon's death. But there had been too much to say for only one evening.

"I understand why you chose me," Mace said eventually, no hint of arrogance in the statement. "But I do not understand why you waited until now." He stepped closer to Ben, lowering his voice to a whisper. Sky cars hummed across the sky in the intermediate quiet, apathetic witnesses to an intensely private conversation. "You knew that the Sith were coming. You've known about…" he glanced around, as if to reassure himself that no one was listening. "About Palpatine for months. Master Gard's apprentice has been having visions for months." The master shrugged, eyes begging the question. "Why now?"

Ben crossed his arms and stroked his beard. If he closed his eyes, he could almost imagine that he were back in the times of Before. "Mace, I only have one shot at this," he confided softly. "We only get one life in this galaxy, but I've been given a second chance. I don't know why, I don't know how. But I can't get it wrong." He looked up at his old friend and tried to communicate an apology. "I had to be sure. And I am sure that I cannot do this alone anymore."

Mace nodded quietly, turning to look out the windows. "The Skywalker boy. Do you really believe..."
"I believe he could be," Ben interrupted. "And I believe that I did the right thing on Tatooine. In bringing him here."

"He's the reason the Sith want to know about Tatooine."

"Yes."

"He's powerful - very powerful."

"Right now, he's just a boy," Ben corrected. "He may be powerful. He may even be the Chosen One. But he's just..." the image of baby Anakin sprung unbidden in his mind, the swaddled chance at redemption that Ben Kenobi had never deserved. "He's just a boy. I lost sight of that, last time. We mustn't get ahead of ourselves."

Mace glanced at the night sky, and at his feet, and at Ben's calm, unmoving expression. He laughed. "I don't know how you do it," he said, his smile somewhat hysterical.

"Do what?"

"Wait. Stand by with all of... all of that in your head, and not go mad."

Ben chuckled. "I've had a fair bit of practice. Still, I landed myself in nine months of censure the first time I stepped out the door," Ben glanced at the taller Jedi, "I would hardly call that 'not mad'."

Mace shook his head incredulously, mind's eye running through four years of memories in light of new knowledge. "I suppose you'll expect me to wait around and not go mad, too."

"You said it yourself. We must bide our time."

"Even if we know exactly who we're up against?" Mace turned to look at him. Ben met his gaze. It felt odd to be telling the Master of the Order what to do.

"We must not act rashly in fear; we seek harmony, not retribution."

Mace pursed his lips in reluctant agreement. "Well said, Kenobi."

"I really think you ought to call me Ben."

Mace strode toward the lift, leaving Ben behind in the quiet. "I'll think about it," he said. Ben smiled, happy to have found himself in Mace Windu's better graces - no matter how begrudging those graces might be. He stood alone in the council room for a while, nighttime isolation allowing him to feel his pent-up exhaustion. He stared out at the unsleeping Galactic City and rubbed idly at his arm.

"It will scar," Vokara advised, gentle hands prodding at his arm. "You're lucky it didn't dig any deeper, your arm might not've survived."

"Yes, I know." Ben watched her mop up the soiled bacta from the gaping wound and slather on a new layer. He smiled in morbid fascination. "Another to add to my collection."

Vokara shook her head, medical sensibilities amused and repulsed in equal measure by his humor. "I wager the other man fared far worse," She offered, watching him. Ben's smile disappeared, and he looked down at the floor. He couldn't confirm the obvious truth. "You're still questioning your own motives, aren't you?" She asked him. Ben looked up at her in surprise. "Qui-Gon told me," she
Vokara finished wrapping his arm and washed her hands. "I know it may not bring back any fond memories, but if you need anyone to talk to, Ben, remember that I'm here." She watched him with a maternal concern as he stood and pulled on his tunic. "You've been through a lot. More than any of us know. I won't pretend to fully understand, but… keeping it to yourself won't help your mind heal."

"I know." His smile was a twitch of hope in a sea of uncertainty. "One thing at a time. Thank you, Vokara," He kissed her on the cheek, and she patted him on the back as he left.

"Force be with you, Ben," she whispered behind him. Her mind strayed to the saber-hot edges of his wound. "Force be with us all."

"...last night before the Galactic Senate. According to Senator Damaera Thane of Kuat, a recent murder investigation has uncovered the presence of a Sith Lord in Kuat City."

Obi-Wan had the volume turned down as low as he could manage. It was past midnight and Qui-Gon expected him to be asleep, but he was wide awake, blue light washed over his pale sleep clothes and his wide-eyed expression. He hunched over his desk to see the blue holo more closely. A female news anchor spoke over footage of Chancellor Valorum speaking in front of the Senate body.

"...these allegations, Supreme Chancellor Valorum confirmed Thane's claims following a press release from the Jedi High Council, the ruling body of the Jedi Order." The image shifted to show a solemn Saesee Tiin, who must've been playing spokesperson for the Council.

"The Council can confirm that the criminal responsible for the recent murders in Kuat City was found, confronted, and ultimately killed in a confrontation with one of our Knights. We have strong reasons to believe that this perpetrator may have been a Sith Lord, and are investigating the matter further. Kuat's state of emergency has passed, but we will continue to keep a close eye on the developing situation surrounding this unusual character."

Obi-Wan snorted softly, without humor. Unusual wasn't the word he would have chosen.

" Authorities have not yet released any further footage on the Kuati Sith Murders, but we will keep you updated on all incoming information as it becomes available."

In the main room of the apartment, the front door opened. Immediately, Obi-Wan shut down his holo, sound and light gone in an instant. His eyes shone just barely in light filtering in past the curtains as he watched his bedroom door.

"Master," echoed Qui-Gon's baritone from outside. "It's a little late to be paying social calls."

"I assume you've heard the news," Dooku's bass resonated throughout the apartment, even at a low whisper.

Qui-Gon sighed. The door slid shut. "A Sith Lord," he said, and hearing his own master say it made the hairs on the back of Obi-Wan's neck stand on end.

"I always feared it may come to this," Dooku said, sighing as he sat. Obi-Wan tip-toed barefoot to the door, pressing his ear against the panel, braid tickling his bare collarbone.
"He's been killed," Qui-Gon pointed out.

"Yes, I heard. By Ben Kenobi no less - or so the rumor goes."

Obi-Wan's eyebrows raised, and rose higher still when Qui-Gon said: "Yes, it was him."

"You spoke with him?"

"Only briefly. He was shaken by the encounter."

"Rightfully so. If this Sith have truly returned..." Dooku sighed. A deep melancholy had fallen over the Force, dark burgundy tinted with fear. "No, they have returned. After a thousand years. I've always said this galaxy is becoming a darker and darker place. I'm not entirely sure that our Order is ready for it."

Qui-Gon mumbled something indistinct, and the pair fell silent.

Obi-Wan leaned his back against the door and stared into the darkness of his room, hearing the roar of an oncoming storm but unable to see its beginning or end.

The apprentice waited for hours, sleep far from his mind. After Dooku left for his own rooms and Qui-Gon fell asleep, Obi-Wan snuck out of his room. Still in his sleep clothes and wrapped in his cloak, he made his way down empty halls to an out-of-the-way repulsorlift.

After years of this unspoken, unplanned ritual, neither Kenobi was surprised to find each other in the basement halls. They sat together on the high flight of stairs near the back of the chamber.

Obi-Wan looked up and around at the hall. Its immense fixtures had become so familiar to him, he rarely remembered to look at the ancient glyphs and pillars with reverence. The Force down here, dense with centuries of life and death, felt disturbed, ripples of long history hearing the darkness of today and answering with echoes of the dormant past.

"You know," Obi-Wan broke the silence, voice echoing in the vastness. "I'm finally old enough that the archivists will let me access the records on this place."

Ben was wrapped in thought, staring at the walls and the desecrated floor, wondering how old this place really was, how many ghosts of darkness past remained with them, awakening only now. "Oh?" He asked, absently.

"Yes. It's a hall of rites. There was a sect of Jedi, founded millennia ago by a group who believed time travel was possible." Ben turned and looked at his younger self in surprise. Obi-Wan's gaze was fixed on the intricate mosaics that covered the walls. They'd held meaning, once. In another life, perhaps he would've been able to read them. "They believed that, in times of greatest need, the Force could bring an enlightened few, a chosen one, back or forward in time to bring balance, restore harmony. They dedicated their lives to mediating this will of the Force, attempting to discern when intervention was immanent."

"I had no idea," Ben said.

"Neither did I. Nor anyone. It never worked, you see."

"What, time travel?"

"Yes. They tried – they tried in the darkest times to summon help from the past and future. During the Schisms, the Hyperspace War; the Sith War, the Civil War." Obi-Wan turned to look at Ben, face
disturbed and seeking some kind of solace. "They were left without a temple, without hope, with less than a hundred Jedi left, who would eventually disband the Order itself, and…" he shrugged helplessly. "And it didn't work. It never did. Not even once." He looked down to the now years-old spot where the Force had ripped open and brought Obi-Wan Kenobi from the future.

"And yet… the Force chose to send you here, to us. Now. Unbidden. For what?" Obi-Wan was frightened. He could not hide it. He stared at the hall floor for what felt like hours. Ben said nothing to disturb him. Eventually, soft voice made hard by the merciless silence, Obi-Wan asked: "What is coming?"

Ben turned and looked at him with apology and reflected fear. "There's no way for me to know. It's all shifted; I'm grasping at the dark. But…" He looked to his younger self and thought of Tatooine, of Mace, of Master Yoda's sage advice to the Council. "But the Force would not have sent me here in vain. There is hope, Obi-Wan. There is always hope." He thought of Anakin. He remembered the face of Luke, a visage interrupted by the breaks in time but no less luminescent. "We must trust in the Force and its guidance."

"Right," Obi-Wan agreed, numb like a youngling repeating his meditation lines. He could not comprehend their meaning. "Yes, of course." The words echoed in the vast, dark chamber; they felt very small indeed.
In the months following Ben's confrontation with Maul, the shadow of the Sith fell across the Jedi Order. Fear was an unwelcome sentiment in the Temple, and it left the Council of First Knowledge in particular scrambling for a solution. It was Mace Windu himself who pushed for transparency. Ben, of course, supported him. They knew better than any other people alive that fear was their enemy - denial would compound its power.

At first, some people did try to deny that Maul was a Sith. While the Council had reached a decision on their official statements, the councilors were of course entitled to their own opinions. Not all of them took Ben's account at face value. For several months following Maul's death, rumors raged like wildfire in the temple. Sometimes, Maul was an assassin who'd gotten ahold of a lightsaber. Sometimes, he didn't have a lightsaber at all. Sometimes, Ben was blamed for embellishing the story, or perhaps in the dark he'd been mistaken.

Some people did believe that Ben had faced a darksider, but a Sith... the thought was too terrible to imagine. It was only after the Kuat authorities had completed their investigations and released grainy security footage to the Jedi Order that the air began to clear. The red lightsaber; the black robes; the fight and visible intent to kill. Ben's report had been accurate in every physical detail, so perhaps he might've been right about the other details.

But the word Sith had not been uttered outside of history class in a thousand years. It took a strong a decisive hand from the Order's leading members to instill their disparate body with a sense urgency and unanimity.

"The Sith have returned," Mace had spoken directly to a class of senior padawans in the early, confused days of the controversy, "but the Light has never left us. We will remain in the Force, as it remains in us."

Resilience became a byword in the Temple, even as politicians scrambled to smile away the Kuati Sith controversy. Ben knew the darkness was far from over; it had hardly begun. But it was different than last time. It was better - or at least, it was for now. Vaapad surged in popularity with senior padawans, and the Order took heart in its own history. Down to the creche, masters and apprentices alike guarded against despair.

Nevertheless, a restless undercurrent trickled beneath their efforts. It felt like the sort of itch you get when you've been sitting in one place for too long and have missed the oncoming of night. It was the sort of itch that Senators brushed off their shoulders, the sort of itch that Obi-Wan had ignored through the Clone Wars. They could not afford to ignore it now.

It was difficult to keep up such rigid vigilance for years at a time, but Ben was used to the trials of waiting. Months ran by like water, and soon there were young Jedi in the temple who had never known a day when the Sith were not a present reality. Before he'd glanced twice, the new curriculum on the history of the Sith had been in circulation for three whole years. Initiates became padawans, padawans became knights, knights became masters. Even in the shadow of the Sith's return, life carried on.

Life outside of the temple was no exception.

Ben could not help but wrinkle his nose at the pungent stench of motor oil and starship fuel. Ship hangers in the Jedi Temple were fundamentally the same as everywhere else; cold, loud, filled with droids, equipment, and puddles of mysterious fluids.
"Name?" Asked the attendant at the window, looking bored.

"Kenobi," Ben smiled.

"Kenobi… Kenobi… Ben Kenobi?"

"Yes."

"Destination?"

"Alderaan."

"Alderaan… Priority level?"

"Ten."

"Oh, good." Gloved fingers tapped away at a keyboard, sending out commands and memos for the computer log. "Alright, Master Kenobi," the man dragged his feet off of the desk, "I've got a ship for you in space number one-eight, but I'll need to refuel it before your flight. Shouldn't take long, if you could just wait in the main hangar."

"Very well. Thank you,"

"Of course, Force be with you." It was an habitual phrase from the non-Force sensitive Temple staff, but Ben had always appreciated the gesture. The man took up a comm and spoke over the loudspeakers, "Pit staff please attend shuttle HS-392 in gate 18, repeat, pit staff attend gate 18."

Ben meandered to an unoccupied spot where he could stay out of the way. Droids milled about in cross-crossing paths across the hangar, carrying supplies and chirping out orders to one another. In one corner, there was a variety of crates, ship parts, and cargo lifts stacked into what appeared to be an unofficial supply dump. Ben walked to it and leaned up against a stack of crates, using the idle time to review his itinerary.

**CLANG-cl-clang clang!**

Ben turned to see what had fallen over, expecting to hear a droid beeping out orders or a crewmember cleaning up the mess. Instead, he heard a soft curse and small, shuffling steps. Too small to be a crewmember. Curious, he bent over to look beneath the crate he was leaning on. In the hands breadth of space between the repulsorlift and the floor, he could see two small, child-sized boots shuffling to and fro. Then, kneeling down in a crouch to pick up a pile of loose scraps, two oil-stained hands, greasy breaches and, when the perpetrator knelt down far enough, the tip of a very short and very dirty learner's braid.

"Don't look at me like that," said the small mechanic to some unseen audience, "you're the one who ran into it." There was a zap and a bright blue flash. "Ow! Stop it!"

Quietly, Ben rounded the corner to see the responsible party.

"Anakin?"

Anakin Skywalker, covered in grease and oil, whirled around. "Master Ben!" He said, hastily hiding something behind his back. He might've been blushing, but beneath the grime it was hard to tell. Ben smiled and crossed his arms, eyebrows rising expectantly. "What-uh, what are you doing here?" the initiate asked, shifty-eyed.
"I am waiting on a shuttle. I think the more interesting question, my young friend, is what are you doing here?"

"Uhhh..." Anakin's face was entirely blank, unable to compose a lie in adequate time. "I was... umm..." BZZZZZT - another blue flash, and the young Jedi jumped in surprise. "Ow! Stop it!" He hissed to the thing behind his back.

"Your friend seems to have the right idea," Ben said, trying to get a glimpse of whatever device Anakin was hiding behind his back, "it is incredibly foolish to lie to a Jedi master."

Anakin's blush was visible this time, reaching all the way up to his ears. "Sorry, Master," he mumbled, and brought out the small droid he'd been hiding behind his back. Ben stepped closer to inspect the device.

"Where did you get this, then?" It was a round training remote - or at least, it used to be.

"It was a broken one from class. I told Master Zyrha I was going to take it to the mechanics," Ben frowned. "Anakin, you didn't steal it, did you?"

"No," the youngling defended, "I did take it to the mechanics, but they said they couldn't fix it. They were going to incinerate it. So I kept it."

"And fixed it, I see."

"I made it better," Anakin bragged, holding it out for Ben's consideration. "See, now it looks like a starship instead of a dumb remote."

It had wings attached to its originally smooth body, complete with a noseplate and a tail, and an upgraded optical lens that would allow for greater input. Two of its small blaster jets remained in their places, mounted almost like guns under the wings. All in all, it did look like a tiny starship - a very fat, very round starship. "You did all this?" Ben asked, quiet pride welling in his chest.

"Yeah, see, now he has a motivator and an old BB voicebox and a memory bank, so he's more like a droid, but with wings."

"He?"

"Yeah. And I found these two magnetized hands for him, they can do stuff." Anakin pulled out the spindly, magnetized grippers out of their slots on top of the sphere. They promptly smacked his hands away and the droid beeped at him. Anakin frowned. "Stop it."

Ben chuckled. "And what do you call this little invention of yours?"

"I think he should be RB-1."

"Arbie-one?" Ben raised an eyebrow, wondering if Anakin heard the homonym.

"Yeah, like Remote Ball number one. I guess I could make more."

Ben only shook his head. "Anakin, I can't help but notice that you've fixed a remote that the mechanics deemed unfixable," Ben prodded RB-1, to which the droid buzzed and hissed. "And made it into a droid, no less."

"Well that's because they don't know what they're doing," Anakin said, fiddling with a screw on Arbie's casing. It sparked violently again, more contained this time. "Or maybe they just don't care."
"Or perhaps you are simply able to dedicate more time to this than they are," Ben said reasonably. It may or may not have been true, but it would do no good to inflate a seven year old's ego.

"I guess," Anakin said, wrestling Arbie into a headlock to re-fasten a loose wingtip. The droid waved its metal arms indignantly.

"Does Master Zyrha know that you're here, Anakin?" Anakin fixed his eyes on the droid and said nothing. Ben looked past his brow at the boy. "Anakin," he prodded.

"No," Anakin mumbled.

"It's very irresponsible for you to run away from your clan, I'm sure Master Zyrha is wondering where you've gone to."

"I've only been here for a little while." Anakin insisted, "Besides, the guys here are nice and Nyra let me borrow her toolbox, and they know I'm here, and... and... it's free time until sixteenth hour!"

"That being so, you need to go back to your master, Anakin." He glanced at the droid. "I'm sure RB-I will be perfectly safe here in the hangar until you come back - which you will do with your master's permission next time."

Anakin hung his head. "Yes, Master Ben..." He hugged Arbie to himself, remorsefully flipping the power switch until the small, winged sphere stopped sparking. Ben let him feel guilty for a moment more.

"And Anakin?" The boy looked up; greasy, small, and pathetic. Ben gave him a smile. "That's a clever little droid. Take good care of it."

Anakin's beaming smile looked whiter because of the dark motor oil on his face. Ben tried to hide how much it warmed his heart. "Go on, then, back to your master. And make sure to return your tools."

"Yes, Master Ben," Anakin scooped up handfuls of droid parts and tools.

"Ben Kenobi, please report to gate 18, repeat, Ben Kenobi please report to gate 18." 

"I have to go, Anakin. Do I have your word that you will tell Master Zyrha about all of this?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Go clean yourself up. May the Force be with you."

"Force be with you, Master!" Anakin echoed back, arms full of dirty scrap. Oil dripped onto his boot. Ben shook his head and left for his shuttle.

Jedi did not celebrate life's occasions in the same manner common across the Republic, and there were many occasions that, by choice or by oath, a Jedi would never celebrate for themselves. Even so, knights of the Order were well acquainted with celebrations and the social significance of a good, rollicking party.

Even if that had not been the case, the fact remained that Ben Kenobi would not have missed the wedding of Bail Prestor Organa for the whole galaxy.

"Ben!" Bail Organa's smile was wider than Ben had ever seen it. The senator picked his way across the ballroom through lords and ladies and various white-tie nobilities. Ben's brown robes looked drab
in the sea of lush, colorful suits, but if the difference between a worn Jedi cloak and the white formal wear of a Prince bore any significance in polite society, Bail ignored it. He threw his arms around the Master and hugged him tightly. "I'm so glad you could make it," he grinned, patting Ben on the back.

Ben laughed and returned the embrace with a crinkled smile. "I'm glad to be here, my friend," he said, drawing away. "You have my most heartfelt congratulations."

"Thank you," Bail smiled, giddily. "Come, please, Breha is dying to meet you."

Bail led his Jedi friend through the crowd, drawing some skeptical looks from strangers and some light bows from those more accustomed to his presence. He spotted Senators Mothma and Iblis, and even Senator Thothili amongst the guests. At last, they reached the center of all attentions, decked in white, flowers in her hair, poised expression fit for a queen.

"Master Kenobi, please meet Breha Antilles - er, Organa," Bail's eyes lighted on her with deep affection, "my wife."

Ben's smile filled his eyes and cheeks - partly in amusement at how completely besotted Bail was, and partly because of Breha. It was so wonderful to see her standing there with every genteel, adamantine nerve that he remembered. He waited for her to extend her hand, which she did gracefully and with a smile. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you, my lady." Ben kissed her hand in the customary fashion.

"The pleasure is all mine, Master Kenobi. Bail speaks of you so often I feel like I know you already. Please, call me Breha." She smiled, and her silk dress paled in comparison.

"I would be honored, Breha. You must call me Ben."

Bail cleared his throat politely. "Father is beckoning me. Pardon me, dear, Ben," he scooted out of the conversation to answer the many calls on his attention.

"Ben," Breha picked up the trail, "I so appreciate your attendance today. I have been badgering Bail to introduce us for months. I hope you will stay after the festivities so we might visit with you more?"

"Only if I do not keep either of you. But now you must see to your guests. And... I admit I have a favor to ask of you.

"Anything," the bride smiled, face inviting him to ask.

"I believe you have a young woman in your employ... A Shmi Skywalker. Might I speak to her?"

"Oh, of course," she nodded. "Her son is a Jedi, is he not?" She began to lead him away from the crowd and to the edges of the ballroom.

"He is."

"Bail mentioned it. You know the boy?"

"I'm glad to say that I do," Ben smiled, remembering the grease-covered ruffian from that morning.

Breha grinned widely. "I'm sure she will love whatever news you have of him. If he's half the heart of his mother, the Jedi are better for him."

"I have no doubt that we are."
"4TM," Breha said to a serving droid, "please fetch Shmi, tell her there is a Jedi who'd like to meet with her."

"Ben Kenobi," the Jedi interrupted. "She knows my name."

"Very well," said 4TM in a chipper accent, "right away, your highness."

Breha giggled. "Your Highness. It's all a bit much, I feel."

Ben grinned. "I do not doubt your worthiness to bear it, my lady." It made Breha laugh.

"Bail has been feeding you too many flattering stories. I appreciate your confidence, Master Ben." She glanced over her shoulder at the many guests milling around the room, waiting for her. "I do want to meet with you at more length, but I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me - please do stay!"

"Of course," Ben smiled as she was whisked away by well-wishers and extended family members.

It was a few moments before 4TM reappeared with a serving maid in tow. She glanced uncertainly at the party and the droid, but then Ben turned to see her and smiled. She broke into a grin and ran to him.

"Master Kenobi," did pass her lips before she threw her arms around him, but it was lost in the folds of his cloak. Ben chuckled and hugged her back.

"You look very well, Miss Skywalker."

"I am very well," she grinned, pulling away. She swiped at her eyes. "I'm sorry, I'm just surprised to see you here. Lord Organa mentioned that he knew you, but I didn't know you were coming."

"Of course I came," Ben beamed, "I wanted to come on Bail's account, but then I heard that you worked for his fiance, and I knew I had to come." Ben glanced up around at the busy waitstaff, food trays and carts full of ice and drinks. "Walk with me?" He asked, extending his elbow to her. Shmi smiled, laughing at the absurdity of it.

"A Jedi takes a servant for a walk at a royal wedding," she strung her arm through his. "It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke."

Ben chuckled and led them out to an emptier stretch of the palace. Marble archways and well-tended moss gardens existed in an extravagant harmony, flanked by a busy waitstaff and centuries-old decor; heirlooms, paintings, tapestries. For a Jedi who'd long loved the aesthetics of nature and simple beauty, Alderaan was a shining jewel in the Core.

Once they had traveled well out of earshot of any partygoers, Ben looked down at the young woman on his arm. She was still little more than a girl in Ben's eyes, but her shoulders were squarer now, her brow smoother. Her body was not only recovered from her early pregnancy, it was made stronger for the years in between. Her brown hair was far silkier and fine, now, pulled into a neat bun and untouched by sand. She carried herself with a calm confidence that made Ben's heart swell in his chest. He had never had a daughter, so the feeling was an unfamiliar one. At length, he asked her, "How are you, Shmi? Really?"

"I am wonderful, Ben. Really, I am. I could never have imagined that I would…" She smiled and shrugged. "That I would be here, free - and working for nobility, no less!"

"I take it Alderaan agrees with you very well."
"Yes. Lady Breha is a dream to work with. The hours are long, but she is so considerate." Shmi allowed a wistful smile to cross her face. "I hope she will be very happy with Lord Bail."

"I'm sure she will be," Ben said. "He is absolutely smitten with her, I've hardly heard the end of her praises for months. I expect great things from them both."

Shmi laughed. "I'm glad to hear it. She's given me time off while they're on their honeymoon, but frankly I don't know what to do with it."

"Rest," Ben suggested. "Travel. Be with friends. You're a free woman, you can do as you please."

"All these years, I'm still getting used to it. It's been… what, seven years, now?"

Had he really been in the past for that long? "Yes, I suppose it has," Ben replied, feeling old.

Shmi looked down at the floor and said quietly, "I suppose Anakin is seven years old, then."

Ben's smile was tinged with sadness. "He is."

"You've seen him?"

Ben laughed. "I know him quite well. I saw him just this morning, in fact."

"Really?" Shmi's smile was pure pride.

"Yes. He's about this tall," Ben raised his hand to his waist, "and when I saw him, he was covered in motor oil, hiding behind a box, tinkering with a droid he built himself."

Shmi burst into gleeful laughter. "He built a droid by himself?"

"Yes, he's become quite the prodigy. Droids, lightsabers, sneaking away from his creche master to befriend the shipservice staff." He smiled at her laugh. "Truly, he's doing as well as I knew he could."

"I'm so glad to hear it," Shmi said, her voice tinged with bittersweet sadness.

Ben let her ruminate on thoughts of her son before prodding quietly: "Shmi, I must ask… I am glad that you've given your son the opportunity with the Jedi Order, but… I admit I didn't think you would. What changed your mind?"

Shmi glanced at Ben, her shoulders bobbing in a bashful shrug. "It was… odd. I never intended to give him up. I could cope with his… abilities, even when they got stronger. But when he turned three, I… I don't know how to describe it. I had this dream. I never remember my dreams, but this one… it was like it was really happening." She tilted her head this way and that in a certain air of self-doubt, even though her eyes gleamed with pure conviction. "I don't have what you have, Ben, what Anakin has, but… I swear it must've been the Force. I saw my son, a grown man. He was on Coruscant, there were Jedi around him. He was… perfect. Happy. It was just… right."

"You saw Anakin as a Jedi Knight?"

"No," Shmi frowned, eyes squinted in memory. "At least, he didn't look like a Jedi. Not like you do, with the robes. But he was with Jedi. I only saw a glimpse of him, but I know, I just… I knew he'd become a great man, someone who meant the world to more than just me." Shmi allowed herself to frown, as any mother would in her place. "When I woke up, I knew that he would never be that man without your Order. I couldn't not let him have that." She fiddled with her fingers, latent regrets and
pride mixing like oil and water. "Even if I miss him dearly."

Ben had never heard of non-Force sensitives having visions, but the idea of Shmi Skywalker seeing the future did not faze him in the slightest. "Foresight is a prized, if not burdensome gift of the Force," he spoke from personal experience, "but I can only thank you for your selflessness. Perhaps one day, Anakin can thank you himself."

"I wish I could ask you to see him," Shmi said with a smile, "but even if you agreed, I know it would be a horrible decision for all of us. I miss him too much, and he has too much ahead of him." She hugged Ben's elbow closer as they walked, and looked up at him, eyes beseeching. "Look after him, please?"

His answer had been there since the day he'd first set eyes on the child. "To my last breath," he promised.

They'd traced a circle through the palace, and had reached the throng of the wedding reception once more. "I should go," Shmi said, letting go of Ben's arm. "I ought to help the waitstaff."

"I shall not keep you. I hope I might see you again before I leave."

"I'd like that," Shmi smiled, slowing to a stop so they could face each other. Her thoughts strayed to Tatooine, and Gardulla, and Herdesssa, and the gift that Ben had given her in parting. "I can never thank you enough, Ben Kenobi."

"Seeing you so happy is thanks enough."

"Are all Jedi so charming?"

"Well," Ben allowed, "I do spend an inordinate amount of time in the Senate. According to my friends, the diplomatic airs have begun rubbing off."

"I see and serve more than my fair share of senators, Ben," Shmi told him, "you are no politician."

"Then what am I?"

She tilted her head in consideration. "A good man." She stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. "May the Force be with you."

"And also with you."

They parted in good humor. Ben joined the reception, mind filled with thoughts of Anakin, trying to imagine him not as he'd known him years ago, but as a small oil-stained youngling grown into a Jedi Knight.

Royal weddings on Alderaan were an all-day affair, and Ben savored every moment. It was not often that a Jedi master got such a respite. However, as the sky began to darken into a burning golden dusk, the respite turned sour. He had just retrieved a glass of water from the refreshments table when someone called his name.

"Master Kenobi," a chill ran down his spine, "what a pleasant surprise."

Ben turned, determined to keep his smile trained in that careful arc that he'd seen Bail perfect over his years in office. Sheev Palpatine was resplendent in rich purple robes, aging face and white hair arranged in a picture of innocent surprise. On that plane of existence that only Jedi and Sith could
see, his presence was blank and unassuming; not muffled like a Jedi Master's, nor bare and undisciplined like a youngling. It was a masterfully crafted shield that invited disregard.

"Senator Palpatine," Ben smiled. "I didn't expect to see you here,"

"Well of course," Palpatine chuckled, coming closer and sipping at his glass of wine. "Practically half the senate was invited - and Bail and I go so far back, I could not turn down the opportunity to wish the happy couple well." He turned to smile toward the head table, where Bail and Breha continued to speak with their guests. A wave of protective fear rose up in Ben's chest, and he hastily tamped it down. Palpatine turned back to face the Jedi, and for a moment Ben feared that the Sith could sense his thoughts. "It's been a while, Master Kenobi. I haven't seen or heard of you since... well, since all that unpleasantness on Kuat." He watched Ben from behind the rim of his wine glass. "Was he really a Sith? The man you killed. The stories have grown quite extravagant."

Ben resisted the urge to swallow. "We have reason to believe he was associated with the Sith," he replied carefully. "He had a lightsaber, and he was trained to fight with it."

"Heavens," the look of concern on Palpatine's face was so genuine that, for a moment, Ben actually believed him. "He must have been a formidable fighter."

"He was," Ben said, very carefully, "from a certain point of view."

Palpatine chuckled. "I'm not sure what you mean, Master Kenobi."

"If he was a Sith, he must have been the apprentice - and a poorly trained one at that. He took me by surprise, but the fight was a short one."

Palpatine's face froze in a second-long pause. "Well," he said with a wide smile, "we are lucky to have such talents as yours. I'm sure not all Jedi would be up to the task."

Ben sipped at his water with an innocent smile. "With all due respect, Senator, all Jedi are trained for such eventualities."

"To face a Sith?"

"To defend life."

"And it seems these Sith are hellbent on destroying it," the Senator muttered, composing a plate of hors-d'oeuvres.

Ben stepped up next to him at the table and selected a handful of vegetable sandwiches. "We will weed him out eventually, Senator. Of that you have my word."

"Him?" Palpatine asked mildly.

"The Sith Master - the one who trained the apprentice. There are only ever two."

"But if there were two before," Palpatine said, hesitating at the cheese tray before plucking a delicate selection. "Surely there could be two again?"

"With the apprentice killed, only the master remains," Ben said, sampling the fruits.

"But surely the master could find another apprentice," Palpatine speculated. Ben glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. As ever, the Force remained unusually blank around him, opaque; almost like a Hutt or a Besalisk. "Could he not? And what if this one is more powerful than the last?"
"I admit I do not know, Senator. I don't know how long it takes to train a Sith Lord."

"How long does it take to train a Jedi?"

"A lifetime."

"Hmm," Palpatine gave a small, humored grin. "The Jedi must hope the same is true for their adversaries."

"We place our hope in the Force," Ben said, absently. Both of them knew, but could not say that a lifetime of training could fall to the Dark in a single day.

"These… Sith Lords," mused the senator, popping a grape into his mouth, "what is their motivation? What do they want? Perhaps the Republic could reason with them."

"They want power," said Ben. They listened to the laughter of the partygoers across the ballroom.

"Power. In what way?" A waitress appeared to restock the refreshments table; Shmi Skywalker. She smiled at Ben and his companion. A cold hand wrapped itself around Ben's heart.

"In all ways possible, Senator." *What happened on Tatooine? A shift in the Force itself.* "Which is why we will find them and bring them to justice as swiftly as possible." Shmi walked away from the table, and Palpatine's eyes followed her for just a moment too long. Ben's jaw stiffened.

"Your faith in your Order is admirable, Master Jedi," said the Sith.

"My faith lies with the Force." Neither Ben nor Palpatine were eating anymore.

"But do the Sith not serve the same Force?"

The Jedi and the Sith stared each other down, each daring the other to reveal his gambit. "They serve a dark perversion of it," Ben said.

"I see," said Palpatine, the very corners of his mouth still upturned. "Well then, may the Force be with us all, Master Kenobi," Palpatine raised his wineglass in a toast.

"The Force will be with us," Ben raised his glass and drank. *But not, I hope, with both of us.*

Bidding the Organas goodbye was difficult, but was made easier by Bail's promise of a visit to Coruscant soon - Breha and Shmi in tow - and by Ben's suggestions of hunting down assignments to Alderaan for his own benefit. His farewell with Shmi was the hardest.

"Watch over him," the mother whispered in his ear when they shared a parting embrace.

"You have my solemn word," Ben told her softly. The visage of Maul flashed before his eyes. *What happened on Tatooine?* He held her tighter and kissed her cheek. "Look after yourself."

"I will try."

"Grandmaster Yoda has a saying," Ben attempted to lighten the mood as they drew apart, "Do or do not; there is no try."

Shmi chuckled. "That makes no sense."

"Perhaps not. But he is known for looking into the future. In the end, we have either done or not done; trying is something we can only do in the present."
"You Jedi are far too philosophical."

"Perhaps we are," Ben smiled sweetly for her. "Goodbye, Shmi."

"Goodbye, Ben."

Back on Coruscant, Ben dined in Mace Windu's quarters, as had become habitual. As co-conspirators in the galaxy's most delicate and long-running mission, they had grown very close - if not as friends, as colleagues.

"A new apprentice?" Mace was asking, wiping his mouth and leaning back on his low dining pillow. "You don't think it could be-"

"Dooku?" Ben sighed. "I'd thought of that. Maybe it could be, but I just don't know. Last time, Dooku wasn't at the Temple. I had never even met him until after he'd fallen. But now…"

"He is very cynical toward the Order," Mace pointed out.

"And he's not alone," Ben reminded, "there are plenty of Jedi who see faults in our Order. Sometimes I think we ought to heed them more carefully. But Dooku… He's too hard to read."

"He may not be a Sith - yet," Mace looked up and met Ben's gaze. "But that does not mean he's not flirting with the dark. Do you think he knows Palpatine?"

Ben shrugged. "It's very possible - he has powerful relatives and friends in the senate. They're sure to have brushed shoulders once or twice." The thought was a harrowing one. "But if those meetings have ever amounted to anything like treason, I wouldn't know of it."

"Hmm," Mace chewed on the last bite of his dinner and shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I. But I don't think that much matters."

"If Dooku does turn - if he already has - we must be prepared to… deal with him."

Ben sighed. He had no desire to fight his grandmaster, especially now that he'd gotten to know him. "Let us not get ahead of ourselves, Mace. We should not presume him guilty until proven innocent."

Mace cocked an eyebrow at him. "And here I thought you were an advocate of caution."

"I am an advocate of certainty. And while we cannot have certainty in all things, I believe that we can find some level of assurance with Dooku. I will speak with him."

"He's a slippery one," the Master of the Order grumbled. "You think you'll be able to get anything out of him?"

"I think so," Ben smiled. "He's very fond of Obi-Wan, and he finds my humor similar to that of my nephew - only more matured and sophisticated."

Mace stared at him with deadpan chagrin. "Imagine that."

Ben shrugged with a tiny smile. "His words, not mine. He does not trust me, per se, but he respects me a great deal."

"Very well. You can speak with Dooku. I've half a mind to put out similar feelers on our greyer members. If Palpatine is attempting to draw out an apprentice from our own number…"
"What if he already has?" Ben asked. The two men looked at each other, a dozen scenarios passing between them in silence.

"What if he's found one elsewhere?" Mace asked back. The unknown was always the most harrowing possibility.

"The Force will provide a solution," Ben said at length. Mace scoffed.

"You sound like your master."

"A man I happen to know is your friend." Ben took up the teapot they'd set aside for after their meal and began pouring two bowls. "Qui-Gon always had a point, you know. Sometimes, we must operate not on what might be, but on what is right in front of us."

Mace nodded, reluctantly accepting the wisdom. *Right in front of us.* "Very well. We will start with Dooku, the other grey Jedi. Palpatine."

"Oh." Ben paused in his task, and smiled before he resumed pouring. "I actually meant the tea - but yes, those things too."

It took small steps to scale a mountain.
"Oh."

**CRASH**

"For,"

**hhhHROOOOMKSHH**

"Kriff's,"

**BAKSSHHHH**

"Sake!"

"For shame! Garen Muln, you filthy-mouthed bastard," called Obi-Wan Kenobi from the side of the dojo, beaming.

Garen ducked under one blade, two, and rebounded as quickly as he could, which was not quite fast enough. "Kenobi, you can suck my- damnit!"

Obi-Wan cackled, not caring how his face ached from smiling. Seeing Aola Tarkona wipe the floor with his best friend was, quite possibly, the most satisfying spectacle he had ever witnessed.

From a technical standpoint, Aola was not an exceptional swordswoman. Her style lacked the precision and refinement that her great-grandmaster Dooku held in such high esteem, and her fighting patterns could become predictable. However, when she'd turned eighteen five months ago, her master had upheld his promise and allowed her to begin training in the jar'kai style, wielding two lightsabers. It was like she'd never known anything else; with a violet blade in either hand, she'd become a nightmarish dervish in the dojo.

Obi-Wan had been bragging on her progress over lunch for months, and his friend Garen Muln had grown weary of it. "Force, Kenobi, when did you become a mother?" the dark-haired boy had rolled his eyes. "She can't be *that* good."

"She could hand your ass to you on a platter, Garen," Obi-Wan had replied, cheeks full.

"That a challenge, Kenobi?"

"Maybe it is. Want me to set you up?"

"If it doesn't scare her away."

Obi-Wan had snorted. "Bring your cloak. You'll want something to hide in when she humiliates you."
"I'll be the judge of that."

In retrospect, Garen thought privately, perhaps he should've weighed his words more carefully.

"Ha!" Aola crossed her sabers and caught Garen's blade in between, launching it back at him before crouching and swiping at his legs. He jumped and flipped over her, but when he landed she was already there to catch his overhead strike. She swung for his right shoulder, but he deflected it to the ground. If she had only been holding a single saber, the fight would've been over. Unfortunately for the elder padawan, Aola's left hand was as heavily armed as her right. She followed through where her deflected blade had left off, speeding toward his shoulder with a promising hrum. Garen growled, barely ducking in time.

Taking his rushed defense as an opportunity, Aola stepped back and staged a quick one-two strike with both blades. Garen, now wiser to the patterns of jar'kai, aimed for the outside saber and hooked his blade around it, pulling with all his might to throw his smaller opponent off-balance. She fell toward the ground, but used the momentum to spin on one foot and catch Garen's chin with the other. He staggered back, blinded for a moment, but recovered with practiced willpower to commit a swipe downwards toward her dominant hand.

This was exactly what she'd wanted him to do. Aola met his blade with one of her own, and used the other to latch around the opposite side. With a neat clench, she flipped Garen's lightsaber out of his hands and criss-crossed her own blades into an 'X', posed precariously around her opponent's neck.

With the same wilted spirit as his discarded saber, Garen let out a sigh. From the sidelines, Bant Eerin clapped. Aola was trying very hard not to smile.

"Solah," griped Garen, wrinkling his nose disdainfully at her purple blades. Aola disengaged them and shook her opponent's hand, grinning.

"That was fantastic, Padawan Muln – I didn't think I had a bantha's chance on Hoth of beating you."

"Frankly, Padawan Tarkona," the elder drawled, "neither did I. Honestly," He turned toward Obi-Wan, who was still grinning like a drunk lothcat, "where in the hels did you find this creature?"

Obi-Wan affected nonchalance. "She was half a chit in Boomtown."

"Oi!" the Twi'lek bristled. Obi-Wan ignored her.

"Saw her, thought she could kick your ass, turns out I was right."

"I'll beat your ass," Garen grumbled, stooping to fetch his weapon.

"Oh, no," Bant chimed in, smiling at Aola. "To the victor go the spoils – and the next fight." Aola beamed, bouncing happily on the balls of her feet. "Obi-Wan?"

"Hmm?"

"Why don't you go next?"

Obi-Wan's smile faltered. "What?"

"Yeah, Obi-Wan," Garen crossed his arms and strod toward his friend. "Why don't you go next?"

Obi-Wan opened his mouth and took a moment to say, "Well I suppose I could…"

"You hesitated," Aola said from the middle of the room. The three elder padawans turned to look at
her. "What, afraid of a half-chit twi'lek?"

Garen snickered. Obi-Wan glanced at Garen and swaggered toward his younger friend. "You're going to regret saying that," Obi-Wan told her, unclipping his saber.

"You're going to regret the Boomtown comment."

"Ten says she wins," Garen whispered slyly to Bant.

"No bet," the Mon Cal replied, eyeing Obi-Wan keenly.

Garen shrugged, and the match began. The duelists fell in with enthusiasm, blue and purple flashing as they struck, parried, ducked, and leapt in a wild frenzy. Unlike Garen, who was a pilot first and a fighter second, Obi-Wan was the posterchild of budding saber mastery. He fought with Aola often, and they were both very proficient in Ataru, albeit in very different styles. Aola's unrefined jar'kai created a wild offense with a long reach, whereas Obi-Wan's growing Makashi sensibilities made his strikes less extravagant but ten times more precise. The resulting clash made for a close and wild fight, Aola whirling around her taller opponent like a planet orbiting a sun, while Obi-Wan swerved and leaped and flipped, striking only when he knew he could cut past her guard.

"She's dancing circles around him," Garen shook his head.

"I'm not so sure," Bant squinted at their mutual friend, who had both eyes riveted on his opponent. He certainly did not look concerned. "I think he's waiting for something."

"For what?"

Aola had just twisted to one side after a quick two-blade slash. Her outside blade blocked Obi-Wan's downward strike, but his saber rode along the length of hers, aiming for her hand. She twisted in the opposite direction to push his weapon away and dodge the inevitable strike. Obi-Wan suddenly dropped his blade, throwing Aola off-balance. He flipped his saber around and flicked the blade out of her hand. In her distraction, Obi-Wan stepped closer, placed one foot on top of hers, grabbed her wrist, and twisted. She yelped in pain and dropped her remaining weapon. When she looked up, Obi-Wan's saber was at her throat.


"Solah," she grumbled. He let her go and she rubbed her wrist. "I really thought I had you that time."

"You gave me an easy in with that follow-through, it was far too wide. Anyone could've thrown you off balance," Obi-Wan told her as she collected her sabers. "You go wide every time. Work on that, and you might have a chance against me."

She was blushing, mostly because she knew it was all true. Feemor had told her such many times - but hearing it from a *padawan*, in front of other *padawans* to whom she looked up to was mortifying. Obi-Wan sensed her discomfort and stepped closer. "Still," he said, sidling up to her with a conspiratorial smile. He draped an arm around her shoulders and glanced very pointedly at Garen, making sure the other man noticed. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, "You knocked Garen Muln on his ass, and I'll be damned if I ever let him forget it."

Aola laughed, and Obi-Wan patted her on the back.

"What did you say?" Garen demanded, glaring at Obi-Wan as he passed by. "What did you just say
about me, you smug wanker?"

Obi-Wan gave a satisfied laugh, engineered to aggravate. "Oh, nothing," he said. Garen followed him, seething.

"What did you say, Kenobi? Force damnit…"

Bant watched the boys leave and shook her head softly. She gestured to Aola. "Come on. We can watch them fight over lunch."

Happy to be included, Aola beamed and jogged into step with the Mon Calamari.

Up on the observation balcony, two masters stepped from their hiding places and watched the youths walk out together.

"He'll be a good teacher, I wager," Feemor said, eyeing Obi-Wan, who was still bickering with Garen. A short fistfight broke out, which ended with Garen putting Obi-Wan in a headlock, until a passing master reprimanded them for their unseemly behavior. Feemor chuckled. "Once he grows out of that, I suppose."

"Oh, he already has. It's only Padawan Muln who brings it out in him," Qui-Gon replied, grinning softly under his mustache. Former master and apprentice strode out of the dojo halls at a leisurely pace. "He's far more mature than I was at his age. He will be a fine teacher," he drew in a steady breath and confessed, "sooner than I would've thought."

Feemor lifted his eyebrows in surprise and turned to look at his master. Qui-Gon glancing sheepishly at the floor. "I've been thinking… I might recommend him for the Trials soon."

"Really?" Feemor's face lifted in surprise. "That's grand, Qui-Gon. What'd he say about it?"

"I haven't told him," the elder admitted. "I haven't told anyone. Except for you just now."

"Oh," Feemor looked away, "I see." The halls of the Jedi Temple were large and the crowds sparse. There was no one near enough to overhear their conversation. "A new thing, then?"

"It's been on my mind for… oh, six months or so."

"Six-" Feemor did a double take on his old master. "Six months, Qui-Gon? You should've told the Council by now."

Qui-Gon sighed in a rare show of insecurity. "I know."

His tone gave Feemor pause. He glanced at Qui-Gon's face and gave a small, sad smile. "You've gone soft, old man." Which was rich coming from a man in his mid-forties. Quieter, he added, "he has to grow up sometime."

"He already has. It's just… I'm not sure when it happened."

"If you think he's ready, Qui-Gon," Feemor advised, "He's ready. I know you two are close, but you have to set him loose eventually."

"Yes, I know…" Qui-Gon's eyes clouded and his lips turned in a subtle, slow frown. "It's just…"

"What?"

Qui-Gon shrugged. He did not have the gift of foresight; that was Obi-Wan's specialty. He certainly
hadn't seen the future unfold before, like Ben. He was a disciple of the Living Force, focused incessantly on the Here and Now. And yet... "A feeling," he said at length. "I think he should stay with me for a little while longer."

Feemor cocked one eyebrow, unconvinced. "But who needs it more, you or him?" his query was met with silence. "If you let him go he won't leave, Qui-Gon. But if you hold on too tight, he just might want to." Qui-Gon breathed heavily through his nose and clenched his jaw. Not wanting to spoil their otherwise enjoyable conversation, Feemor drew in a brisk breath and said, "He'll make a first rate knight. I'm sure he'll be a credit to us all."

Qui-Gon nodded. He was familiar with the sensation of stubbornness and rebellion. The feeling of dread, however, that persistent, ringing sound of an oncoming storm, was entirely alien. Still, amid the unfamiliarity of the Not Yet, in the Here and Now, some things remained constant. "Yes," he told Feemor with proud smile, "I'm sure he will be."

"Obi-Wan!" Anakin, missing a front tooth and tunics horribly askew, abandoned his seat and rushed toward the door of the classroom. Several of his classmates craned their necks to see why.

Obi-Wan smiled at the door. "Hello, Anakin." The Wolf Clan's elder members - those above the age of nine or so - were all tinkering away with bits and bobs of machinery. At the front of the room, holo diagrams and schematics spun on slow axes. Some crechelings gazed up at them, brows screwed up in concentration. Master Talon Drekka, a mech-head Nothoiin with a knack for children, was going about the room, checking circuits and answering questions. He glanced up to see the visitor.

"We're making droids today!" Anakin beamed up at his much taller friend. At that moment, Master Drekka came to the door, golden skin more wrinkled than Obi-Wan remembered from their last class together. "We're not making droids, today, Young Skywalker," he said, coming to the door. "We're making simple circuits." Anakin sulked and muttered something, but Talon ignored him. "Good day, Padawan Kenobi," he said with a smile.

Obi-Wan bowed. "Master Drekka."

"It's been a while - still bemoaning the complexities of mechanical engineering?"

Obi-Wan gave a self-deprecating chuckle. "Only for my own sake, Master. I'm very glad to see others engaged by it - it comforts me to know my deficiencies will be amended by the younger generation."

Talon barked out a laugh. "Self-aware, humble, and tactful. They always said you'd make a diplomat - and not a shabby warrior either. I saw your fight with Quinlan Vos last thirdday, quite a show."

Obi-Wan bowed lightly. "I thank you for the compliment, master. I try to make up for others' deficiencies in the areas I can."

Talon laughed again. "I retract my humble comment. So what brings you here?" He glanced down at Anakin, who was fidgeting and obviously trying very hard not to interrupt the adults' conversation. "Come to listen to the excitable youth?"

"Not exactly. I've actually come looking for my uncle, Ben Kenobi. I was told I might find him here?"

"Not quite. He's a few doors down, teaching the younger ones some Sii-Cho katas."
"I see, thank you."

Anakin tugged politely on Master Drekka's tabards. "Can I show Obi-Wan what I made?"

Talon bent slightly to say, "Jedi do not boast, Anakin."

"No," said the youngling, "I wanted to show him how I'm making up for his deficiencies."

Talon threw back his head and guffawed. Obi-Wan pursed his lips and stared at the wall. "He's got you there, Kenobi," the master grinned, and patted Anakin on the back. "Five minutes, Anakin," he told the boy, and went back to his class, muttering, "Humble indeed."

"You ought to watch that cheek," Obi-Wan said through deep chagrin. If Anakin had registered the severity of his own wit, he didn't let it show.

"Look at this!" He said, running to one corner of the room to fetch something. He brought it back and held it up for Obi-Wan's inspection.

It was a droid. It was round, and had wings, and spindly arms, and a single, giant optical lens. It was painted very sloppily in green and white, though the underlying grey rubbed through on the sharper edges.

"What's this, then?" Obi-Wan asked, taking the deactivated droid in his hands.

"I made him!"

"Really?" As peculiar a device as it was, this in itself was impressive. "I thought Master Drekka said you weren't making droids today," he said.

"Nah. I made him last week. I mean I finished him last week. I'm making a circuit today that should let him talk."

"That's very impressive, Anakin," Obi-Wan said, and meant it. "What does it do?"

"I dunno yet. His name is RB-1."

Obi-Wan paused. "I'm sorry?" Surely Anakin hadn't named the droid after him.

"RB-1," the boy repeated, the striking homonym apparently lost on his young ears. "Like Remote Ball number One. I made him from an old junk training remote, see?"

"I see," Obi-Wan could see the familiar remote-droid traits beneath the additions, alterations, and paint. "That's very clever. You don't think there's a name perhaps more suited for it?" Obi-Wan could hardly bear to think of what Garen would say if he learned about the droid.

Anakin was crestfallen. "You don't like it?" He asked, pouting.

Obi-Wan was suddenly reminded that, as a close friend of Ben and as a senior padawan of some reputation, he was not only role model for Anakin, he was something of a hero. He fidgeted uncomfortably. "No no," he demurred, handing Arbie back to Anakin, "that's not what I meant. It's a perfect name." Which of course was not his actual opinion, but he couldn't just say that. Diplomacy had always come naturally to Obi-Wan. Children, on the other hand, had not.

Oblivious to his visitor's discomfort, Anakin beamed, gap-toothed and proud. "Thanks!" He said.

"Anakin, five minutes are up. Come on, it's time to start soldering."
"Go on, then," Obi-Wan nudged him with a smile. "Keep up the good work."

An empowered spring in his step, Anakin tossed Arbie away to clang on the floor - perhaps that's why the paint is scratched, Obi-Wan snorted at the thought - and leaped back into his place, attending to Master Drekka's every word.

Obi-Wan let himself out to find Ben's classroom. He found it and lurked by the door until the end of the session. As Ben's tiny students were putting away their training sabers, Obi-Wan slipped around the door frame.

"Ah, Obi-Wan, come to take a lesson from the younglings?" the elder Kenobi asked, provoking a round of childish giggles. Obi-Wan smiled for the younglings' sake.

"No, actually, I've come on an errand. Master Qui-Gon and I have just been back from a mission briefing, and before we left Master Windu asked if I might deliver this to you," he produced a datapad and handed it to his older self. "I gather he was a bit too busy to do it himself."

"The life of a councilor is a hectic one," Ben took the 'pad and tucked it into his belt beneath a tabard. "Thank you. And this mission of yours - where are you heading?"

"Nazzar. A minor quibble about trade alliance membership fees, I think."

"Hmm," Ben furrowed his brow, trying to remember. "I don't seem to recall that one at all."

Obi-Wan lifted an eyebrow. "Shall I take that as a good omen, or a sign that I'm embarking upon a new and uncharted future?"

Ben chuckled. "If anything, you should take it as a warning - your memory will horrible when you're my age."

Obi-Wan laughed with him. "I haven't seen you in a while. How was Alderaan?"

"Very well, very well," Ben refused to think of Palpatine. "Bail and his bride are happy, their world is happy, and I am happy for them. I had the treat of seeing Anakin's mother again."

"Really? Oh yes, she's from there, isn't she?" Which wasn't entirely true, but Ben had never felt compelled to tell Obi-Wan the full truth. "She's well, I take it?"

"Yes, very. I didn't have to seek her out, it seems she's taken up work with Bail's new wife, Breha. I saw her after the ceremony. She's doing quite well for herself."

"I'm glad to hear it. I actually saw Anakin just now, looking for you."

"Oh?"

"It seems he's built a droid and named it after me - though I'm not sure that he knows he has."

"Ah," Ben smiled, motioning for Obi-Wan to walk with him as he left the classroom. "Arbie-One?"

"You knew about it?"

"He was attempting to hide his inventions in the starship hangar. I convinced him to fess up to his crechemaster, but I gather she's let him go on with the project. He has a knack for machinery."

"He looked like the youngest in his class," Obi-Wan peeked into Master Drekka's room as they passed, now empty of all students.
"Oh, he is, by several years. But his masters are not ones to dissuade potential," Ben's face shone with understated pride, "and I'm not one to disagree with them."

Obi-Wan absorbed this in silence. He'd always wondered why Ben doted on Anakin so. It was clear that there was something special about the boy, and something personally significant to Ben. Obi-Wan had wondered briefly if Anakin had once been Ben's apprentice, but had thrown out the notion. Him? Take on a padawan in his mid-twenties? Anakin would be ready for apprenticeship in a few short years, but the idea of taking him on himself was ridiculous. Obi-Wan wasn't even sure he'd be a knight by then, and he knew beyond all doubt he wouldn't be ready to teach. In the end, he'd accepted Ben's affinity for the Skywalker boy as a fact of life, even if the unspoken questions nagged from time to time.

"Qui-Gon and I will be leaving in the morning. I suppose I'll see you when we get back?"

"Yes, I'll be grounded to teach classes for several more weeks, I suspect I'll be around when you return."

"Force, I hope so," Obi-Wan said. "A month of negotiations over membership fees? I shan't even imagine it."

Ben chuckled. "Qui-Gon will stage a coup before then."

"Oh," Obi-Wan seemed taken by an epiphany. "That's not a bad idea…"

Ben shook his head. "He's rubbing off on you more than you know, Force help us all. I need to go, and so do you. Safe travels, and Force be with you."

"And also with you, Master," Ben bowed lightly as they split paths.

"Don't let Qui-Gon do anything stupid!" Ben called over his shoulder.

"No promises!"

Which was, at least in relation to Master Jinn, about as strong a declaration as one man could make.

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Once alone, Ben opened the datapad that Mace Windu had relayed to him. It was a classified, off-the-record dossier, and prompted him to open it with his thumbprint. Inside, he found a list of names. A note at the top read:

*These are all of the Jedi in the Order that I would classify as 'grey'. If you know of any others, please add them to this list. I am unsure what actions we can - or should - take to monitor them, but I will continue to meditate on the problem. But as you know, awareness is the first step towards enlightenment.*

*This datapad is not linked to the Temple Network, only I will receive any changes you make. I should tell you that this kind of data harvesting on our own is, while not against bylaws, heavily frowned upon. Operate with discretion, I advise storing it somewhere private.*

That made Ben smile. He liked to think that his influence on the Korun master was, if anything, therapeutic when it came to rule-following. He scrolled down the list. Thankfully, it was a sparse list. Dooku was there, as were Pong Krell, Sifo Dyas, and a few others that Ben did not recognize. He added Asajj Ventress, and paused in thought. He knew that, much like Quinlan Vos, Asajj had not been raised in the Jedi Temple. Should history be allowed to repeat, she would never interact with another Jedi aside from her master until his untimely death. He made a small note underneath her
A padawan to Master Ky Narec. Currently on Rattatak... I would suggest, if possible and when convenient, recalling this team to the temple. Her greyness may be a want for socialization. She was raised a slave.

It was not unlike Anakin's old childhood, Ben mused. It would take care and patience to overcome those hurdles. But that power was not in his hands, not now. His mission lay elsewhere. He scrolled back up to find Dooku's name on the list, where Mace had left a short paragraph of notes.

Relatively close with Master Sifo Dyas, who demonstrates a more neurotic obsession with dark times. As you know, we will need to keep an especially close eye on Dyas, but Master Dooku has changed his timeline enough that I do not know where we ought to begin or end. He is very interested in the Sith as an academic subject, and even when on the council, he was aggressively neutral when discussing our fight against the Dark. He is a fine sentinel for this reason. I do not know enough about him to say more; you will have to fill in the gaps.

Unfortunately, with Dooku, finding the gaps and filling them in would be a long and delicate process. The man was a difficult study, with dozens of skeletons no doubt hidden carefully away in a closet behind shields a parsec thick. Nuance was the name of the game, and even for Ben's considerable skills in diplomacy, it would be a challenge. But Ben Kenobi had never been one to back down from a sufficiently interesting challenge.

"He can't be that busy," he told his plants, shrugging into his cloak. "Obi-Wan's off-planet, and Anakin's too busy with his coursework for Dooku to hover. So unless he's resumed his duties as sentinel, he won't have a good reason to turn down lunch." Ben paused in his thinking, and eyed his dorva vine, which was grown nearly down to the floor. "You're right," he said, squinting carefully at his envisioned stratagem. "I'll need to pick a very fine wine."

Over the next few weeks, Ben occupied his mornings with teaching younglings and padawans, leaving his afternoons free to share tea and meals with Yan Dooku. Whether the man was lonely or merely entertained by Ben's indulgence of his refined tastes, Dooku seemed to genuinely enjoy their meetings. Unfortunately, Ben had to keep constantly on his toes, shielding his intentions - and his identity - from perhaps the only man in the Order whose sheer intellect could intimidate him. In the back of his mind, he found himself wishing more and more that he'd gotten to know the man as Obi-Wan knew him. More and more, he wondered to what extent Dooku had shaped Obi-Wan into a new version of himself.

"You and your nephew are uncannily similar," Dooku had joked one evening over chess and wine. Ben had glanced up at him in some surprise. Eventually, he said,

"I would claim family resemblance, but I'm sure we spend enough time together for proximity to be a factor as well."

"Strategy is not picked up by osmosis, Ben. It can only be taught." Dooku carefully placed his rook in an innocuous square ahead of Ben's knight. Ben stroked his beard and evaluated the board.

"I was unaware you played chess with him often." He moved his bishop to anticipate Dooku's rook.

"Chess, no. But I fight with him often. The overlap between the two is striking." Dooku slid his own bishop across the board, near to but not threatening Ben's king.

"I will take that as a compliment, Master Dooku. You yourself have said that Obi-Wan is a
prodigious talent."

"Prodigious, yes, but he has much to learn." Dooku moved his rook behind Ben's knight. Ben took it with his bishop, but it cleared the way for Dooku's queen to march right up to Ben's king. "Checkmate."

Ben let his mouth fall open slightly. He eventually nodded in defeat. "Point taken, Master Dooku."

The older man grinned, no malice behind it. "A prodigy only grows better with practice, Master Kenobi. Another?"

It was only two weeks before Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon returned from their mission, both sauntering into the temple in high spirits and happy to be home. Unfortunately, the high spirits were not destined to last.

"Padawan?" Qui-Gon asked concernedly one morning after he woke to find Obi-Wan absent and his door closed. As a younger man, the padawan had slept in whenever he was allowed, but lately he'd begun keeping his own morning schedule. It was nearly mid-day. "Obi-Wan? Are you alright?"

No response. He let himself into the room and found Obi-Wan sprawled in his bed, arms tangled up in the sheets. He was running a high fever and was in no state of mind to be going through any morning routine - be it his or anyone else's.

"Nazzaran Flu," had been Vokara Che's pronouncement. "Unusual at this time of year. I'd say he picked it up on your journey and it's been been incubating ever since." She looked down at her incapacitated, red-eyed ward with sympathy. "I can give you a vaccine, Master Jinn, but I'm afraid it's too late for bleary-eyes here. He'll have to wait it out."

"I see," Qui-Gon said face wrought in parental concern. He watched Obi-Wan blink heavily through his fever and the light healing trance Vokara had put him in. Vokara dug about in her hypospray cabinet before coming up with the correct bottle.

"He'll need to be isolated for at least eight days until he's no longer contagious," she instructed, putting a shot to Qui-Gon's neck and deploying the vaccine without ceremony, "After that, he can interact with just about anyone - though I'd advise his friend Bant to steer clear, aquatic species react horribly to the virus even after the contagious stage has passed - but he'll be about as much use as a split kyber. Make sure he gets plenty of rest and fluids."

"I bow to your wisdom, Master Che. I promise to remove him as soon as he becomes conscious. I wouldn't want him to stay and barter with you for his release."

The head healer grinned. "Probably for the best. I suppose not all Kenobis can be model patients."

"Between the two of them," Qui-Gon said, taking a seat beside his bedridden apprentice, "I think they balance out well."

"It's a very lopsided balance" she amended. "If his fever does not break within two days, let me know."

"Of course."

Eight days passed, and then ten, and then two weeks, and Obi-Wan was still confined to the sofa. He had no energy, his inner ear was shot, his head spun whenever he closed his eyes, and if someone
had asked him to do anything more strenuous than blink or complain about his misery to Qui-Gon, he wouldn't have been able to try - Master Yoda's maxims be damned.

Unfortunately for Obi-Wan, the Council did not always let the illnesses of grown padawans dictate the mission queue of their masters.

"Called for assignment?" Qui-Gon had frowned upon answering his comm. "My apprentice is sick. I will have to seek an exception."

"I understand Obi-Wan's condition, Qui-Gon," Mace Windu told him, "but the Council is still requesting you for this assignment. We determined a replacement last week, but he still needs a team partner. All things considered, we thought you would be the best fit."

"All things considered?" Qui-Gon asked, curious. He glanced at Obi-Wan, who was sulking on the couch and pretending he wasn't eavesdropping.

"The replacement is Ben Kenobi. Seek an exception if you like, but I think he'd appreciate your company on this one. Besides, you'll like the mission. It's a nice, horrible jungle planet where you can reconnect with nature."

Obi-Wan did not budge, but Qui-Gon could sense his sudden, silent relief at having to stay home. "What's the mission?" the master asked, mentally reprimanding his apprentice.

"Alaris Prime," Mace told him. "You get to help a clanful of wookies start a colony on a planet infested by gundarks. Interested yet?"

Qui-Gon's smirk was only fueled by his apprentice's subdued aura of horror. "Does Ben know you've called me?"

"He's the one who suggested it."

"Well then," Qui-Gon shrugged, "when should I report to the council?"
Chapter Notes

I have an outline. I do. But the bit of this story that was supposed to be one chapter is turning out to be two, probably three. I hope you all like wookiees and Qui-Gon/Ben bonding time, because we're going to be camping out here for a bit.

Thanks as always to my lovely beta, En-Shaedn!

Alaris Prime was not quite a day's travel from Coruscant. Although it was a comparatively short travel time next to some of their further-flung missions, it was a very long time to mull over the complexities of their assignment. Ben fared worse. Reviewing the dossier and chatting idly with Qui-Gon could only occupy him for a few hours and inevitably, eventually, silence overtook them. It left Ben with only his own company, and on this particular mission, it was a very annoying company to keep.

When left to the confines of his own thoughts, Ben was plagued by the familiar nagging he'd felt during the State Dinner with the Coalition and the Federation representatives years ago. He knew this mission. He hadn't been a part of it, but Qui-Gon had told him about it. Told him... what? The lacuna in his memory mocked him. It would be useless to ask this iteration of his master about the never-was. Ben decided to take a walk about their vessel to clear his head.

He knew what Alaris Prime could be one day. In the Clone Wars, it had been a valuable engineering outpost, where the Wookiees developed some of the most devastating weapons in the Republic's arsenal. But how it had arrived at that point, how the Wookiees had claimed the planet, expelled the gundarks, and overcome whatever other challenges awaited them was a blank spot in Ben's memory. Through the fog, he could see the faint outlines of drama, of some big thing that he was missing. Unable to clear the cobwebs, Ben sighed and turned back to the cockpit. When he opened the flight deck door, he found Qui-Gon in conversation with Feemor.

"You sure you don't mind?" Qui-Gon was asking, brow furrowed. Ben walked into the cockpit and closed the door quietly, trying not to interrupt. Feemor's pleasant lilt carried over with reassuring calm.

"Of course not. I'll be grounded for a few more months while Aola finishes up her coursework anyway. Your apprentice is safe with me. 'Sides, we poor souls of the Jinn branch must stick together - isn't that right, Obi- oh. He's gone and fallen asleep again."

Qui-Gon chuckled. "Probably for the best." Ben smiled and lowered himself into the copilot's seat.

"Aye, I can only hope it's helping. Lad needs to get back up on his feet, the inactivity is driving him mad. Driving your dear old master mad, too."

"Dooku?" Qui-Gon arched an eyebrow in aggravation. "Hasn't he got better things to do than lurk?"

"Oh, aye. Enough for a few days, sure. He's been down to the creche to see Ben's favorite youngling - is Ben with you?"
"I've just walked in, in fact."

"Hullo, Ben. As I say, Dooku's been down to see Anakin quite a bit. But you know the man. Can't suffer children for more than a few moments at a time. He's been by more and more to ask if Obi-Wan's fit for the dojo."

"And you told him in no uncertain terms to sod off, I hope," Qui-Gon flicked a few controls to monitor their flight progress. Feemor chuckled.

"Ever the rake, Master Jinn. I sent Aola to placate him. She seems to be enjoying the distraction."

"Distraction?" Ben asked. Feemor's lackadaisical tone was absurd. "I've heard Yan Dooku called many things, Feemor, I've never heard him called a distraction. He's sure to be wiping the floor with her."

"Oh, he is. She's got plenty of burns to prove it. But you know the lass, she likes frollicking with murderous beasts."

"Are you comparing our grandmaster to a savage animal?"

Feemor chuckled. "Not in so many words."

Qui-Gon smirked. "I hope she enjoys herself. Perhaps her enthusiasm will dissuade him from pestering my apprentice."

"Maybe. I shall inform you of all the riveting details as time allows."

"Of course. Give her and Obi-Wan my best."

"I will. Force be with you, Master; Ben."

"And also with you." Qui-Gon ended the transmission and put his comlink away. Ben smiled, snorted softly, and shook his head.

"What?" Qui-Gon wanted to know.

"It would've been nice to have him around the last time. Don't know if Obi-Wan's told you, Nazzaran flu is insufferable."

"He has - too many times to count, in fact."

Having his own master complain about him to his face was something Ben would never get used to. He usually felt compelled to apologize. "Sorry about that."

"You've had it before, then?"

"Yes. After that bore on Nazzar with the membership fees."

"The exact same?" Qui-Gon turned to look at Ben in surprise.

"Almost entirely. You were even sent on this exact mission."

"Was I?"

"Yes, you went solo, I was left behind sick, and I hated every minute of it." Ben scratched at his beard and shrugged. "It's a peculiar point to remain constant across two rather different lifetimes. I
wouldn't wish that flu upon anyone."

"I see." A pause while Qui-Gon scrolled through his dossier, not actually reading any of it. He and Ben rarely acknowledged Ben's history as Qui-Gon's apprentice. It was simpler that way, especially around Obi-Wan. But now, alone, on a mission together again, a latent sense of camaraderie blurred that unspoken convention. "This mission… I don't suppose I divulged any helpful details to you when I returned?"

Ben stared ahead through the cockpit windows. "You did, actually. Quite a few, very thorough. Apparently it was a fascinating, involved assignment." When he ended his train of thought there, Qui-Gon looked up from his paperwork, waiting. Ben met his gaze. "Unfortunately, I can't remember any of it," he admitted.

Qui-Gon scoffed and closed his 'pad. Ben grimaced and put out his hands in defense.

"I was sick. And beyond that, I was very put out by not having been able to go. You talked for hours, Master, I couldn't have listened if I tried."

"Inattentiveness fueled by bitterness... honestly, you should know better," Qui-Gon reprimanded, as though Ben were still his apprentice. He shook his head. "The Force gifts you with unprecedented knowledge of the future and its possibilities, and you forget it because you were sulking."

"I did not forget," Ben insisted, shoulders down, chin high in a diplomatic air. "I never knew it in the first place." Perspective was everything. Ben checked their progress toward Alaris Prime; they were nearly there. "The Force works in mysterious ways. No matter how blind I am in this instance, things never happen the same way twice. You are not here alone, I am not completely without my wits, and I'm sure as we go along, something will jog my memory." He eyed Qui-Gon with a sly and pointed glare. "The Force will provide a solution, I am sure." Qui-Gon hated it when he parroted his sayings back in his face.

Qui-Gon shook his head in chagrined silence. After a while, he turned toward the con and began packing away his things for departure. "Remind me to lecture Obi-Wan on attentiveness and respect to his superiors when we return."

Ben side-eyed him. Qui-Gon side-eyed back. "Do you honestly think that will help?" Ben asked, voice droll.

If Qui-Gon found this funny, it did not register on his face. "If things never happen the same way twice, it's worth a shot."

The Jedi ruins on Alaris Prime had been under excavation for three years. Soon after the negotiations between Attichitcuk and the Republic had been settled, a dozen Jedi had been dispatched and had ever since been living on-site to conduct the excavation. Using technological aids only when necessary, the team relied heavily on the Force to uncover their own history, hauling off boulders and weeding out parasitic vegetation from the ancient stone walls. It was an arduous task, but deeply rewarding.

The temple itself was an expansive structure, miniscule in comparison to the Ziggurat on Coruscant, but impressive for how much of it remained intact. Winding underground corridors, elevated plateaus, and square, windowed towers combined into a labyrinthian, eclectic architectural specimen that would no doubt occupy the imaginations of Jedi scholars for years.

Derelict for centuries, the temple was enshrined inside and out by vegetation. Trees grew in and
through towers, roots decorated the hallways where young Padawans had once traveled to their classes, and the long, wide, pillared chamber that the researchers believed to be a refectory was now covered in ivy. These particulars had been footnoted in the dossiers of the Temple's incoming guests, shown in holopics and short asides. Although the team had not spoken of them, Ben knew that Qui-Gon was excited about their accommodations. He, fond as he was of nature, was somewhat less so.

"Ah, Master Jinn! And Master Kenobi, is it?" A tall, broadly built Jedi approached as they strode down the ship's ramp.

"Ben Kenobi," the named bowed politely. "Pleasure to meet you, Master…?"

"Radigan," the man's smile was lopsided and kind, and just a bit mischievous against his sun-tanned skin. He had long, blue-black hair tied in a rakish tail, but some of it fell out of its tie as he bowed. "Nomar Radigan."

"A pleasure to meet you, Master Radigan," Qui-Gon greeted.

"To you both as well." He eyed Ben in particular and chuckled. "I have to say, I was a little confused when Obi-Wan's prefix changed on the latest mission update." He glanced at Qui-Gon, "You keep a backup Kenobi on hand, just in case?"

Qui-Gon laughed. "I'm afraid that my apprentice is Temple-bound with a particularly stubborn virus. Ben is Obi-Wan's uncle, and an old friend of mine."

"Ah, that explains it," Nomar said, and winked at Ben, crowsfeet scrunching merrily. "You must know I only jest, Master Kenobi. Come on, I'll show you inside."

They walked out of the small packed-dirt landing bay and onto a walking trail. The path weaved through dense forest, made entirely of soil except for a few improvised stairways. As they walked, Qui-Gon became increasingly engrossed with the natural fauna, a smile growing beneath his mustache. Ben would have normally rolled his eyes to see it, but he too was feeling the draw of the forest. The Force was strong here, thrumming like an old heartbeat and a welcome home.

Nomar seemed to understand his companion's thoughts. "As it turns out, Jedi temples age like wine. The older, the better." He bounced down some steps and from behind an overhanging branch, the half-ruined temple came into view, brown stones outlined by mossy grids of grout. Nomar gave an appreciative sigh and stepped over a large tree root to continue on their path. "I was skeptical coming here at first, but now," He took an appreciative breath of jungle air. "I can't imagine leaving."

"Skeptical?" Qui-Gon remarked, "I would have thought it would be an honor."

"Oh, it is, don't get me wrong. But I'm not really the sort for this kind of assignment. It wasn't me they wanted. My apprentice, Zulo, is hellbent on becoming a scholar. He's got a knack for this sort of stuff," Nomar's voice softened with pride. "He heard about the ruins a few years ago and petitioned the council to allow him to come along. They granted the request, and of course I went with him."

"It sounds like a wonderful opportunity, especially for a padawan." Qui-Gon gave him a smile.

"It is, and I'm proud of him for seizing it. Though, I admit I was disappointed to hear your apprentice wouldn't be joining you. Zulo is a good kid, but here, it's Masters as far as the eye can see. I would've liked for him to spend time with someone his own age. He's only nineteen, but acts like he's eighty-five."

Qui-Gon laughed. "I'm not entirely sure Obi-Wan would have helped. He's an old soul, far too serious for his age. And he broods," Qui-Gon glanced at his once-padawan. In his younger years,
Ben would have glared for the comment. But age had made him better friends with himself, faults and all. He shrugged.

Nomar let out a laugh. "Sounds just like mine. Perhaps they can make friends, once we get back to Coruscant. Force only knows when that will be." They'd reached the temple entrance, an open doorway leading into a yawning blackness. Nomar flipped a switch, and a long string of lamps flickered to life, illuminating a dirty, curving hallway. Master Radigan lead the way, with Qui-Gon and Ben following after in single file. Dozens of footprints were visible in the soil-dusted tile, sometimes interrupted by a root or a stray rock. Their footfalls added to the collection, echoing off the close walls as they descended into the cool belly of the temple. Qui-Gon and Ben took in their new surroundings in silence. Privately, Ben thought that the atmosphere felt strikingly similar to the basement levels in the Temple where he'd found sanctuary for so many years. As he was about to mention it to Qui-Gon, he realized abruptly that Qui-Gon had never been to the basement levels. He kept quiet.

"Truth be told," Nomar broke the silence in a far more somber tone of voice than before, "It's a good thing the Council has sent two masters instead of one. You aren't here for the excavation, and from what I hear, yours might not be the sort of mission you'd like to bring an apprentice into."

Qui-Gon frowned. "I'm sure Obi-Wan would've been up for the challenge, had he been well. He's a senior padawan now; quite ready for the trials, I'd say."

Ben, who had been concentrating on where he placed his feet, whipped his head up to stare at the back of Qui-Gon's head. The taller master did not seem to sense his shock.

"Is he? Well," Nomar hesitated somewhat awkwardly, "that's good. But I hold my words, Master Jinn. It might be better to go into this without the… ties that an apprentice brings along. You're working with the Wookiees, pitted up against gundarks and worse. It's going to be rough and tumble all the way down."

"Worse?" Ben picked up, glancing around Qui-Gon's shoulder to their guide.

Nomar shrugged apologetically. "Rumors. Now, granted, I'm little more than a dogsbody around here, but our surveyors have sent in some reports of unusual activity in the unoccupied sectors of the planet. We stay in close contact with the Wookiees, who say they have no idea what it is we've seen. We're not properly equipped or staffed to investigate. It could be nothing… but I'm not so sure. I'd keep an eye out."

Qui-Gon hummed pensively, frowning in the way he often did when forced to face future eventualities. "The Force will guide us," he said at length, baritone resolute. Ben pushed away a bad feeling. The hallway opened up into a room and the trio fanned out. Qui-Gon moved to walk beside Ben, and gave him a stern, questioning look. Ben shrugged helplessly. His memory remained as shrouded as the warnings Nomar gave them.

"Master Krill!" Nomar called, and waved at a figure across the room. From behind a makeshift desk, a human female smiled and stood.

"Masters Jinn and Kenobi, I presume," she approached them and bowed. They replied in kind.

"Indeed we are," Qui-Gon answered for them both.

Nomar smiled, holding out a hand to introduce the newcomer. "Gentlemen, this is Tora Krill, the de facto leader of our little setup here."
Tora smiled humbly at them. Her short white hair gave her a spritely, energetic look, though her face and neck were showing the wrinkles of late middle age. "I'm not actually in charge," she clarified, eyeing Nomar in a way that said she'd lectured him about this technicality before, "that's master Ular's purview, but he's been swamped with administrative minuta, and I have the most experience with the ruins." She folded her hands in the neat manner of an executor and returned attention to the Temple's newest wards. "Master Ular is away presenting our research at a conference, but let me welcome you to Alaris Prime in his stead," she smiled at the two masters. "I realize your mission lies outside of the temple, but of course we are always happy to host our own."

"We are very grateful for your hospitality," Ben smiled, taking point in their conversation before Qui-Gon could snap at it. "It's an honor to see how you're uncovering our Order's history. How is the excavation proceeding?"

Tora flushed with pride. "Very well, I'm happy to say. The condition of the temple is far better than we had anticipated. Much of the structure is as sound as the Ziggurat, and we've been able to catalog whole roomfuls of artifacts - a very rare find."

Ben nodded, an interested grin on his lips. "That's wonderful to hear. It must be fascinating work - I shall enjoy hearing more as the project progresses. I'm something of a hobbyist scholar."

"Well," Tora smiled, pleasantly surprised by Ben's enthusiasm, "I shall be more than happy to indulge you. For now, I ought to show you to your rooms, I know you have an important mission ahead."

"Of course, thank you." This time his smile was wide and disarming, dimples and all.

Master Krill smiled back, stepping around the pair to lead them away. As Ben took steps to follow, Qui-Gon came up close beside him.

"Do you always flatter yourself into the better graces of the opposite sex?" He whispered.

"It was not flattery," Ben admonished, defensively, "it is fascinating, I do look forward to learning more. It's not every day we get to see our own temples as they would have been three hundred years ago." Qui-Gon knew from many years at Obi-Wan's side that it was a genuine sentiment. However, those same years of experience had taught him that Obi-Wan would never engage in such unabashed interest without an ulterior motive. As they walked side by side, his stare was silent and relentless. Eventually, childhood sensibilities still sensitive to Qui-Gon's tricks, Ben cracked. He tipped his chin defiantly. "Even if that were not so, it is in one's best interest to find a host's good favor."

"I see," Qui-Gon muttered, easing back and looking intensely smug. "I always said you'd be a charmer if you weren't so serious. Nice to know you've finally listened to me."

Ben sighed heavily, as grown children were wont to do around their fathers. Qui-Gon chuckled. For all of Qui-Gon's teasing, Ben's efforts did work in their favor. Their original room allotment would have seen them sleeping in a damp, half-cleaned chamber with hard floor mats for resting; but after Master Krill had seen what her team had set up for them, she'd scoffed, apologized to them both - to Master Kenobi more than once - and moved them to a much more agreeable room, dry and clean. She'd even rustled up padded sleeping cots for them - a rare luxury in the field.

"A Jedi craves not physical comforts," Qui-Gon muttered after she'd left, eyeing the room and Ben's quietly pleased expression.

"No," his companion had answered, sitting down on his plush cot with an appreciative sigh. "But a
good night's rest before a hard mission is not a selfish comfort. We come to serve, after all."

Their overnight accommodations settled, the two Jedi set about plotting their next course of action. They contacted Attichitcuk and announced their arrival. Apparently, they had not come a moment too soon. The Wookies were spread thin across their territories, battling off a new wave of gundarks and defending their fledgling crops as they had been for months. They'd already lost many good men and women to the fight, as well as equipment and supplies. It was unclear if they would be able to recoup their losses. Attichitcuk, however, adamantly refused to give up.

"As you should," Qui-Gon had concurred with the Wookiee leader. "Your people have suffered enough hardship on Kashyyk, I have no doubt they will overcome here on Alaris Prime. We will leave for your camp at dawn and render whatever help we can."

That settled, the pair covered the windows to block out the late afternoon sun and prepared for one last rest before they entered the mission field.

"Have you ever fought a gundark before?" Qui-Gon asked conversationally as they settled into their cots.

"I have, actually," Ben's smile was irrepressible and absurd for the topic. Qui-Gon noticed it.

"Was it as fun as all that?" He joked. Ben shook his head.

"No, it's just…" he touched his smiling lip with a finger, trying to make himself stop. "The time I'm thinking of… Anakin was with me, both of us were weaponless…" he chuckled at the memory of Anakin's face, the way he'd rattled on and on about that encounter for weeks afterward. That man did not exist anymore - could not exist. Ben missed him. "It was rather funny, is all."

Qui-Gon looked at him, quizzically. "That boy must've changed you more than I could've guessed, if you think fighting a gundark without a weapon is funny," he jibed, lying down on his cot and closing his eyes. "I should like to hear the story someday."

Ben almost launched into the tale then and there, but then he thought of Dooku's role in it - or rather, Darth Tyrannus' role in it. As far as Ben was aware, Qui-Gon was ignorant of his old master's sympathies - those that were, and those that might yet be. "Not all of it, perhaps," Ben said quietly, settling into a comfortable spot. Discomfort coiled in his belly and he felt compelled to change the subject. "Do you really think that Obi-Wan is ready for the trials?"

Qui-Gon opened his eyes, though Ben could not see. His moment of hesitation before answering was long enough to convey self-doubt, but short enough to convey solid conviction. "Yes, I do."

"Hmm." Hearing it felt odd to Ben. It was nearly three years earlier than when he'd graduated, and even then, he'd never received such glowing commendation from his master before Qui-Gon's own interests had demanded it. Hearing it now, meant for another iteration of himself, was both healing and hurtful. "It's a bit early for it, by my reckoning."

"Yes, I had thought of that," his master admitted, sounding unusually pensive. Though neither could see each other, Ben could imagine his expression, the seldom-wrought wrinkles of preoccupation on the face of a man used to living in the moment. "But you know better than I how much he's changed from what you knew, who you were at his age. Your arrival has… sped things up."

"I've sensed it." Palpatine. Maul. The Sith. "But not in the same ways."

"Even so. Your presence in his life, the matters he's had to deal with because of it, they've aged him. Obi-Wan is very nearly… no, he is a man. He'll make a great Jedi Knight - of a caliber I'm grateful to
Ben had no way of conveying his emotions coherently. The swell in his chest to have earned Qui-Gon's regard, the ache he felt from missing being his apprentice, the sheer awkwardness of sharing his own master with himself. But Qui-Gon's condemnation of himself, a self he had never known, was something Ben could not ignore. "Obi-Wan is not me, Qui-Gon, no matter our similarities. And you are not the man I knew. You are different, in your own ways; I know you would never inflict upon him what happened to me."

"What I did to you," Qui-Gon saw through Ben's careful passivity. "You have done nothing to me but mend what once was, Master, what never will be, and I thank you for it." The Force hummed quietly in their apology, a contented tone that invited both to rest. "When will you tell the council?" Ben asked at length, growing drowsy.

Qui-Gon hid how the question upset his inner sense of peace. "When the time is right," he said cryptically. "As you say, it's a bit early yet." Which he felt was true; but he did not entirely understand why.

"Just be sure to mention it to him before you mention it to the Council," Ben advised. "It'll be better for everyone."

Qui-Gon did not feel up to the task of asking why. "I'll keep it in mind," he said, and consigned himself to sleep. Ben followed his example shortly thereafter.

They awoke before dawn. Ben had warned Master Krill that they would be leaving early, so she'd wished them well and told them where to find their portable kitchen and 'fresher units. They washed up, checked their provisions, and quietly made their way to the kitchens for one last proper meal.

The halls were empty. Lonely security lights gave off just enough light to illuminate the doorways and uneven footpaths. Electricity generators and field equipment stood here and there, out of the way and dormant until their sentient masters emerged for the day's work. They made no noise.

Not wanting to spoil the silence, Ben picked up the disused threads of his mental link with Qui-Gon to say, "I think we're the only ones awake."

Qui-Gon craned his neck to see around the bend ahead of them. "Not quite," he replied, taking the sudden telepathy in stride, "Look."

Ben looked. They'd just come upon a large, recently-cleared chamber. It was a makeshift kitchen, full of tables and cooking equipment, right where Tora had said it would be. However, there was one fixture that Master Krill had neglected to mention. It was stooped over by a wall, shining a bright purple light on some obscure point of interest. A padawan's braid hung over the far shoulder.

"You must be Zulo," Qui-Gon said. Across the hall, the apprentice jumped suddenly, falling back and raising his bright lamp to see his visitors. Qui-Gon and Ben both winced and shaded their eyes, temporarily blinded. The boy hastily pointed the light away.

"Sorry," he said, blacklight causing his teeth to shine blue as he flashed a nervous smile. He leaned
over and flipped on a regular lamp so he could turn off his hand-held one.

Now fully illuminated, Ben could see that he was only a boy. He was shortish, and gangly, still waiting on his post-pubescent musculature. His eyes were alert and intelligent, but, though disguised by his dark complexion, they sported fatigued bags underneath. Ben wondered if he woke up at this hour everyday.

"Hello, Masters, so sorry about that."

"No need to apologize. It is Zulo, isn't it?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Yes," he bowed, "Zulo Berron."

"It's nice to meet you, Padawan Berron. Your master speaks very highly of you." The apprentice grinned at the praise. "My name is Qui-Gon Jinn, and this is Master Ben Kenobi. We're in search of breakfast - this is the camp kitchen, is it not?"

"Yes, please, help yourself," Zulo gestured, kicking his equipment out of the way. They moved further into the kitchen, whereupon Qui-Gon set out hunting for tea. Zulo watched them with intense interest, which he was attempting, albeit poorly, to hide.

"You're the ones going out to help Attichitcuk, aren't you?" He asked. Ben smiled up at him.

"Yes, we are. How did you know about that?"

Zulo shrugged. "Small team around here. We don't really have secrets."

"Ah," Qui-Gon smiled as he put together a scanty tea tray with breakfast cakes, "That must be freeing. And maddening."

Zulo laughed. "A bit, I guess. Are you leaving soon?"

"As soon as we finish breakfast," Ben answered, joining Qui-Gon with a trayful of fruits and cooked cereal. They made their way to a table and set out their shared foodstuffs. "Why don't you join us?"

Hesitant, Zulo went to sit by Ben, and graciously accepted the piece of fruit offered him.

"We're up before the sun to rendezvous with the Wookiee colonists for our mission. But why is an apprentice awake at this hour?" Qui-Gon stirred his tea. "I have a padawan not too much older than you. At nineteen he would've slept in past midday, if I had let him. Has your master asked you to get up this early?"

"Oh," Zulo smiled sheepishly, "No, actually… I don't think Master Nomar knows I'm up. I was working on a project, is all."

"What kind of project?" Ben asked, scratching his beard. Zulo gestured to the corner where he'd been working with his blacklight. A meter or so above the ground, there was a thick band of limestone which encircled the entire room. In the artificial lighting, indistinct carvings were visible.

"There are some old inscriptions in the walls, maxims and sayings, so forth."

"Yes. The Temple on Coruscant has similar monuments around its halls."

"Yes, but these have to be translated," Zulo explained, shyness dissolving while discussing that which he knew well, "they're written in Old Galactic Standard."
"Really?" Ben's inner scholar was able to pick up on the significance before Qui-Gon did. He scratched the side of his face. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I can show you. The carvings are impossible to read, but there was ink there, and the leftover bits of it show up under blacklight. It's OGS, I'm sure of it. I've been translating the inscriptions to try and date the temple."

"Old Galactic Standard hasn't been used for thousands of years," Ben frowned, "I thought this temple was only a few hundred years old?"

"That's just it," Zulo exclaimed, eyes wide and excited, "I think the initial reports are wrong. This could be one of the oldest Temples in the Order."

Qui-Gon glanced askance at the worksite. "The memorialization of a dead language in a Temple does not mean it was not long dead when it was written. You can still find texts written in OGS in the Archives."

Zulo deflated somewhat, but his expression remained confident. "Which is why I'm also dating what the inscriptions say. I'm hoping there will be some lexical giveaway, maybe even a date somewhere."

"What does Master Krill say to this theory of yours?" Qui-Gon asked, biting into a sandwich.

This time, Zulo's whole demeanor shrunk, shyness returning. "She doesn't… that is… This project wasn't actually assigned to me. Per se. I've been doing it on my own."

"Master Krill doesn't know?"

Zulo bit his lip. "No."

"Hmm," Qui-Gon smiled, sipping his tea. He could not always sympathize with scholars; he did not have the right disposition for all of the intellectual drudgery. But he could sympathize entirely with a bit of rebellion. "So that is why you're up so early."

"Yes."

"You ought to tell the others," Ben suggested. "Or are there secrets among you after all?" Suitably chastised, Zulo nodded. "Still, I wish you the best of luck. It would be a remarkable discovery if this temple really is so old." Ben suddenly put down his spoon to scratch at his beard.

"Are you alright?" Qui-Gon asked him. "You've been doing that all morning."

"I don't know what it is," Ben grumbled, scratching. "It's an itch that won't leave me."

"Oh no," Zulo scooted slightly away from Ben, "You didn't get furlice overnight, did you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Furlice. They live in dark caves - and temples, as we've found out. They usually snack on gundarks, but they also go after species with hair." He squinted at Ben's face with a grimace. "Tend to go after facial hair first. You won't see any of the guys growing beards around here. I'd get that checked out before they spread to your hair."

Ben sputtered. "Lice?" Just what he needed. "And you, you've made it out unscathed, I take it?" He looked up at Qui-Gon, who blinked and shrugged.

"Perhaps they went for the weaker target, my friend."
"Very funny," Ben glared. He turned a more civilized expression on Zulo. "How does one get rid of these pests? Assuming that is what this is." Ben wondered if he was imagining the sudden sensation of crawling. He itched again.

Zulo looked uncertain. "Well, if you were sticking around, we've developed this whole cleaning routine to get them out and keep them out, but, since you're leaving… when we first had problems with them, everyone just shaved."

"Shave?" Ben said with distaste, as if the solution were in fact more abhorrent than the problem, "I'm not going to shave."

"Well," Zulo shrugged, not sure how to advise a master now that his cure-all had hit a sore spot. "I'm not sure what to tell you."

"The Force will present a solution," Qui-Gon finished off his tea and began clearing their dishes. Ben continued to scratch. "We really ought to be going. Thank you for the conversation, Padawan Berron. May the Force grant you success in your endeavors. You really ought to tell your master. I believe he would be impressed with your efforts."

The apprentice bowed. "Yes, Master Jinn." He glanced at Ben, who was now glowering at the air, picking at his facial hair. Qui-Gon chuckled.

"Leave him to me. He'll have far more to worry about when we meet with Wookiees and gundarks."

Zulo grinned hesitantly. "Force be with you both, then."

"Indeed."

When Ben had visited Alaris Prime in the past, they'd been able to travel around the entire sphere without much trouble, using well-paved roads and landspeeders to cross distances at a convenient pace. However, the industrial base that he remembered from the Clone Wars was a figment of memory. Here in the present, there were no roads at all, and no hope of crossing the jungle terrain on speeder, and no good place to land a personal craft. And so, for the next several hours, the Jedi progressed on foot. Qui-Gon kept his left hand rested on his saber, eyes scanning the horizon for any potential threats, be they gundark or otherwise. Ben's hands were occupied with scratching his face.

"You know, the Wookiees will not thank you in the slightest if you bring your lice to them," Qui-Gon advised.

"It's not lice," Ben insisted, though he knew it was a lie - probably.

"Shall we let you test your wild hopes on a colony of people who are covered in fur? Or will you do us all the decency of shaving off the infestation before it becomes worse?"

Ben glared at him, hating how the man was so often right. "I don't suppose you have a kit with you, do you?"

"If you mean a hair kit, no, I do not. I didn't think it would be necessary. Though I do have a medic kit with a laserknife…"

"Nevermind," Ben grumbled, unclipping his lightsaber. "Give me a moment, will you?" He looked around their surroundings and set off down a short embankment.

Qui-Gon watched him march off toward a small puddle and ignite his saber. "With a saber?" He
raised a concerned, skeptical brow. "You're trying to get rid of the lice, not your face."

Without turning around, Ben called back, "You would be amazed at the tricks you pick up when a saber is the only tool you have to your name," Ben said, sitting down in front of the puddle to use it as a mirror. "I would think you of all people would respect a good field trick."

Qui-Gon only shook his head and waited, eye still scanning the horizon, searching for any movement, and hint of trouble. There were none. Only birds chirping quietly and the chitter of bugs in the trees.

Eventually, Ben hiked unhappily back up the slope, rubbing at his clean-shaven face and picking off bits of singed hair and whatever remained of the lice. "Happy now? Let's go. We've still got at least twenty klicks to go."

Qui-Gon did a double take, and proceeded to openly stare. Ben was looking down at his map. "We're headed southeast, by my estimation, which means we should be coming upon a valley fairly soon. We can follow its base for another dozen klicks or so, which should let us out here, just a few klicks south of Attichuck's base." He looked up for his Master's agreement, but found him staring at him instead, mouth slightly agape. He frowned. "What?"

Qui-Gon's mind was whirling back in time, back to the day that Ben had first appeared in the Temple, to the moment when Qui-Gon had first laid eyes on him. Unnerving, he'd thought then. He long since forgotten about that feeling, the chill that had run up his spine when he realized that this man was not like Obi-Wan, he was Obi-Wan. The feeling was back now, stronger than before. Without his beard, Ben looked exactly like his younger self. For a brief moment, Qui-Gon believed that he had been propelled ten years into the future, a future in which he and Obi-Wan, not Ben, were once again set on a mission together.

"Master?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon shook himself. "I'm sorry," he told Ben, blinking away abstraction. "You just… you look very different, is all." He scanned the slightly wrinkled version of his apprentice once more. "You've aged well." It was meant as a compliment, but Obi-Wan - no, Ben, Qui-Gon had to remind himself - sneered.

"I haven't aged since I was twelve, that's why I grew the damned thing in the first place," which made Qui-Gon laugh. Ben sighed, almost wistfully, and stroked his bare chin. "It'll take weeks to grow it back," he lamented.

"Vanities, Padawan," Qui-Gon reprimanded, setting off into a hike once more. Ben scoffed and followed.

"Diplomacy. I need that beard."

"For what?"

"Intimidation, among other things. And besides, without it, I might as well tell the entire galaxy my true identity. I should like to have it back before we return to Coruscant. There would be plenty of comments."

"Hmm." Qui-Gon hadn't thought of that. "The Force will provide a solution." But, on that same vein, "And what if Obi-Wan ever decides to grow a beard?"

"He shall have to shave. We look too much alike. Without some great distinguishing feature between
us, we might as well announce to the whole Temple that he has a time-travelling counterpart who's been living amongst the Jedi for nearly ten years." Ten years. Saying it out loud made him feel old - even without the beard.

"And have you considered that?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Considered what?"

"Telling everyone."

Ben balked at the idea. "Everyone? No." He shook his head, and added quietly, "Perhaps a few others. I want to tell Aola. She is close with Obi-Wan, with me. Her master knows, you know… She deserves to know, I think."

"Feemor's mentioned it before."

"Has he?"

"Yes, you two ought to talk about it when we return."

"Yes… I think I will." Ben let himself drift off into thought as they continued to hike along the low ridge until it descended into a valley.

They trekked on in companionable quiet for several more hours, speaking occasionally of the mission, or of the Temple and Zulo's project. They travelled down into the valley and along its path, and were halfway through hiking back up the cove's end when Qui-Gon very suddenly stopped and shot out his arm to prevent Ben from taking another step forward.

Ben's senses jerked to life, and he watched the elder man's face intently. "What is it?"

Qui-Gon did not answer immediately. After a moment of silence, his mental voice was tense. "Do you sense that?"


Qui-Gon did likewise. "Gundark?" He surmised. Ben let out a sigh.

"Gundark," He agreed. The creature burst into view, sniffing the air. It saw them, bared its teeth, and charged with a roar. The Jedi split up, flanking the beast on either side.

"You know," Ben said from across the heavily-wooded field, "I never actually learned how gundarks made it out this far," he swept his saber in a casual arc, missing the gundark's foreclaw when it drew it up at the last second, and ducking out of the away when it brought it back down to land on top of him.

"Perhaps you should stop wondering how and start focusing on the fact that they have," Qui-Gon struck a hit on the animal's paw as it swiped at him, and it yowled.

"Well of course it's here," Ben threw back, running underneath the belly of the beast, "but how did it get here?"

Qui-Gon did not roll his eyes, but only because he was busy dodging the Gundark's angry claws. It's shrieks were deafening at this close range. "You said you've fought a gundark before, how did you defeat it then?" He yelled over the noise, sliding down a ridge toward the head. As the Jedi slid, the
beast turned completely around, sending it's tree-trunk thick tail barrelling at Qui-Gon's head. He put up his saber at the last minute, severing half of its tail entirely, to the creature's wailing agony. It fell in a bloody, twitching heap and the Jedi winced in sympathy, feeling guilty for inflicting unnecessary suffering.

The gundark kicked with its hind paw and ejected Ben out from beneath itself. The Jedi groaned and stood, robes now covered in soil. He hobbled toward his master. "With a cave full of very large boulders, which seem to be scarce about now." He eyed the severed tail and shrugged. "Nice try, though." Their pause to converse gave the gundark time enough to turn around and spot them. It dove at them face first, teeth gleaming. The Jedi ran.

"There's a steep cliff not far ahead," Qui-Gon yelled as branches and weeds smacked against his legs. Ben glanced over his shoulder at the pursuing gundark, trying not to trip on roots and rocks.

"Its tail is throwing it off-balance. Nip at the heels?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Now," he said. The two veered off to either side of the path, running around and coming back behind the creature from opposite directions. Alternating in turn, they dodged at the monster's feet and shins, prodding it with their sabers onwards toward the cliff. It roared and bent down to take a bite out of Qui-Gon, but came back up with a mouth full of foliage instead. The treeline came into view, and then the rocky cliff beyond. The gundark burst through the wood's edge in an explosion of leaves and dirt.

As simple as the creature's brain was, it seemed to have realized their plans for it. It roared in anger and charged back toward the Jedi and the safety of the forest.

"Now?" Ben asked loudly.

"Now," Qui-Gon confirmed mentally. They raised their hands as one and sent a massive push through the Force, sending the gundark flying backward and over the edge of the cliff. Its claws scrambled at the edge, but it fell to the ground with a fading howl. The sound of its landing was punctuated by the splitting of trees.

"Well," Qui-Gon panted, trying to catch his breath, "as good as any boulders, I'd say."

"Yes, it's rather easier with weapons," Ben agreed, and went forward to look over the cliff.

Far below, the gundark was silent. But nearby where it had landed, the sounds of a familiar alien language rang out. Qui-Gon came up beside Ben and peered at the carnage. Already, two hair-covered bodies were running toward the fallen gundark, waving their bowcasters overhead in victory. Their growls echoed up the cliff face to their allies above.

"I suppose," said Qui-Gon, brushing hair out of his face, "that would be our rendezvous point."

By the time they'd reached the bottom of the cliff face, the Wookies had already begun clearing up fallen trees and loading them into repulsorcraft. It appeared they were butchering the gundark, chopping off claws and fur, sorting usable bits and marking out where the best cuts of meat would yield. Ben winced. He couldn't imagine fried gundark being an exceptionally palatable meal. Still, he supposed it was good to see the gundark's unfortunate demise put to good use for others.

As the scavengers worked, a huge, golden-brown Wookiee emerged from the forest. As he passed, other Wookies nodded their heads respectfully. Though Ben's Shyriiwook was rusty, he was able to make out the speaker's boisterous greeting.

«Masters Jedi!»
Ben smiled at him. "Attichitcuk," he bowed slightly. "It is good to see you - you seem to have come upon us at just the right moment."

The Wookiee leader seemed to chuckle at this, though it came out as more of a purr.

«No, master Jedi, it is you who has come at just the right moment. I am incredibly grateful to see you. Come with me. We cannot waste any more time.» He waved a massive paw, bidding them to follow.

Qui-Gon and Ben shared a look, and fell into step together behind Attichitcuk, allowing themselves to be led toward the new Alaris settlement and whatever dangers lay within.
The Wookies' camp was several klicks north from where Qui-Gon and Ben had killed the gundark. Apparently, they had been tracking the beast for several hours when it had picked up the Jedi’s scent from upwind.

«As grateful as I am to see you - and that you have killed another one of those dreadful things,» Attichitcuk was saying as they picked their way through dense foliage, «I'll admit I'm disappointed that we were not able to follow it further. We need to know where they roost.»

"It is a true infestation, then," Qui-Gon said, watching his feet carefully as they descended down a steep embankment. Ahead of him, the Wookiee leader nodded.

«When we arrived, we thought we'd chosen land far away from their hunting grounds. But no sooner had my son Chewbacca and his agemate Shoran arrived than four gundarks attacked our camp at once. We were able to take them down on our own. But it has triggered a never ending war with the beasts. I don't know if gundarks hold grudges, but these ones might.»

Beside Qui-Gon, Ben spoke up a dry tone, "I do not believe gundarks have the brainpower for that sort of thing, though what they lack in biology they make up for in sheer obstinence. Perhaps your camp is in their territory after all," he mused, rubbing his chin and wincing slightly when he realized he had no beard. He drew his hand away. "Then again, as far as we know, they could consider this entire moon their territory."

"Whatever the case," said Qui-Gon in that indelible, encouraging calm that had defined Ben's adolescent years, "we will do all that we can to help eradicate the pests - at least from this part of the moon. How many Wookies do you have to spare?"

Attichitcuk eyed the three Wookies that had accompanied them, the one up ahead and the two flanking on either side. «Just fourteen. We had more, not so many cycles ago.» He looked down at the ground, weighed down by some invisible burden. «One gundark, four, even, is no match for a pair of Wookies, but they haven't stopped coming. Even our strongest are beginning to feel the strain. If we lose any more, the beasts might win after all.»

"It will not come to that," Master Jinn assured gently as they plodded along. "You've been tracking them," he said briskly, "what have you learned?"

Attichitcuk ducked under a low branch and when he came up, the sadness in his face had been replaced by cool determination. «They don't travel in packs. They seem to network with their own kind, perhaps even nest with them, but they hunt alone. We don't know the lay of this land well enough to say where the most likely spots are.»

"Gundarks nest in caves, do they not?" Ben asked. "Have you found any cavern complexes nearby?"

«Small ones,» Attichitcuk replied, «None big enough for the monsters we've seen. We're still looking, but we're running out of time. These forests are uncharted. The Republic had the moon surveyed by satellite years ago, but those maps are not detailed enough for what we need.»

"Are you keeping your own maps, then?"

«Yes, a clanmember, Khaati, is our cartographer. She can show you what we know.» The Wookiee pointed to a bright green spot coming into view. «Our camp is just there.»
Set into modest, brightly lit forest clearing, the camp was small and understaffed. A Wookiee holding a bowcaster by the perimeter nodded to them as they passed. Upon entering the camp, no longer confined to the dense wood, the arriving party spread out. Qui-Gon and Ben stayed close together, taking in the sights of the camp.

There were four main prefab buildings which seemed to be operations and facilities, while a dozen or so smaller huts, little more than tents in their own right, lay farther off in the grassy clearing. A large, unidentifiable insect flew past Ben's nose. Qui-Gon smiled. Ben sighed.

Oblivious to the divergence of tastes going on behind him, Attichitcuk waved the two Jedi to join him as he entered one of the large, domed shelters. "In here," he told them. "We can show you what we know."

Although it was sunny out, inside the prefab shelters, the shades had been drawn to allow for the large holotable.

"Our camp is here," the cartographer called Khaati said, pointing to a large yellow marker on the rotating holomap. A scattered mass of blue dots appeared on the terrain, concentrated most densely around the camp. "These are all of the gundarks we've seen," she said, and tapped at the controls. Approximately half of the blue dots turned red. "And these are the ones we've killed."

Ben rubbed at his chin - he had never been aware that it was such a routine habit, until now that his beard was gone and the sensation shocked him every time. He fiddled with his hand and eventually thrust both thumbs through his belt. "This one here," he pointed to a red dot some klicks away, against a sharp ridge above the valley. "That is the one we killed today, is it not?"

"It is. We spotted it first here, just a klick away from our eastern perimeter. We tracked it to where you killed it. We've tracked two other gundarks going in a similar direction."

"So you believe the nest could be somewhere past this point," Qui-Gon said, pointing to the woods beyond where the gundark had been heading.

"We don't know. That's the problem, Master Jinn. You see, we've observed gundarks travelling in all directions from the camp. It could be that one direction is their hunting grounds, another is their nest, or perhaps they have more than one of each. But we have no way of knowing, not until we can follow one all the way to its destination."

"It's very hard to follow a gundark unseen," Ben concluded.

"And once seen, it is very hard to leave them alive and escape with your own life," Khaati said. She shook her head. "You see why we have so little data to go on."

"How long have you been attempting to track them?" Qui-Gon asked, stroking his beard idly in thought. Ben wondered privately if his master was where he'd picked up the habit.

"Three months, now," Attichitcuk stepped forward to examine the map. "Killing them all as they come at us is a dangerous, risky business. Even for us. Constant vigilance isn't enough. We must be proactive in hunting down our enemy if we have any chance of long-term survival."

"Of course," Qui-Gon put his hand down, away from his chin. "Perhaps we can be of some help. Jedi senses may aid your efforts in tracking."

Attichitcuk grinned. "One of the many reasons I am glad for your aid, Master Jedi."
Qui-Gon gave him a friendly grin. Khaati deactivated the holotable even as Ben stood studying it, and lifted the shades to let in sunlight. Drawn from his own thoughts, Ben looked up to see Qui-Gon and Attichitcuk walking side by side out of the shelter, ducking under the low door frame.

"Aside from the gundarks, how are operations proceeding?" Qui-Gon was asking, squinting into the mid-day sun and looking around at the shelters set up around in the clearing. Ben jogged to catch up as Attichitcuk responded,

«Slow but steady. The vegetation here is similar to our home on Kashyyyk, and the soil will be good for our plants as well as our livestock. We already have a greenhouse set up, just there," He pointed to one of the larger prefab shelters, this one outfitted with clear flimsiplast on the roof, «It yields us a large percentage of our food. And over there, that's where we'll keep the bantha and greyclimbers for meat and milk. Unfortunately, we can't transport any here until we're sure the gundarks will not snap them up like they do everything else." The Wookiee sighed. «Those beasts have caused us a great deal of trouble. It's no wonder your Jedi were driven away from their temple eons ago.»

"The gundarks are an imported species," Ben said, "and they've taken over." Attichitcuk chuckled. «I suppose I cannot begrudge them their success - after all, what am I? But aside from gundarks, there's hardly any wildlife to speak of. They'll be hunting each other, soon. Their blind greed for land and progeny have upset the balance of this whole moon.»

Balance was, of course, something Jedi sought to uphold in all things. "We will do what we can to rectify the situation," Qui-Gon assured. "At least, in this region."

«Of course.»

They walked several long strides in silence, worn grit paths crunching under their boots and claws. In the quiet, Ben was struck by a memory.

"Attichitcuk," He said, rather suddenly, "Before we left the temple, one of our brothers there mentioned that they've spotted unusual activity in some sectors of the sphere. Do you know what he was referring to?"

The Wookiee tilted his head in thought. «There is not much to know. I know of what he spoke, that is, that there have been unusual movements in the forest, but the Jedi have been too understaffed to investigate, and we've been too preoccupied with the gundarks to look into it.»

"I see," Ben frowned, mind caught on a bizarre feeling. "What, then, made you aware of this activity at all?"

Attichitcuk waved a paw, and turned toward one of the large, common shelters. «I'll show you. Come with me.»

They followed the Wookie into the hut, which seemed to be a supply stash; electrical equipment, generators, motors, a spare speederbike, and extra bowcasters. He went to a corner and rummaged around for something, which he eventually found and plonked onto the tall worktable sitting in the middle of the room. «We found this shortly after we first arrived here.»

The Jedi approached the table to examine the object. It was a power cell, damaged and likely irreparable. The glass reactor case had been broken, stained a faint green by the lost coolant. Its metal parts still shone dully; it was recently made, and recently lost. A cool, unpleasant feeling fell over Ben's senses.

"You found this as soon as you arrived?" Qui-Gon asked, examining the object. "It's not one of
No. But we're not sure whose it could be - the surveyors never actually landed on the moon's surface," Attichitcuk told them.

Ben was staring at the thing, vision tunnelling to absorb every detail of its structure; the three reinforcing rods, the triangular base and the spots for rivets, the capped glass and rusted coils. He'd seen this cell before. Not this particular one, but a thousand just like it. He'd seen it... where? Anakin had shown it to him on more than one occasion, he remembered. But what those occasions had been, and what events had precipitated the need to understand such technology was beyond Ben's recollection.

"Ben?" called Qui-Gon, deliberately. Ben shook himself out of thought and looked up at the other man. By the look on his face, Ben realized that it was not the first time he'd called his name. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," he said, perhaps too quickly. "Sorry, I was...thinking. It seems familiar."

"You recognize it?" Attichitcuk perked up.

"Not exactly," Ben took the device from Qui-Gon to turn it over in his hands. "I'm not sure." He studied it while the other two watched. There was no insignia, no markings, no inscriptions. His mind wandered back to the talk of 'unusual activity', and brushed up against memories of what Qui-Gon had told him after returning from this mission. Unfortunately, the words were still fog in his mind. "You may not be the only sentients on this moon after all."

"Chief!" A Wookiee burst through the door, "Gundark, just outside camp!"

Attichitcuk straightened to attention. "Has it seen us yet? Can we track it?"

"I'm afraid it's tracked us, sir," replied the Wookiee, "and it's hungry."

Both Jedi drew their sabers. Attichitcuk took up a bowcaster and sighed with anger and a leader's sense of duty. "We'd best be quick, then."

This gundark was smaller than the one they'd encountered before. Between the Wookiee's practiced response and the Jedi's swift saberwork, the beast stood little chance.

"They must be getting desperate," Ben said to Qui-Gon, who was wincing at the pathetic creature; he'd been the one to deal the final blow. "One this small shouldn't have tried to pick off and entire camp by itself."

"I thought you said they were obstinate creatures?"

"Obstinate, yes, suicidal, not quite." He turned away to let the butchers do their work. "I hadn't realized the infestation would be this bad."

"I never mentioned it?" Qui-Gon asked, dry humor running sour.

"Maybe you did," Ben snapped, mind wrestling with images of the gundark, of the power cell, of Qui-Gon pouring tea in their apartment and talking for hours. Nothing came of it. "Damn my memory."

"Masters Jedi," Attichitcuk interrupted before Qui-Gon could prod the apparent amnesiac any further, "The beast left a trail on it's way into our camp. We must hurry before it goes cold."
"Of course," Qui-Gon turned, and brushed Ben's arm as he passed. "Focus on the moment, padawan, not your memories."

Ben stood there for a moment, frowning. That was the second time Qui-Gon had called him that. He hadn't the heart to correct him. "Of course, master," he mumbled to himself, and trudged on after the tracking party. Force willing, their tracking would lead them to their goal sooner rather than later.

The trail went cold after just a few short clicks. Despite this, they kept at it for days, trudging up and down the forest hunting for any sign of gundarks, living, angry, hungry, or otherwise.

"You know," Ben muttered to Qui-Gon one afternoon as they hiked up a viney slope, "You always told me that when one goes looking for trouble, one usually finds it." Upon cresting the hill, he looked out across the lifeless forest and sighed. "But then again, I suppose you never included a timetable in that maxim."

Qui-Gon, who was also growing weary of this game, had sighed with him. "All in good time," he'd said, half to himself. "The Force will provide a solution." The unspoken 'eventually' was mutually understood.

A whole week went by, and several more days after that, and still they had no leads save for the trail that the juvenile gundark had plotted on his way to their camp. The dots on the holomap yielded no helpful patterns or new insight, and every day that went by without a gundark sighting put the camp occupants more and more on edge.

"Is that stubble I see?" Qui-Gon asked one morning, smirking at his companion as he brewed their bitter, field ration tea. Ben had glowered over his breakfast.

"Not much of one," he'd said. Past puberty, Ben had never suffered from the inability to grow facial hair. However, the hair on his face was even more persistently ginger and fine than the hair on his head, and was difficult to see until it was longer.

"I thought you wanted it back before we return to Coruscant?"

"I do. And at this rate, I'll have it down to my chest before we return to Coruscant." He drank his tea and winced at the subpar flavor.

Qui-Gon had chuckled, but didn't try a rebuttal. His sentiments mirrored Ben's too closely for petty debate. He drank his tea, and winced as Ben had.

"Having fun reconnecting with nature, Master Jinn?" The younger man wanted to know. It was Qui-Gon's turn to glower.

The following day, they made a breakthrough. They found not one, but two gundarks on the trail.

"What are they doing?" Ben whispered the question as they watched from afar. The gundarks ahead seemed to be doing nothing much at all, rummaging around for tubers and burrowing prey. "I thought you said gundarks did not travel together?" He asked of Attichitcuk.

The Wookiee leader shrugged. «There is much we do not know about them, Master Kenobi. Besides, they must travel together sometimes - where would the little ones come from?»

Ben ticked an eyebrow, conceding the point.

They followed the pair further into the forest than they had with any other creature. Apparently
distracted by each others company (and competition for food, if the mealtime brawls were anything
to go by) the two gundarks remained oblivious to their sentient pursuers. It was ironic, Ben thought,
how two gundarks could become less trouble than one.

«We're getting close to their nest,» Attichitcuk had said to their camp on the fourth night of their
pursuit, «I can feel it.»

Ben and Qui-Gon had considered the notion for themselves. The Force was an ally in many ways, in
sensing life and its directions. But on a moon so covered in life, in plants, insects, gundarks and
Wookiees alike, the motions and patterns of migration were hard to decipher. "Perhaps," Qui-Gon
had said somewhat less confidently than his Wookiee colleague, "If we are, we will have to be more
vigilant than ever."

It was timely advice. The following morning, just as the dew was beginning to fade from the ground,
the wind shifted and the gundarks' nostrils filled with the scent of Wookiee and human. As one, their
heads jerked up, eyes turning this way and that until they landed on the bush that concealed the
enemy. One growled low in his throat.

Qui-Gon ignited his saber and burst from the cover, charging at the beast with exaggerated motions.
"Don't shoot them!" he yelled at his bewildered comrades, "scare them! It'll keep them running back
to their nest!"

It was a viable plan, and Attichitcuk was more than happy to use it. With great bellowing war cries,
he and five Wookiees leaped from their cover and charged. Ben brought up the rear, lightsaber
blazing to life in a blinding blue flash.

The element of surprise was an advantage even against gundarks. Upon seeing six heavily armed
Wookiees and two humans wielding fire-hot lightsticks, the gundarks screamed some wordless
obscenities at them, turned tail, and fled. Not wasting a moment, the sentient crew followed in hot
pursuit.

Leaves and branches smacked at their sides and their arms as they ran, keeping the dark red fur of the
gundarks in their sights. Suddenly, the two monstrous bodies diverged, one veering left and the other
right.

"Attichitcuk, you follow that one!" Ben pointed to the one that had turned right - south. "Qui-Gon,
and I will track this one."

«Starspeed, Jedi!» bid the clan leader as the two parties split.

The Jedi chased the gundark further and further into the forest, wasting no energy on talking or
planning. If ever the beast looked ready to retaliate, they would nip at it's heels with their sabers,
compelling it to continue on its headlong flight. The Force augmented their endurance, legs pumping,
chests heaving long after a normal human's would have given way. The gundark had no such luck.
They could hear it's labored pants as it galloped along, growling occasionally, swerving and slowing
in indecisive patterns.

"Wait," Ben called, shooting out an arm to call for a halt. The pair decelerated together, breathing
heavily, "It's tired, if we push it any more it'll try to make a stand. We need it to keep going." Ben
explained between breaths. "Let it go. We'll follow from further back."

Qui-Gon nodded, catching his breath. "Good thinking."

They tracked it for another hour. Then, out of nowhere, light screeched up ahead and the gundark
bellowed in pain.

"Blasterfire," Qui-Gon said, drawing his saber. Beside him, Ben was momentarily frozen in place, muscles twitching against his sleeves, his too-soft, gauntlet-less sleeves.

"No," he said, uncomfortable flashbacks crowding his senses, "that's cannon fire."

"Cannon fire?" Qui-Gon frowned at him, "are you sure?"

If he could have, Ben would've forgotten the sound years ago. "It's a very distinctive sound," He said.

Another blast, and a great, creaking *thud* told them that the gundark was dead.

They approached in crouched ready stances, sabers-drawn, eyes alert. Ben was shifting his hands against his saber, trying to remember how to hold it comfortably without gloves on.

The gundark's corpse came into view first, a gaping, smoking hole in its throat. Qui-Gon winced and looked on it with sympathy, but Ben was too busy looking around them to care. "There," he pointed. Through the trees, the silhouette of a massive ion cannon loomed.

"What in the hels is that doing here?" Qui-Gon asked, eyeing the gundark.

"Unusual activity…" Ben was muttering, eyes growing wide as revelation dawned. "That powercell, I knew I recognized it from somewhere. It's from a droid."

"Droid? What kind of droid?"

Ben turned to stare at Qui-Gon, past Qui-Gon, to the realm of memory surfacing in his mind. "That's what I forgot," He said suddenly, breath quickening, "that's what you told me, what I forgot, it was the droids - the Wookiees weren't the only ones here, the damned *Federation* is here, too." He snuck closer underneath the trees to look at the canon from afar.

"The Trade Federation?" Qui-Gon asked in a whisper, not understanding Ben's alarm. "The Neimoidians, you mean?" He snuck up beside Ben.

"Yes, they wanted this moon, during negotiations, they fought with the Coalition over colonization rights." The image of Sheev Palpatine rose unbidden in Ben's mind, eyes cold, smile wickedly smug. He shook his head. "Back then, last time… You told me they'd set up illegal warehouses here, something they claimed was a storage outpost for their goods in transit. You stumbled across some of their security droids by mistake, that's what kept you so long here, that's what you spent so long talking about."

The Jedi crept along the forest floor until the soil dropped off into an expansive cove. Hiding in the foliage, they stared grimly at their discovery. The cove was filled with massive, thick-walled durasteel structures, each crawling with droids. Cannons lined the high cliffs of the cove, and every droid on the ground wielded a blaster. They marched in formation, their clanking tan bodies moving in unnerving unison.

"Those aren't security droids," Qui-Gon whispered, "And those aren't warehouses. They're bunkers."

Ben could not speak. He could not fathom what he was seeing, what he was feeling; it was the war all over again. It was the beginning, all over again. Palpatine's plans, already coming to fruition - and Obi-Wan was still a padawan. Had they overlooked it for this long, the last time?
"Hey!" exclaimed a painfully familiar voicebox, "What are you doing-"

Ben stood, drew his saber, and decapitated the droid before it could finish speaking.

"B1 battle droids," he told Qui-Gon, taking the severed droid head and skewering it with his saber for good measure. "Manufactured by the Trade Federation."

"You know them?"

"I've fought too many of them not to. We need to report this to the council. Now." Ben could not tamp down the panic rising up from his gut.

"What are they doing here?" Qui-Gon was still watching the bustling cove below.

"Amassing an army. A droid army. But... it's too soon. They aren't supposed to be here. They aren't supposed be anywhere. Not yet." Ben gulped. But there were battle droids here. And if they were here, there were sure to be more elsewhere. Where? Geonosis? Naboo? Coruscant?

"What on earth could the Trade Federation want with a droid army?" Qui-Gon asked in confusion.

"To take over the galaxy, that's what," Ben snapped, slinking away. "But they're not the puppet masters. We need to contact the Council. I need to speak with Mace Windu, now."

"Ben, what are you talking ab-"

PEWSZZING! A red blaster bold ricocheted off a tree branch above Ben's shoulder, and he ignited his saber. A barrage of shots arrived in short succession, beating out a path moving toward Qui-Gon's head.

"Get down!" Ben yelled, stepping up to deflect the fire.

Qui-Gon flattened himself, but rose back up again as soon as the danger had passed. "Well this would explain who's been driving the gundarks toward Attichitcuk's camp," He said, as another round of blaster fire traced a burning line toward him.

"Damn it Anakin, I said get down!" Ben shoved the man to the ground. One bolt missed its mark by centimetres, leaving a scorching hole in the tree trunk where Qui-Gon's head had been.

"What did you call me?" Qui-Gon asked, bewildered. Ben was not listening.

"These droids are horrible shots, but there are too many of them. We have to fall back and draw them out; they won't send more than a squad after us. We'll take care of them and rendezvous with the others, contact the Council." He stood and began retracing their path back toward the dead Gundark. "Come on!"

Qui-Gon remained where he was a moment longer, listening to the robotic shouts of, "Let's move!", and "Find them, now!" before lifting himself up off the ground and following Ben's hasty retreat toward the trail.

He found Ben running back along the way they'd come. Before Qui-Gon could ask any questions, the droids were on them. Blaster bolts pinged off the trees and the ground, spraying sparks in every corner of his vision. Ben's saberwork was tight and neat in dismantling them limb by limb. "Destroy the heads," the younger man advised, "they're not really dead until you've got the head."

Qui-Gon put the advice to use as quickly as he could, taking out two droids in a single turn,
The man turned and sliced the droid's blaster in half, ignoring its sudden cries of "Uh, no wait, please!" as he cut its head from its neck and soldered it into the jungle floor. Two other battle droids and a surveillance probe fled the scene, leaving their fallen brethren behind.

"Come on," Ben said frantically, disengaging his saber and pulling Qui-Gon by his elbow, "There could be more of them. We need to get back to base and report this to Master Windu as soon as possible."

"Ben, you're not making any sense, you need to calm down and explain."

"I already did," Ben snapped, baring his teeth just slightly, "those are battle droids, manufactured and armed by the Trade Federation, and currently being stored in illegal bunkers on Alaris Prime. It's what I forgot, what you told me - only it's worse, this time. It's not just damned warehouses, it's bloody battledroids." He was shaking his head as he trudged onward down the path. "It's too soon for this," he muttered to himself.

"Ben," Qui-Gon followed him, confused but doing his best to exude calm, "We will report to the Council, there is no need for this."

"Force, how's he gotten this far?"

"Ben."

"It's sped up. Everything has sped up. We need to move quickly."

"Ben, you need to stop centering on your anxieties."

Unexpectedly, Ben wheeled on him. "Don't say that," he spat, "Force, I hate it when you say that. Don't center on my anxieties? Well, why don't you live through a war, why don't you fight those things and worse every day, watch everything and everyone you love crumble to ash, die at the hand of a man you once called friend, come back forty years in the past to live it all over again, and we'll see how well you deal with your anxieties."

He regretted every word as soon as it was out of his mouth. Ducking his head in embarrassment, anger, and shame for both, Ben trudged onward. Qui-Gon came closer to him as he sensed the edge of his fear melt away.

"I'm sorry," Ben grunted eventually.

Qui-Gon pursed his lips. He hated the cloud of questions and irresolution hanging between them, but this was not the time or place for apologies and explanations. "Transmissions will be difficult in the bush. There are long-range comms at Attichitcuk's camp. We will contact the Council from there." He pulled out his pocket holomap and marked the location of the Federation bunkers. "For now, we must focus on the mission at hand."

Logic. Cool, experienced, level-headed logic. Ben wondered if he'd ever learned to use any of it at all. He felt tired. "Yes, Master," he resigned, but still looked over his shoulder as they walked.

Before the Jedi made it back to the main path where they had diverged from their Wookiee friends, Attichitcuk had comm'd them with important news: they'd found the gundark nest.

"And what is your plan, now that you have found it?" Qui-Gon asked.
A moment of hesitation before Attichitcuk's low growl came back over the comm: «We will drive them out, if we can.»

"And if you can't?"

«We do not yet have herds of bantha, Master Jinn. We must get our meat from somewhere.»

Qui-Gon ticked an eyebrow. "I see. We'll be there as soon as we can."

«I would appreciate your lightsabers at my side. I doubt this will be an easy fight.»

"With gundarks," Ben piped up, voice dry, "it rarely is."

True to expectations, it was not an easy fight. There had been no time to talk or strategize. No sooner had the Jedi stepped within speaking distance of their Wookiee allies than had a mother gundark spotted them from down in the nesting caves and raised the alarm for all to hear. The ensuing brawl would become stuff of legend on Alaris Prime.

As Ben had learned firsthand during the Clone Wars, there was very little in the galaxy that could stop a Wookiee. They did not scare easily, they were resilient against injuries, had remarkable physical endurance, and, if allowed to gather in numbers greater than two, were practically unstoppable. They fell into combat with gusto, bowcasters, blasters, claws, and electrified spears all playing their part to bring down their enemy.

The Jedi employed the shepherding tactics they'd already developed over the past weeks to chase the gundarks out of the wide, rocky tunnels. Some fled, some turned and fought. Those that did fell to the ground soon thereafter, and did not get back up again. Before sundown, the Wookiees had taken down over half of the nest's occupants, and the Jedi added to the count. Finally, as the sky pinkened at dusk, there remained only one: the biggest, meanest, angriest female. The mother.

She put up a nasty fight, batting one Wookiee off his feet and straight into a wall, where he folded in on himself and made no move to get up again. Attichitcuk fired at her, blast after blast, but the fire seemed to only anger her further.

"Qui-Gon," Ben asked in a peculiar tone of voice, watching the huge beast work her jaw in threatening chomps, "You know what I told you before, about defeating a gundark weaponless?"

"With rocks?"

"Yes," Ben pointed to the giant stalactites hanging off the ceiling.

"Even better," Qui-Gon said, putting his saber away.

"All of you, stand back!" Ben warned, putting away his weapon so he and Qui-Gon could reach out toward the sharpened stones as one. The Wookies, though limited in their knowledge of the Force, took the hint. They fell back to a safe distance, putting in a few last shots as they did. The mother gundark roared in rage, hind legs bunching up to launch her forward, mouth wide open for the kill.

With a great crack, a dozen pointed stalactites detached from the cavern ceiling and followed gravity to the earth; the unfortunate gundark between them and their destination met with the laws of physics, yelped, whimpered, and lay still.

The Wookies all cheered, raising their bowcasters high and bellowing with all their might. Even Qui-Gon Jinn, who detested violence against nature, allowed himself a satisfied smile. He turned to Ben to share their moment of victory, but stopped when he saw the man's face. Ben did not look
victorious or inclined to cheer. He only looked exceptionally tired.

«We will camp here tonight» Attichitcuk announced, «And proclaim our victory over the whole nest. We've beat the beasts, at last!»

With understandable enthusiasm, the Wookiee clan cheered for the safety of their colony, their people, and their future.

That night, while the Wookies basked in their victory, Ben sat outside, high up on an outcropping of slate. Qui-Gon went to the cave entrance and watched him fiddle with the long-distance comm that Attichitcuk had leant him. Quietly, he climbed up the path toward his former apprentice. Still a ways off, he could hear Ben speaking into the comm,

"-illegal presence. We have to bring them to task on this, Mace."

"It could be risky tipping our hand so soon," Mace Windu was saying, interrupted by static. "If the Sith begin to suspect-

"They are the ones who have tipped their hand. If we do nothing, it would be more suspicious than if we send the whole Order on their trail. This is not some quaint warehouses out on a backwater moon, this is fullscale invasion - or at least preparation for it. That's how I see it, that's how the Senate will see it. They're either very cocky, or very desperate."

"That is a very crucial 'or', Kenobi."

"Our response must remain the same for both, and in full accordance with the law and the Alaris Agreement. If you would, please forward my intel on to Bail Organa. He's the only senator I trust right now."

"Trust or no, you put a lot of pressure on him, Ben. That's going to get dangerous sooner or later."

Ben sighed. "I know. But right now, it's the only option we have. You know how corrupt the Senate has become."

"Unfortunately, I do."

In the ensuing silence, Ben seemed to realize that he was not alone. He glanced back at Qui-Gon, unsurprised to see him waiting a respectful distance off. "I need to go," He told Master Windu. "We will speak of this in more detail when I return."

"Yes," said the Master of the Order, voice heavy, "we will. May the Force be with us all." He cut the transmission bluntly.

"Mace has always been one for theatrics," Qui-Gon chuckled softly as he approached and lowered himself into a seat beside Ben, joints groaning in complaint. Ben remained silent. Qui-Gon waited a moment to gather his thoughts before speaking. "What you said earlier, Ben," he began.

"I'm sorry," Ben interrupted, "I shouldn't have said those things. You were right. I focus on my anxieties too much. It is all I've known how to do for years. I forgot myself, let my fear get the better of me." He hung his head. "Thank you for reminding me."

Qui-Gon hesitated. "I was going to say," he resumed at a deliberate cadence, "that you were right." He gave a pause so that Ben could look up and stare his fill. "As long as we've known each other, I still have no idea what it is that you've been through, what you've lost. I doubt I ever will. Were I put in your shoes, allowed to relive my most trying years all over again..." he considered Xanatos,
Tahl's death. "I'm not sure I would handle it as well."

"I haven't handled it well at all," Ben scoffed.

"You've handled it better than I could ever hope to," Qui-Gon reminded. They both knew it was true. As emotional as Ben could be, he had the temperament of a saint. The fact that he'd ever found his breaking point spoke volumes. "Earlier, you called me Anakin," Qui-Gon stated, and waited for Ben for comment.

Ben let out a long breath and looked down at his hands. "Technically, he was my apprentice," he said at length. "But in the later years... he was my brother. We were so much closer in age than any other master and apprentice, I... It was easier to be friends with him when he graduated. We fought together in the War, all the time. We looked after each other. Saved each others' skins more often than I care to remember." He shrugged. "Seeing the droids again, the blasters... I forgot myself."

"So there was a war," Qui-Gon surmised. He'd guessed it privately ages ago, but to hear it out loud was jarring.

"A huge war," Ben said. "A staged war, fought with puppet armies, all marching to the tune of a man who killed the Republic."

This disclosure made Qui-Gon turn and watch Ben very carefully. He was a notoriously secretive individual, particularly where the future was concerned. "You wouldn't tell me that unless it was practically on top of us," the master said. Ben folded away the clunky comm unit, fiddling with its antennae and wires.

"The droids made up one side of the board. He's setting up his chess pieces already. I thought we had time."

"We do have time," Qui-Gon soothed. Ben shook his head.

"Not as much as I thought we did. I thought I knew what to expect, I thought the board was still clear." He shook his head harder. "He's already set up his pieces."

"And you know where he will move them." He, being, of course, the nameless Sith behind it all.

"No, I don't," Ben let out a mirthless, hysterical laugh. "That's just it. They're not meant to be here, they're not meant be, at all. Not yet. He's moved the pieces around, shifting them forward sooner, and I've not even set mine in place yet."

"You have," Qui-Gon insisted. "Need I remind you - I'm still here. You thwarted that future when you took out his apprentice, and how many more of his plans did that alter? You are the one who is one step ahead, Obi-Wan."

The name had slipped out by mistake, pure, innocent habit. Neither said anything, but hearing it stripped Ben to his core, leaving him vulnerable in front of the only man he'd ever seen as a father. "I'm supposed to know," he said, very softly. "That's why the Force let me come back, I'm supposed to know how things turn out, how to fix them. And I've tried. But now it's all changing, and I'm not sure of anything."

"Then you must trust in the Force, and in your own senses," Qui-Gon concluded. "You know, Obi-Wan's instructors have been telling me for years that he'll make one of the best strategists in the Order. But I've known that since the day I first spoke with you." Ben looked up at him. "This... Sith Lord, he might have all his pieces in different places, but you can still see them. You know where to look. He doesn't know that. He can't see you. He can't see your pieces. You have the advantage over
"For now," Ben said miserably. "Now is all that we have," reminded the master. "When I say do not center on your anxieties, I do not mean forget them. I mean that you must set them aside so that you can seize your moments of action with clarity." This was something that Qui-Gon had never fully explained to Ben, when he was an apprentice. "Anxiety has its purpose in every game of chess, but not when you are moving your pieces."

Ben took in a deep breath, held it, and let it out again. He nodded. Qui-Gon quietly put a hand on his back, offering him silent support. They sat there for a long while, staring out over the forest, admiring the vastness of space and its nighttime constellations, free from the light-polluted air of Coruscant.

After a long stretch of silence, Qui-Gon looked over at Ben and chuckled. "What?" the younger asked.

"You were right," Qui-Gon smiled at him, giving him a firm pat on the back. "You really haven't aged at all since you were twelve."

Ben scoffed and rolled his eyes. Qui-Gon laughed, using Ben's shoulder to help him stand. "You ought to rest. Maybe your beard will grow back overnight." The taller man strolled back down and into the cave, where the warm glow of the campfire flickered against the walls.

Ben shook his head and looked out at the stars. A million different threads of thought ran through his mind, begging for investigation, for action, for immediate attention and answers. Where was the rest of the droid army? Was the production of the Clone Army already underway? If so, where did that put Sifo Dyas? Was Dooku a part of it? Was he Palpatine's new apprentice?

He closed his eyes and reached out to the Force, relinquishing his anxieties to its endless depths. They would be there for consultation, when the game demanded a cool analysis. But here and now, it was nighttime on Alaris Prime, and he was in need of rest. Exhausted from carrying his worries and determined not to let them follow him to bed, he left his perch swiftly, found a hard sleeping mat, fell onto it, and slumbered until morning.
The Queen

Chapter Notes

I forget to say this every chapter, but as always, a huge thank you to my beta, BS monitor, partner-in-plotting, and chief of soundboarding, en-shaedn.

The next several days were a test of endurance. Though they'd contained one gundark nest, there were plenty more for the Wookiees to take care of once the Jedi left. Ben and Qui-Gon spent a little over a week lingering on Alaris Prime, helping Attichitcuk and his retinue develop a field guide to the gundarks, their known locations, tracking methods, and proven ways of dealing with them once their nests were discovered.

«We do not wish to eradicate them entirely,» the Wookiee leader assured the Jedi when they'd reviewed the plans together, «But there is always a certain level of pest control needed in these situations.»

Ben found a smirk pulling at his lips. "Perhaps this would've been a good mission for Aola," He told Qui-Gon in an aside. "I'm sure she would see a slavering, vicious, hungry monster as a mere 'pest' as well."

Qui-Gon wasn't convinced. "Don't you mean 'pet'?" They laughed together.

It was just a few days later that the Wookiees bid the Jedi goodbye. «I am sad to see you go, Masters Jedi,» Said Attichitcuk as they put together a small party of speederbikes to ferry the Jedi back to the Temple. «I cannot express my gratitude. We were on our last leg, and you have given us hope.»

Ben smiled at the Wookiee, genuinely glad to have aided his endeavours. The value of hope was a treasure near and dear to his own heart. "We come to serve, Attichitcuk." He bowed. The Wookiee chuckled at the Jedi's formality.

«You Jedi monks and your bowing. You deserve a proper farewell!» With that, the massive, furry Attichitcuk stepped forward and wrapped Ben in an enormous hug. The other Wookiees warbled their thanks and Qui-Gon laughed. Discreetly spitting fur out of his mouth, Ben smiled as Attichitcuk moved on and gave Qui-Gon a similar goodbye embrace. Thanks to his height and forewarning, he was able to take the gesture with a bit more grace.

"It has been an honor, sir," Qui-Gon smiled at the Wookiee.

«So it has with both of you. Starspeed!»

And off they went. Attichitcuk's son, Chewbacca, was the one to lead them back to the temple. Ben knew that the Wookiee was younger than when he'd met him a lifetime ago on Tatooine, but he looked virtually the same. After they'd arrived at the Jedi temple, the Wookiee had stood to attention and given them a friendly salute before riding away. Watching him go, Ben could not help but wonder if he would ever see the tall, shaggy pilot again. He hoped, for the sake of everyone, that it was not aboard the Death Star. Although… he would not entirely mind seeing the Millennium Falcon again.
Shaking off nostalgia, he followed Qui-Gon onto their ship and headed straight for the bunks. "Wake me when it's my turn on the con," he called ahead to the older man, and fell into bed.

"Ben." someone shook his shoulder. "Time to get up."

Reluctantly, he rolled over, flimsiplast mattress cover crinkling beneath him. "Right," He blinked, and Qui-Gon's indistinct figure came into clearer focus. "What's our ETA?"

Qui-Gon chuckled, deep voice rumbling through Ben's drowsy daze. "We've already landed."

"What?"

Qui-Gon pulled him up by his arm. "Come on, time to go."

Ben was too tired to think for himself. He allowed Qui-Gon to walk ahead and followed him wordlessly, not noticing, much less questioning their destination. When he finally realized where they were headed, it was too late.

"Master Kenobi," grinned Vokara Che, a glowing tablet propped on her hip, "You've trimmed your beard!"

As a matter of fact, he hadn't so much as touched a trimmer for weeks, but he did not try to correct her. "Hello, Master Che." He let her lead him away to an examination room, where she sat him down and took a blood sample. Qui-Gon was chatting with her idly, though Ben did not have the awareness to discern what they were saying. When the chatter paused, he asked politely, "Vokara, this is going to sound odd, but… what time is it?"

"Oh dear," She laughed, now using a fine-toothed comb to go through his hair. "No wonder you're being so compliant. It's not quite 14:00."

"Oh." He peered up at her work. "If you're looking for lice, I can assure you there are none."

Vokara continued her combing. "As soon as you mentioned it in your report, you resigned yourself to this fate." Comb, comb. It was quite lulling, actually. "If so much as one of those beasts makes in to the residential wing, it'll be weeks of work to be rid of them." Comb, comb, pick. "Besides, I need to make sure they didn't give you any nefarious diseases."

"What a pleasant thought," said Ben. Qui-Gon was watching him from the doorway with muffled amusement. The sight of him, hair puffed and various sections pulled straight by Vokara's comb must've been entertaining. Eventually, the man pushed off the wall with a laugh.

"I'll leave you to it, then."

"Oh no you don't," Vokara pointed an accusatory comb at him as he fled. "Get back in here, Master Long-Hair, I'm not done with you yet. Wait your turn."

"Master Che, I was unaffected."

"So you say - but Force only knows what could be hiding in that mane of yours. How you humans put up with it is beyond the likes of me. Sit down."

"But-"

"Sit down, Master Jinn."
Qui-Gon sat down. From beneath Vokara's deft and careful hands, Ben squinted at him. "If he does have lice," he mused aloud to the healer, "will you make him shave?"

Qui-Gon raised a threatening eyebrow.

"No, we have medication for that," Vokara said matter-of-factly. Ben scowled, crestfallen.

"Damn."

Once they were declared lice-less and their blood panels given a clean bill of health, they were allowed to return to their quarters. Or rather, to Feemor Gard's quarters, where their welcoming party was gathered and waiting.

"Ah, there you are!" Feemor beamed when he answered the door. "Obi said he thought you were back on planet. Uncanny senses, that lad. Welcome home - Ben! You've cut your beard!"

"From a certain point of view," Ben laughed, welcoming Feemor's embrace with friendly smile.

"It suits you - you don't look quite as much like a shaggy terrier, now."

"What?" Ben sputtered. Feemor chuckled and brushed past him to greet his old master.

"Padawan," Qui-Gon smiled widely when Obi-Wan came around the corner. He was up and moving, back straight, eyes bright, and smiling as well. They hugged, and Qui-Gon took the young man by his shoulders appraisingly. "Force, you've lost weight. Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes, nearly back to normal," replied the apprentice, somewhat quieter than was his norm. "And I'm gaining weight back, I'll have you know."

Feemor reappeared. "I've been running him through his drills, and he's done marvellously." Obi-Wan accepted the open praise with a gracious smile. "For a man stuck in bed for three weeks, I'd say he's broken records. But I'll let you be the judge of that, in the dojo."

Obi-Wan's eyes lit up at the prospect. Qui-Gon laughed at his youthful vigor. "After dinner and rest," he amended. He gave Obi-Wan's shoulder another affectionate squeeze, fondness trickling over their bond. "It's good to have you back."

"You as well, Master," Obi-Wan said. "And you too, Ben. How was Alaris Prime? As horrible as I've been trying to imagine it?"

Ben laughed. "Oh, there were good and bad bits. We'll talk about it later. His smile faded. After he'd spoken with Mace. After he'd meditated - a lot. He cleared his throat. "And where is Aola?"

"Away with classmates, cramming for finals - exams are next week," Feemor replied.

"Force, is it that time already?" Qui-Gon exclaimed. Feemor nodded with an understanding expression.

"Aye, it is. Hard to believe. These will be her last courses as an apprentice," he explained in a soft, sentimental tone.

"She excited?" Ben asked. Obi-Wan snorted.

"You have no idea."
Feemor chuckled. "Aye, poor Obi's been stuck here suffering her study hours for weeks. I'm sure he'll be glad for a little peace and quiet."

"And I will be more than happy to oblige," Qui-Gon sighed, finally feeling their days in the jungle catch up with him. In years past, a jaunt through forest with a couple of unwieldy beasts would have been an invigorating vacation. Now, however... he really could do with a bath and a nice, long sleep. In the back of his mind, where he could hear the creaking of his own joints, he wondered if he was getting too old for this sort of thing. Obi-Wan seemed to pick up on his melancholy and shot him a concerned glance. He smiled. "It's good to be back," he said. His apprentice smiled back at him, face shining in complete agreement.

After a short while, while Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan caught up and Feemor made tea for all of them, Ben retreated to his own quarters.

"Do you not want tea, Ben?" Feemor had asked, unused to the picture of the elder Kenobi retreating as soon as the kettle was on.

"I appreciate the offer, but I have to wrap up a few things with the Council."

"Oh," Feemor's face fell into somber understanding. "Of course. Give Master Windu my best, then."

Ben forced a tiny smile at the man's perception before leaving the apartment.

He decided to bathe before anything. He hadn't seen a proper shower or sonic since before they'd landed on Alaris Prime, and despite every camp trick he knew, the sweat and grime had begun grating on his last nerve. He had half a mind to toss his robes down to the incinerator rather than the laundry, but diverted to the latter chute at the last minute because, as repulsed as he was, Ben knew it would be incredibly wasteful.

He reveled in the feel of warm water, taking his time to wash off the last traces of the Alaris moon. He closed his eyes and allowed warm water wash over him longer than frugality would allow. In his mind's eye, he could see the battle droids again. This time, he could see clones bursting onto the scene to fight them. Would it end like this, again? In a war? General Kenobi, a voice echoed in his head. It was a title he never wanted to hear again.

He emerged from the 'fresher, half-dressed and toweling his wet hair, to find Mace Windu sitting in one of his chairs and sipping tea. The Councilor glanced up at him.

"Your hair's longer and your beard's shorter. That's odd." The Korun sipped serenely at his tea again.

Ben went into his room, tossed his towel away, and put on a shirt. He returned to the main room with as much dignity as he could manage. Mace seemed not to care either way.

"I take it you got my report, then," Ben said.

"You should've sent it to the whole council," Mace reprimanded. "It's going to be a lot of paperwork."

"You know why I didn't, though."

Mace sighed. "Yes." He poured Ben a cup of tea. It smelled like a brew that Master Yoda favored - some things always stayed in the family. "Tell me about it."

Ben did. He told Mace about the battle droids, and the Wookiees, and the Jedi Temple, and the fact
that both the Jedi and the Wookies suspected *something*, but could not determine what. "The Federation is keeping to their own neck of the woods. They don't want trouble with Attichitcuk or the Order."

"And no wonder," Mace tsked, "they're harboring an army."

"It just… it wasn't *like this,*" Ben lamented, stroking his beard, which was rougher than he was used to, "There weren't armies before. There weren't even that many droids - it was just a bunch of warehouses."


Ben did not actually need reminding. "And yet I have no idea how much I have actually changed. For every thing I can name, there are probably five or ten others." He sighed. "But if the Trade Federation has that many droids stationed on Alaris Prime, it means they've already made enough to store elsewhere. We need to know if the Geonosians are manufacturing them."

"Even if they are, we can't stop them. The Federation is a private institution, and the Geonosians have sovereignty. They can manufacture what they like."

"Be that as it may, they have to put the things somewhere - illegally, as it turns out, in places like Alaris Prime. Surely you can whip up enough red tape to keep them occupied while we sniff out the rest?"

The Councilor sat back with a diplomatic sense of satisfaction. "It should take minimal effort. Your report warrants a full inquiry, other suspicions aside. I plan on forwarding the report onto Chancellor Valorum as soon as the rest of the Council has seen it. If precedent is anything to go by, his office will make sure the Nemoidians are taped up to their necks."

"Good."

There was a lull in their conversation as they both mentally traced the threads of thought that connected the grand conspiracy together. They arrived at the same junction at the same time, but Mace put a voice to it first.

"And Palpatine?"

Ben pursed his lips. He tried to recall the tones of Qui-Gon's assurance, his confidence in Ben's sight, his strategy. He still felt like a youngling grasping at straws. Even so, parts of the chessboard were clear. "He's growing desperate. He's moving his plans up. Without the buffer of Maul to stand in between him and the galaxy, he is trying to cinch his victory before anyone can even think to be suspicious." He thought of what Palpatine said at Bail's wedding, about how easily a Sith might find a new apprentice. He thought of Dooku.

"You're saying he is the one behind the droids?"

"Yes. And if he's pushed for the creation of one army, the other is not far behind."

Mace nodded slowly. "The clones."

"Yes."

It was a serious prospect. Unlike droids, which ran on synthetic brains and the orders of sentients, the clones were people; real people. They were, in many ways, the first victims of Palpatine's war. Ben wondered how many had been created by now.
"We will have to look into it," Mace voice what both of them were thinking. "But how will we do it, without revealing what we know?"

"The key is Dyas," Ben said, running a pensive finger along the rim of his teacup. "We need to find Sifo Dyas and uncover what he knows."

"But we already know what he knows," Mace pointed out.

"Not all of it, and not publicly," Ben reminded. "Just because I have knowledge of the past doesn't mean I don't have to live it all over again. I couldn't just show up at Kamino in the name of the Jedi Order with no official business, and you can't give me official business until there is some business to be given."

Mace nodded slowly. Ben could practically see the wheels turning in his head, minute strategies appearing and disintegrating under his mental scrutiny by the dozens. "Is Sifo Dyas the only avenue?"

Ben shrugged. "That I know of, aside from the Sith. He acted independently of the Order when he ordered the creation of the clone army."

Mace seemed annoyed by this. "We may have our work cut out for us, then. Sifo Dyas hasn't been on the active roster for nearly five years - and he hasn't submitted an official report of any kind for longer than that."

Ben frowned. "What?"

Mace let out a breath, and it sounded as if it had been cooped up in his lungs for too long. Rogue Jedi were not a phenomenon widely broadcasted to the masses - within the Order or without. "Sifo Dyas was on the council for several years, as I believe you know," the man explained with an exasperated air, "and he did not part with us on good terms. After he came back as a knight on active duty, we began sending him on simple, easy missions. It was meant as a mercy, trying to ease him back into things."

"I take it this did not go as planned," Ben surmised. Mace cast him a look.

"Trouble started with the first mission he took after leaving the Council. It went well. Almost perfectly. He sent in his final report, but never actually made it back to Coruscant." He paused. "We don't know where he went or where he is."

"Has he communicated with no Jedi at all?" Ben found it hard to believe.

"None that we know of."

"Does he have any friends he might have contacted? An apprentice, former apprentice or master?"

Mace shook his head. "His master's been dead for years. He never had an apprentice. And as far as I know, he's not in the habit of keeping friends - not of the sort you're talking about, anyway." It was a sad thought. "Sifo Dyas is… a very preoccupied person. Of all the grey Jedi I've known, he's the most unpredictable, and unstable."

"I take it he was not popular on the Council," Ben guessed.

"He did not hold popular views," Mace admitted.

"Neither did I half of the time, but I got on well enough," Ben pointed out.
"That is because you have a sense of tact, Ben. Sifo does not. He is paranoid, and driven by fear."

"Fear of what?"

Mace's brow furrowed, and he looked ever so slightly guilty. "Years ago, I wouldn't have been able to say. Since meeting you, hearing about everything… I wonder if he was right in all that he said, all the wild claims he made about darkness in our future, return of enemies." He paused, frowning deeply. "Unfortunately, none of us gave him any credence, and it drove him to act on his fear. But if he's acted earlier than you remember, like Palpatine has, then we need to find out when and why as soon as possible."

"I couldn't agree more," Ben said.

Of course, this conclusion begged the rather obvious and incredibly vexing problem of how.

"I will look into it myself," Mace said in that particular tone of his, the one that he didn't know Ben recognized. It was the tone of Mace Windu assuming a task which he was not entirely sure he could accomplish, but was unwilling to trust to anyone else. Mace was, after all, the most dependable person that either of them knew. Ben nodded, but inside his gut twisted anxiously. There had to be another solution. There was one, of course. It was staring him in the face. But it was vastly uncomfortable and entailed a whole number of risks that were not only his to take. He drummed his fingers on the arm of his sofa.

"That list you sent me," Ben breached their confidential project, "you've seen my additions?"

"Yes."

"And… what do you think we could do about that at the moment?"

For a split second, Mace's face was entirely blank as he dug his way up through the layers of convoluted strategy they'd built in conversation. "What?" He asked.

"The grey Jedi. We can't ignore them."

"No," Mace said, shortly, thinking quickly. "No, but… I'm not sure what we can do, at least right now. I've been keeping tabs on them, I've mentioned them as off-handedly to other Councilors as I can, trying to build a network, get others to see…" He trailed off. "We need to deal with the Federation, with the clones first. Before the threat grows any larger. The grey Jedi are a potential threat - the droids and the clones are one that is already here."

Mace did not see the connection, then. Ben decided not to press it. Besides, he wasn't entirely confident that it was a viable option. "Of course," he smiled, unease quietly pooling in his gut. It would wait for another time, when he was more sure of himself.

They finished their tea, but not their conversation. There was too much to consider. They both resolved to meditate on the matter.

No matter how he meditated, Ben's mind always managed to undo the Force's patient whispers and work itself into fitful knots over and over again. The memories of Alaris Prime, the unanswered questions from his meeting with Mace ran circles around the inside of his skull, weighed down by memories of a world past, strings of thought tangling into a tighter and tighter ball that made him almost constantly susceptible to a headache.

He sought solace, as he often did, in occupation. Just two days after he returned to Coruscant, Ben
took up his neglected post as teacher. He'd already seen Aola and her class graduate out of the junior padawan dojo, and now was occupied with another generation of learners - and this time, they gathered round with holobooks in hand, not sabers, and their topics did not stray toward that ever-looming fact of the Sith. Instead, they spoke of tranquility, and honesty, and stories of great Jedi gone by. They studied and meditated on the good things in the galaxy - even Jedi knew that childhood was innocent, and to understand the light, children must be allowed to grow up in it, untainted.

"Master Ben! Master Ben!" The Wolf Clan chorused when he arrived at the door. When Ben smiled, he could feel every wrinkle in his face, but his heart felt younger than it had in ages. He'd only been away from their clan for a few months, but he could see evidence of growth spurts from almost all of its members. Children grew up so fast.

Elbowing his way to the front of the throng behind the half-door of the creche classroom was Anakin, who was beaming wide, one front tooth missing, blonde hair a horrible mess. "Master Ben! I knew you'd be back today!"

"You are very perceptive, my young friend," he gave a mock-bow. "Perhaps it is you who should be giving the lesson today, Master Skywalker." The other younglings giggled at the joke. Anakin flushed. He shrugged and said with careful nonchalance,

"Naw. I'm no good at talking."

Mira, the small Pantoran girl who was often hanging by Anakin's side, looked over at him with an incredulous look far too perceptive for a five year old. "You sure do it an awful lot, Ani."

Master Zyrha appeared from her separate office, comfortably unchanged next to her ever-morphing charges. "Master Kenobi," She grinned, thin, pointed teeth gleaming in a friendly way, "It is so good to see you, please come in."

As soon as he was through the door, a half-pint moshpit of admirers followed Ben through his every step.

"Master Ben, are you back for good?"

"Master Ben can you tell us a story?"

"Master Ben tell us about your mission!"

"Master Ben look at my loose tooth!"

"Master Ben, can we do sabers today?"

Ben chuckled at the younglings and patted one or two on the head as he tried to clear a spot amid the flock to sit down. Anakin claimed the spot nearest to him, and Mira took up the spot next to Anakin. "Yes, I'm back for your lessons. I trust you've all been very good for my replacement?"

"Yes, Master Ben," said the younglings obediently. At the last moment, Sarsan added,

"Mostly."

Ben laughed. "Thank you for being honest, Sarsan." He tried to sound serious, though the smile was threatening to break through. "Now. Would you please bring me the lesson book?"

The Zygerrian obediently rose and went to the shelf of oversized picture-holobooks in one corner and took down a thick history book. Well, 'history' would be a stretch. It was a story book, about real
Jedi who lived real lives, who did real things in the real world, but the interpretation of the stories - whether they were fact or legend - was left to the listener.

Ben enjoyed the stories as much as the younglings. In the Jedi path, it was a quiet secret, not knowable until a master made it to very old age, that the lessons they learned as children were the same lessons they longed for as adults. Familiar tales, challenging or comforting as they were, were their own form of meditation. These children did not know it yet, but the truths they learned in the creche were the most fundamental and important truths of life.

By the end of the lesson, the harshest edge of Ben's headache was gone. Beside him, Anakin pulled Mira's thumb from her mouth from where she'd been sucking on it. As he did, the boy glanced up to the door, saw something, and smiled.

"Master Dooku!"

Ben did not look up, but he could almost visualize his fleeing headache stop, turn around, and begin to trudge back toward him. The other younglings did not seem so enthused by Master Dooku's arrival, but Anakin was at the door as if it were Ben himself. Setting the holobook aside, Ben rose with creaking knees, listening as Anakin excitedly told Dooku about their lesson of the day. The silver-haired master listened politely.

"Ah, Master Pallatac and the Flying Boma. It's been years since I've heard that tale - did you enjoy it?"

"Yeah!" Anakin said, standing on tip-toes to prop his folded arms up on top of the half-door. "Especially the part where he used the Force to fly that dead starship!"

Dooku chuckled. "Quite." He looked up to see the only other figure in the room whose head reached above waist height. "Master Kenobi," he smiled, resonate bass sounding genuinely pleased. "Back from your little adventure with the Wookiees, I see."

"Yes. How did you know?" Ben picked his way toward the door. The younger children, seeing that the grownups were talking (likely about boring things, as grownups usually did) slowly drifted off to their other activities and projects. Some of the elder ones remained interested, and were listening attentively to what the masters said. Ben glanced askance at them.

"Qui-Gon told me," Yan replied, choosing to ignore their eavesdroppers. "Did you two not just return a few days ago?"

"We did."

Dooku scoffed. "And already back into teaching. Your work ethic is admirable, Ben."

He smiled. "Thank you."

"Admirable, if not a bit absurd." Dooku glanced back down at Anakin, who still hung at the door. At least the other children had the sense to spectate from a distance. "It was good to see you, young Skywalker," Master Dooku said in a deliberate tone. "Do you not have a project you are working on?"

Even this heavy-handed hint was too much for Anakin. "Well yeah," the boy said enthusiastically, "but I'm not allowed to work on it in the creche halls because Master Zyrha said it could combabust."

"Combust," Dooku corrected. "I see."
"Yeah, but it's so cool, it's this modifier I'm working on for RB-1, it's got this laser sight outfit that will let him see in the dark, and a new jet servo so that he can turn on a dime, even better than dumb remotes, and…” Dooku blinked slowly while Anakin droned on. Ben fought back a smile.

After watching his grandmaster suffer for several satisfying moments, Ben cleared his throat and said gently, "Ani, I think Mira was looking for you."

"Oh?" this immediately drew the youngling's attention. He spotted the Pantoran across the room, happily playing with blocks with two of the older girls. "Umm… okay. Sorry, Master Dooku, I need to go."

"Of course, young one. Run along," the elderly man sighed in relief. Half a dozen younglings were still watching. Yan glared at them until they desisted to find other hobbies. Ben stepped closer to his grandmaster.

"You just have to find the right buttons to push," he advised in a sage voice. "And never, ever ask about Anakin's projects unless your entire evening is free."

Dooku smiled in chagrin. "Duly noted, Master Kenobi. As a matter of fact, my evening is free - though I'd just as soon not spend it hearing about mechanics." He stepped aside so that Ben could walk out of the room to join him in the hall. The older master began walking away from the dormitory. He waited for Ben to join him and said, "I've recently acquired a fine vintage of wine from an old friend in the corporate district," he said. Ben was not surprised in the slightest. "Unfortunately, I feel it would be an over-indulgence to drink it by myself, but an insult if I do not drink it at all."

"Quite a predicament," Ben said mildly. "They are both daunting grievances. However, between you and I, I think there may be a ready compromise." He accepted the invitation.

"Good," Dooku smiled, easing their trajectory toward the residential wing. "I would love to hear about this mission of yours."

The wine was an incredible vintage. Ben did not consider himself a connoisseur, but even his rustic palate could tell that this drink, served elsewhere, would've been incredibly expensive.

The company was of a fine stock, as well. While the tight knots of suspicion continued to roll about in Ben's mind, Dooku was if nothing else a gentleman of poise. He was polite, and witty, and precise, and perhaps the only person in the temple who made a cape look not only dignified, but regal as well.

"Alaris Prime?" Dooku repeated as Ben began regaling him with his mission details, "You were not actually on Kashyyyk?"

"No, the Wookiees have been setting up a colony on the moon of Alaris. It's quite the undertaking."

"I'd say. Who is at the helm, if I may ask?"

"Attichitcuk."

"Really?" Dooku's eyebrows raised in pleasant surprise. "I haven't heard that name in years. He is still leader of his clan, I take it?"

"Yes, and gaining power for his new leadership role on Alaris Prime," Ben told him.
Dooku took a drink. "I'm glad to hear it." He paused in thought, and pulled out a dusty memory, smiling vaguely. "I've actually worked with him, once before."

"Really?" This took Ben by surprise. He still had trouble remembering that Dooku was not only a Jedi, but had been an active Jedi for years. Ben wondered, idly, how many of his stories he'd never heard.

"Yes, though it was probably far before your time. I was still a padawan, then. Master Yoda and I were deployed to Kashyyyk as attachés to Attichitcuk for a diplomatic excursion. It went… poorly." He chuckled, dark humor pricked. "Have you ever heard of the tarentatek, Master Kenobi?"

Ben's brow furrowed. "I can't say that I have," He admitted from behind his wine glass.

"It is an enormous, formidable creature. Master Yoda and I, along with Attichitcuk and a few others, had to fight one on our way to a summit. It was a very treacherous mission, but I remember Attichitcuk in particular was a fine warrior."

"He still is," Ben nodded. "We were up against an infestation of gundarks on Alaris Prime. He's set a fine example on how best to install pest control in new colonies." A pause for effect. "As it turns out, bowcasters and very large rocks are the system of choice."

Both of them laughed at the joke, polite even in their mirth. After the humor had faded, they took long sips of their wine, each smiling softly. "Pest control," Dooku parroted in a quiet chuckle. "Good for him." He swirled his glass. "Gundarks, colonies… any more excitement on your mission?" He asked.

Ben's smiled faded from sincerity to that careful, fake expression he'd learned from a life lived among politicians. He thought inexorably of the datapad hidden in his quarters, the one with Dooku's name on it. He thought of what Palpatine had said at Bail's wedding. He took a sip of his wine and kept smiling.

"Not really," he said, and used wit to cover his anxiety, "just the murderous, ravenous beasts and the clanful of angry Wookiees."

Dooku chuckled. "A fair point," He tipped his glass. Ben mirrored the gesture. He drank again, but did not enjoy the taste as much as before.

The following week, while Aola and her classmates slaved over exams on very little sleep, Ben rose early, dressed in clean, pressed robes, and took a private shuttle to the Republic Senate.

Bail Organa, as he often had in the past, met him on the landing dock.

"Master Kenobi," he greeted, smile a bit tired, "It's such a relief to see you."

"A relief, Bail?" Ben was surprised to see the senator looking so anxious.

"Yes. Things have been…" He glanced around, as if there would be staff to eavesdrop even in the landing dock. "...tense. With this whole Alaris Prime business blowing up…"

"Blowing up?" Ben cut in as they walked toward the administrative block of the building, "the report isn't even public yet - I spoke to Master Windu about it days ago, not even the council has seen it yet."

"That very well may be the case, Ben, but you'd be shocked at how much senators can learn about
your Order's movements. Several people know that Jedi went to Alaris Prime, but no one took any notice about it until the report was delayed for a week - and counting."

"Delayed? A week?" Ben frowned as they strode into the plush senate offices. A protocol droid attempted to give Ben directions, and he waved it off. "You act like Jedi mission reports are in the daily news columns."

Bail sighed. However gifted Ben was in politics, there were some things that he would never understand unless he actually lived as a politician. Seeing as that was impossible - thank the stars and suns above, Bail thought - he did not mind explaining: "They might as well be. Whenever a Jedi has business in a Republic system, rest assured the mission report is sitting on the desk of that system's senator as soon as the Council archives it - assuming there are no security blocks put on it."

"Which is rare," Ben said, though he immediately thought of his years-past jaunt to Herdessaa and Tatooine. It had been tightly wrapped under security clearances, Ben recalled. How much of that mission had been released to the Senate's prying eyes?

"Yes," Bail continued, not missing a beat, "most of the time, the missions are fairly forgettable. The reports come in like everything else, to stack up on desks, like everything else, and are only ever read by underpaid interns. But once in a while, you people like to prod the rancor, and we sit up and listen."

Ben considered this with a deliberative frown. "I thought Alaris Prime was a forgettable mission. It was just gundarks." Which was mostly true.

"Gundarks are forgettable," Bail said, walking fast. Ben was having to jog slightly to catch up. "But there are a lot of senators watching every move of the Alaris Prime affair. The Coalition has vested interest in the success of the colony, the Federation is seeking to make a land grab if Attichitcuk should fail," the fact that they had already done so illegally went unsaid between them, "and there are half a dozen other interested parties who are looking for an opportunity to take their slice of the pie. Untouched, fertile moons are a rare commodity, Ben. It may be just jungle and gundarks to you, but here, it represents a lot more."

"I see," he muttered.

Bail went on, "They were happy waiting for a report, but then the Neimoidian offices went into an uproa - apparently about Alaris Prime, if the interns are to be believed - rumors have been spreading, speculations galore, and still no report. The scandal hasn't even blown yet, and everyone is bracing for impact."

"I see," Ben said again, brow set in grim understanding. A sinking feeling appeared in his gut, and he wondered if it had been a good idea, after all, to forward his report to Mace alone. A lot of paperwork, the man had said. He hadn't known paperwork meant turmoil in the Senate. "Did you get what I sent you?" he asked. Bail shot him a short, sharp glance.

"Yes."

"And you read it all?"

The man sighed, a breath packed with anxiety and frustration. "Yes. That's why I called you here. We need to talk."

They were walking quickly toward Bail's office, as if speed would help them elude the taut webs of intrigue in the common halls. "Do you still have it?" Ben muttered the question.
"No," Bail said, much to Ben's relief. "I destroyed it after I read it, per your request."

"Good."

Their speedwalking was now a mutually understood dash to privacy, where they could speak of controversial matters without interruption. They almost made it to Bail's office unaccosted. Almost.

"Ah, Master Kenobi," said a calm, gentle voice. Ice ran down Ben's spine, but he made himself turn politely and smile at the newcomer.

"Senator Palpatine," he greeted, mustache now fully regrown and hiding the fake corners of his smile. "How nice to see you again."

The Senator from Naboo smiled as well, but he had no mustache to cover the diplomatic veneer. "Yes, it's been so long, since Senator Organa's wedding, I believe." He nodded pleasantly at Bail. "How is Lady Organa, sir?"

"Very well," Bail smiled in the easy way of a man who was used to this dance, and, moreover, did not harbor Ben's sense of distrust. "She sends her regards, and thanks you for your gift of Nubian textiles. The seamstresses have made her some very fetching statewear with it."

"Good, I'm very glad," Palpatine seemed genuinely pleased with this. He looked back at Ben. "And what about you, Master Jedi? I trust you have been well."

"Yes, very well, senator. Business as usual."

"Of course, I'm sure." He smiled. There was something else in his eyes as he paused, and then said, "Any interesting work of late?" He asked. His eyes were hungry.

"Actually," Bail piped up conversationally, "Ben was one of the Jedi sent to Alaris Prime."

"Really?" Palpatine's smile flickered, and for a split second, his impenetrable shields faltered. In that fleeting, so easily missed moment, Ben could sense the man's emotions.

Shock. Rage, directed at Ben. Almost involuntarily, Ben thought of Maul, of their fight on Kuat, and he knew, in that instant, exactly how enraged Sidious had been at that turn of events. It was a similar emotion now, except beneath the currents of red-hot anger, there was something else, something faster and unexpected. He deciphered it just as the Sith snapped his shields back up again.

Surprise. Palpatine was surprised.

He did not show it. "That was you?" The Nubian senator asked, calmly.

Ben felt as though he was being drawn out from his body. His consciousness hovered for a moment in timeless observation as he stood before Palpatine, the man's question still ringing in his ears. Seize your moments of action with clarity, the memory of Qui-Gon's advice echoed in his mind. The Force pulled at him; whispered, no, yelled at him. This was a choice, a vital choice. He'd been presented with a question, the answer presumed by the inquisitor. But something deep in his gut, the same sense that had taught him to see into the future, the same sense that had led him back through time, the same Force that had sustained him through it all was telling him that he could change the presumptions of this man, and in so doing, instigate a vital series of events.

Where the chain would lead, he did not know. For better or worse, he grabbed hold of the Force's voice, verified its deafening shout in his ear, and acted without hesitation.
"No, actually, it wasn't, I'm sorry Bail, you must be mistaken."

Palpatine raised his eyebrows. Bail shot his friend a confused look.

"But…" Bail said, thinking fast, eyes searching his friend's face desperately for a signal, a hint. "I… thought I heard your name mentioned. Granted, it's all hearsay, but I've been keeping tabs on the mission for the Coalition."

"Yes," Ben said slowly, as if trying to wrack his memory. "Whatever you heard must have been in reference my nephew, Obi-Wan."

Silence. Sheev Palpatine's brow furrowed slightly. "What?"

"My nephew, Obi-Wan Kenobi, is a Jedi as well. He and his master Qui-Gon Jinn were sent to Alaris Prime recently," Ben explained, watching Palpatine's blank expression.

After a pause, the senator said, "Oh. I had no idea you had a relative in the Order," his smile returned. Ben replied in kind.

"It's not unheard of. We brush shoulders occasionally, but usually it's just the name that causes confusion."

Both senators laughed politely at this. Bail was doing a good job of hiding his befuddlement.

Following along with whatever game Ben was playing, he said, "That's my mistake then. I suppose you can't trust anything until the official report comes out. Is that forthcoming, do you think?"

"Oh, I should think so. But you never can tell," Ben shrugged. "The Council often follows its own timetable."

"Indeed," Palpatine said. His smile was thin. "I shall have to read it carefully." His smile grew more predatory. "I shall bid you both good day - much to do!"

"Of course, Senator," Bail and Ben bowed as one. Once Palpatine was gone, the two turned and all but bolted for the safety of Bail's office.

"What was that?" The senator wanted to know as soon as the door closed.

"I…" Ben wasn't sure how to explain it. "I don't exactly know," he said, blinking, trying to comprehend his own actions. "He must not know." He decided at the same time he realized it. Images of battle droids appeared in his mind. "He must not know that it was me on that mission."

Bail frowned at him. "And why not?"

It was a good question, Ben thought. "I don't know," he said, "he just can't. It's important."

Bail had never been sure why Ben distrusted Palpatine so fervently, and no matter how he pried, Ben would not explain. However, forced to choose between them, Bail would always side with the Jedi. He trusted Sheev Palpatine to be a good senator, but he trusted Ben Kenobi with his life. "Alright," he said. "You'd better get that in the official report, then."

Later that evening, as soon as Ben had left the Senate, he called Mace Windu on his private line and asked him to replace his name on the report with that of Obi-Wan Kenobi.

"What?" The Master of the Order asked in an annoyed tone. Ben had interrupted his dinner.
"I know, I know. Just… please."

"Why? Ben, what is going on?"

"I'm not sure," Ben admitted. "I am following the Force's direction. Palpatine thinks it was me. We can't let him think that. He'll connect the dots somehow, I'm sure of it. He's watching this whole mission with the eye of a hawk, and you and I both know why. We have to let him think it was Obi-Wan - which, it was," Ben said, suddenly realizing the hidden truth behind the lie, "from a certain point of view."

Mace sighed heavily on the other end. "Ben, what difference does it make?"

Ben chewed on his lip. What did it matter? Why were there knots in his mind, a tugging his gut that demanded him to act? "It's a game of chess," he said, though he could not see the entire board. "I need to play my pieces right. I need him to think a queen is a pawn."

The line went silent. Ben could practically feel the skepticism broadcasted over the comm. "I'll change it," Mace said, not sounding very happy about it, "but you and I will have words about this."

"Of course. Thank you, Mace."

Master Windu sighed again, the weight of an entire Order - and it's most intractable members - weighing down on him. "May the Force be with you, Ben," he said, and hung up.

Left to the silence of his shuttle, Ben's mind began reviewing the day's events - and what a day. His thoughts kept turning and pointing and sticking to one moment, a single revelation whose significance he could not yet understand.

He'd been surprised.

By sundown, most everyone had left the Senate building. Attendant droids were dozing in their powerstations, interns were sleeping in their shoebox apartments, and senators had long since retired to mull over their paperwork and fine scotch in their homes. Even Chancellor Valorum, known for his workaholism, had retired for the day. The only people left in the building were night-shift security, custodial droids, and a single, lone senator.

In the confines of his own office, Sheev Palpatine was working late, mind preoccupied by a few innocent words spoken by a Jedi Master. The window shades were darkened, the lights set low to attract no attention. Slowly, he drew up his hood to obscure his face, as he always did for this sort of business.

The holotable in front of him flickered, and then clicked. The blue projection of a Neimoidian viceroy appeared.

"Have you recovered what I asked for?" Palpatine asked. The Neimoidian wrung his hands.

"Yes, my lord."

"All of it?"

"Yes, my lord. The data should be transmitting to you as we speak, sir."

"Good." Palpatine turned his head slowly, careful not to reveal his face, and checked the glowing data console on his desk. Two unread files waited in his inbox. He turned back to the Neimoidian,
eyes no longer soft with expectation. "You do realize, now that the Jedi have seen your little… outpost, they will be hunting you down across the entire Republic."

The Neimoidian fidgeted uncomfortably. He had not wanted this job, but had been given little choice in the matter. "My lord," he said, trying to muster a smile. It came out as a nervous twitch instead. 

"Can you not… help us?"

"Not anymore," the Sith spat, "you should have chosen backwaters for all of them. If the Jedi had found you anywhere else, I might've been able to help you." He tipped his head up, every part of him dripping with contempt. "But Alaris Prime is under scrutiny by the entire Galactic Senate. As soon as the official reports come in, you will be beyond my help." He paused for effect, letting the fear sink in, the desperation. Just before the pathetic, shivering reptilian could burst, he said, very softly: "If you want me to help you, hide them. All of them. Now."

"Yes, my lord," the Neimoidian bowed hastily, ready to please and save his own neck, not stopping to consider if the request was reasonable, or feasible. "Of course, my lord. It will be done."

"Good. I will not have you fail me again, Viceroy. I have an… associate. She will oversee your efforts and report back to me. For your sake, do not displease her." With that, Palpatine cut the transmission. He turned to the console and opened the data files waiting there for him. The first was a video feed, taken off a surveillance droid from Alaris Prime. It was grainy, shaky, and only a few seconds long. It showed two Jedi fighting - no, slaughtering - a squad of the Federation's battle droids. One was tall, with long hair, and wielded a green lightsaber. The other was shorter, clean shaven, with a blue lightsaber. Palpatine watched the clip several times, and paused it when the two Jedi were in clearest view.

He pulled up the second file. They were the results of two DNA tests performed on the fibers and hair found at the scene. Both of the tests had turned up results from the Jedi Order's registry. Attached to the ID photos of both Jedi were their names and information.

Jinn, Qui-Gon
Human
Male
57 standard
Master, Jedi Order of the Galactic Republic

Kenobi, Obi-Wan
Human
Male
22 standard
Senior Padawan, Jedi Order of the Galactic Republic

Palpatine's eyes slid back over to the freeze-framed video and bore into the faces of the two Jedi. Their faces were indistinct, but there was no mistaking them. Master Jinn, though Palpatine had never seen him before in his life, cut a distinct figure: Long hair, beard, even the lightsaber color matched the profile. He looked down the frame at the one called Kenobi - clean shaven, shorter, younger. It was a formulaic combination for Jedi apprentices, but even so… He squinted at the video and let it play again.

Master and apprentice. Yet this apprentice was very nearly a knight. He fought just as well as his master - better, in fact. And he'd been instrumental in pulling the curtain on Palpatine's careful plans. He'd been the one to destroy the most droids.

The video cut off just as the droid fled from the scene. The last visible trace of the Jedi was of Obi-
Wan Kenobi, standing over a decimated battle droid, stance reeking of power and control.

"Kenobi," Darth Sidious said to himself, very quietly. He steepled his fingers and watched the video run, again, and again, and again. "How interesting."
"Very good," Dooku's bass voice echoed across the dojo with an unusual, encouraging lilt. Obi-Wan, panting for breath but not about to give up under the scrutiny of his grandmaster, nodded and performed the Makashi kata again. It was a fast and vicious kata, not the slow meditative kind common in Soresu.

"You favor your right side too much," Dooku critiqued, circling the padawan with a sharp gaze, arms folded behind him. "You cannot always count on your dominant hand, foot, and eye to be in the right place at the right time," he advised. "A Jedi Knight must master his whole body. Switch hands."

Obi-Wan did. He was used to doing exercises with his left hand - that didn't mean he was very good at it. His work was sloppier than before, anyone could see that. Strangely, Dooku said nothing about it. Instead, he waited until the padawan was done with the kata and repeated curtly: "Again."

Dooku was a relentless teacher, but he was not merciless. A padawan under his tutelage probably wouldn't have been able to see it, but any Master who'd taught enough students could've seen the care hiding beneath his intensity. He pushed his students hard, harder than they thought they could endure, but it was never so hard that they broke.

Ben watched the training session from the doorway. Obi-Wan's advanced techniques had drawn the eyes of several passing padawans and even a few masters, but it was Dooku, statuesque behind him that drew Ben's attention. His mind was far away from the dojo floor, lost somewhere back in the Senate building, retracing his steps.

Palpatine had been surprised to hear that Ben Kenobi had been to Alaris Prime. But that wasn't right, Ben thought. It'd taken a few days for him to realize why. Dooku.

Palpatine had been angry, yes, and understandably so. But hidden beneath the currents of rage, there had been an unmistakable twang of surprise. Surprise that it had been Ben on Alaris Prime. But he should have known, Ben realized later. He should have known all the details about the mission days ago, the information relayed to him by his apprentice. But he hadn't known. He'd been unprepared. No one had told him about Ben's role on Alaris Prime.

But just days before, Ben and Yan Dooku had discussed the mission at length over wine. How had Palpatine had not heard of it?

After a great deal of thought, Ben was forced to conclude that either Dooku was an incredibly mistrusting apprentice who was willfully hiding pertinent information from his master - which would paint him in a nigh suicidal light - or, and this was an absolutely enormous or - Dooku was not a Sith apprentice at all.

It was difficult to imagine. Master Dooku. Not Count, not Darth Tyrannus. Just Jedi Master Yan Dooku, Jedi Shadow and Makashi master.
"Well done that time." Dooku's praise was clipped with subtle derision. Still, Obi-Wan seemed pleased to hear it. "One more time." The padawan started again.

Dooku's face was impossible to read. Across the dojo, Ben's mind was flip-flopping in desperate patterns, trying to rationalize the implications of Palpatine's surprise and Dooku's silence, and what he would do about it. Put in this situation in another place and time, he would have been happy to watch and wait, stand by as Dooku stepped fully into the light or the dark. But this was the here and now, and here and now Ben did not have time to watch and wait.

"Master Kenobi," Dooku called, jerking Ben from his thoughts. Obi-Wan was sitting in the middle of the dojo now, covered in sweat and decimating his second cup of water. "You've been hovering there long enough. Come inside, and tell your nephew how he can fix his lefthand guard." Obi-Wan turned to look at him, obviously unaware that he'd been watching for so long.

Ben pushed up off the doorway and strolled into the arena. "He likely already knows what most of them are. Nothing that practice won't fix," Ben said. "He's a natural swordsman. The gaps will fill themselves in, given time."

Obi-Wan might've blushed at the praise, but he was already bright red from exercise so it was hard to tell. Dooku's eyebrows raised. "A generous assessment, Master Kenobi." He glanced at his grandpadawan, whose braid was beginning to look more and more out of place of late. "But a fair one." Then, to Obi-Wan he said, "You ought to remember your high guard. Pick it up too slowly, and it gives your opponent an opportunity."

Obi-Wan nodded, still panting and grinning. Yan Dooku could not dole out compliments unaccompanied by critique, but even that had its own shade of approval. "Yes, Master."

Dooku turned back to Ben. "I don't suppose you'd like to stay for a bit? It's been awhile since I've fought a master of such caliber as yourself." There was a competitive glint in his eyes. Obi-Wan seemed excited by the prospect.

Ben, however, was aware of his own state of mind. He could not clear his head for a fight. Unbidden, memories of his fight with Pong Krell resurfaced. If that master could elicit such vivid flashbacks in his memory, what on earth could Dooku do to him? He gave an apologetic smile. "Though I am sure it would be an honor, Master Dooku, I am afraid I have to decline. I have many duties today, and cannot be seen limping out of the dojo." Dooku chuckled.

"Very well, another time. Have you come to spectate, then?"

"Actually, I've come seeking a word with Obi-Wan," Ben tipped his head, and Obi-Wan looked up at him, suddenly attentive, still dripping with sweat. "However, I think it can wait until after he's cleaned up a bit."

Dooku nodded. "Of course. I shall leave him to you, then. I have other appointments to keep." He gave them both a polite smile and swept out of the room.

Ben looked down at his younger self, who was still sprawled on the floor. "He always leave you in such a mess?" he asked.

Obi-Wan shrugged. "Most of the time. But Qui-Gon does the same."

"Qui-Gon at least works for it, rather than ordering you through katas till stars fall."

"Eh," Obi-Wan shrugged, and stood with grunts and groans. "I'm learning a lot." The fact that he could admit this was, Ben thought privately, one of many reasons Qui-Gon must've thought he was
ready for knighthood. Obi-Wan began shuffling toward the showers. "What is it that you wanted to talk to me about?"

Ben followed after him, looking around the echoing locker room suspiciously. "Nothing we can speak about in public."

Obi-Wan looked around the room of stalls and shrugged. "We're the only ones here, Ben."

Sighing, Ben waved a hand, and both doors shut and locked with a hiss. "It's about Alaris Prime," he said, as Obi-Wan hung up his belt and began to strip. "It's… complicated. I trust Qui-Gon filled you in on the details?"

Obi-Wan disappeared behind a curtain, but his laughter was still audible. "Yes, gundarks and Wookiees and something about lice. I don't envy you." The water turned on, and Ben had to raise his voice slightly above the din.

"And did he tell you about the Trade Federation?"

"Yes, he mentioned it. Droids. He said you were rather… disturbed by it. Was it really an army?"

Ben sighed again, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "Yes. And I doubt this is the last we'll hear of it. The thing is…" There was no way to explain clearly.

He must've stood there, pinching his brow and thinking for some time, because after a few minutes the water turned off and Obi-Wan asked, "What is it?"

Ben looked up at crossed his arms. "I put your name on the report."

"What?"

"I… I said it was you and Qui-Gon who went on the mission, not he and I."

"Why?" Ben could not see him, but the confusion was evident in Obi-Wan's voice.

Ben struggled to find the words. "The army we found, the droids. They're not just some slapdash thing put together by the Trade Federation. It's bigger than that. There are certain… people who are watching that mission unfold very closely."

Obi-Wan appeared from behind the curtain, a towel about his waist, brow furrowed, very slowly unfolding his trousers. "The Sith," he concluded, and looked to Ben for confirmation. The elder nodded. Mind now reeling, Obi-Wan stepped into his trousers and shook out his tunic. "But… why does it matter?"

"This Sith knows who I am." Obi-Wan's head snapped up to stare at him in sheer panic, so Ben put out a placating hand and amended, "I mean he knows me as Ben Kenobi, he doesn't know I'm…" He gestured to Obi-Wan. "You know. But he knows me, and he knows that I'm the one who killed his apprentice."

Obi-Wan nodded. "And… you didn't want to get involved in another one of his affairs, give yourself away." Obi-Wan was trying to work through the problem. "But… where do I come in?"

"That's just it," Ben lamented, coming to lean against a locker across from where Obi-Wan was sitting down to put on his socks. "I don't know the details of why I did it." It sounded so ludicrous. "The Force led me, and I acted. He cannot know that it was me. The only thing that made sense was to say that it was you. Which… it was, in a way."
Obi-Wan's face twisted in stern consideration, and for several long moments he was silent. "I suppose..." He mused at length. It did make sense for an apprentice to go on a mission with his master. It was unusual to have two masters go on a mission together when one of them had an apprentice waiting around at the Temple. "I suppose that will raise fewer eyebrows," he said eventually.

It was a fair point. "I'm close to him," Ben explained. "Close enough to keep an eye on him. But if I get too close, get involved in too many missions with his... plans, he'll start making sure I can't do my job. Maybe that's why I changed the report," he shrugged. He hated this feeling, the need to put personal interests above other people. But were they really personal interests? It was hard for him to tell. "The Force guided me, but I should have consulted you first. And now I've gotten your name mixed up with the Sith because of my own actions. I wanted to tell you so I could apologize." He paused, looked down at the floor and added, "You know... I don't think the report has gone through yet, I can ask to amend it."

Obi-Wan was quiet for several moments while he finished straightening his tabards and obi, buckling his belt. Eventually he stood and said, "Don't change it. My name is listed alongside my master's, which is as it should be. And if this..." He struggled to say the word; years after Darth Maul, it was still hard to admit the truth. "...Sith now perceives me as a threat, I'll take that as a compliment." He smiled. Ben shook his head.

"It's not right. I shouldn't have gotten you mixed up in this, especially not for my sake."

"I would have gotten mixed up in it eventually, Ben," Obi-Wan told him, folding his arms. "As a Jedi, it's my duty to stand against darkness, against the Sith. This is my job. If I had been there, I would've told you to do the same thing. The Force guided you, and the Force will present a solution." He realized what he'd said, and winced. "Force, I sound like Qui-Gon."

Ben actually laughed. He sat down on the bench next to his younger self and said, "That's not a bad thing."

"No, I guess not," Obi-Wan smiled, but it faded quickly. He chewed at his lip. "This... army." He glanced up at his older self, looking for answers. "What is its purpose?"

Ben drew in a long breath and sighed it out slowly. He hadn't intended to tell Obi-Wan the full story, especially not so early on. But things had changed. "He's going to try and start a war. He needs two armies to do it, so that he can force us to choose sides."

It was a very simple plan set on a massive scale. Even at twenty-two, Obi-Wan had seen enough of the world to recognize the plot. "And he's the only one who can bring peace, I suppose?"

"That'll be his gambit, yes."

Obi-Wan nodded. "This droid army is the first one."

"Yes."

"And the second?"

Ben was not ready for that conversation. There were still too many factors in play. "We will cross that bridge when we get to it," he said. He was surprised when Obi-Wan nodded, apparently satisfied with this answer.

They sat in mutual silence for a while, listening to the drone of the fans overhead. Obi-Wan ran a towel over his hair and then spent several more minutes trying to comb it into submission.
"You said you know this Sith lord," he said, not looking at Ben.

"Yes."

"Do I know him?"

"No, thank the Force."

"And he's the master?"

"Yes, I killed the apprentice."

"That was years ago," Obi-Wan pointed out with some apprehension. He set the comb aside. "D'you think he's found a new one?"

Ben glanced at Obi-Wan and thought of Dooku. But Palpatine hadn't known. He'd been surprised. And Dooku was... what was he? A giant grey question mark. "I don't know," Ben said, truthfully.

Obi-Wan nodded and stood.

"Alright. I'll tell Master Qui-Gon about the change later today, so we can-"

"Now hang on," Ben interrupted, "I should tell him. This is all my doing, I need to explain."

"I can do that," Obi-Wan countered. "It's as much my plan now as it is yours, Ben. Had you involved me before hand, I would've taken the risk anyway. You're not fighting the Sith on your own. I know there'll be certain risks to... to being me."

Ben looked at him, frustrated. He wondered to himself if this was the sort of self-sacrificing nonsense that had driven Anakin and Cody mad during the war. "But it wasn't your own choice," Ben protested.

"It is now. And I'm choosing to own it and tell my master about the whole thing myself. So you will get to tell him," a wry grin spread over his face, "from a certain point of view."

Ben had no way to respond to that, so he sighed heavily. Obi-Wan chuckled.

"Hey!" cried a frustrated Jedi from the other side of one of the locked shower doors, "what's the big idea? Is anyone in there? Let me in!"

Ben flustered, "It's, ah, maintenance! Just a moment, Master Jedi." He tried to sound mechanical. Obi-Wan cast him a thoroughly unimpressed look.

"Maintenance?" He whispered. "That's the best you can do?"

"Oh, just go," Ben shoved his shoulder toward the door on the opposite side of the room. Manipulating the Force in a flippant manner entirely unbecoming of a Jedi Master, Ben hastily unlocked both doors and fled the scene. By the time the sweaty, frustrated Jedi finally got through the door, both Kenobis were gone.

Over the next several days, Obi-Wan and Ben suffered the cost of explaining their 'plan' to Qui-Gon and Mace, respectively.

Qui-Gon was baffled and furious at Ben for dragging his apprentice into such a mess, but before he could move to the door to hunt Ben down, Obi-Wan had stepped up to put his own master straight.
"I assumed the risk myself," he snapped, raising his voice in an authoritative tone Qui-Gon was not used to hearing, especially in private. "He made a decision, and I’ve decided to support it."

"It could put you at risk," Qui-Gon shot back. "It wasn't his choice to make."

Obi-Wan didn't let down. "I'm a Jedi, this is my job. If I had been there, I would have told him to do exactly what he did. He followed the Force's guidance - or isn't that what you would have me do?"

"Obi-Wan, this is a Sith, who has whole systems and organizations at his bidding, that's who he's just exposed you to."

"That's who you've exposed yourself to, need I remind you, but you don't seem too concerned about that," Obi-Wan retorted. Silence. Softly, he continued, "No, I wasn't really there. No, it wasn't Ben's choice to make. But it's mine now, and Sith or no I know it's the right thing to do. I can feel it - can't you?" But it was the faintest of feelings, the slightest whispers telling him to step forward, just one step at a time.

But Qui-Gon had never been one for seeing the future. He could not respond. His apprentice sighed and said, "I'm not a child anymore, Qui-Gon. Let me do this."

The master's will crumpled; humbled and sad. "No," he said. "You're right."

There was a strained silence as they both absorbed the unexpected shift in the atmosphere. To patch the disintegrating hierarchy between them, Obi-Wan said, "If they start going after you, my place is at your side."

Qui-Gon mustered a smile. "Of course," he said, although it felt profoundly unfair.

Across the Temple, Ben was having a far less melodramatic time of explaining his choice to Mace. At the end of the day, the only real explanation that he could offer was that he had acted according to the Force's direction. This logic, though it enjoyed significant respect within the Temple walls, was still a dissatisfying answer when dealing with Sith Lords. However, Mace Windu had far weightier matters on his mind than a single name on a mission report.

"I'll expedite the report on through the Council. If the Senate is as restless as you say, we won't want to give Palpatine any extra time to sweep his mess under the rug."

And that was that.

"There is still the matter of the clones. I've been looking for any points of contact that Sifo Dyas might've had in the temple, but have had no luck so far."

"None?"

Mace shook his head, looking out the window of his quarters. "A few old mission reports, some log entries. Nothing substantial. For a former Councilor, he hasn't left much paperwork behind, and even less in way of friends or contacts." He sighed, and rubbed his face. "I didn't realize it would be this bad."

Ben was chewing on the inside of his cheek, trying to decide whether it would be wise to speak. "I may know of someone to ask," He said.

"Really? Who?"

Ben bit his lip, hard. He wasn't going to like it. "Yan Dooku," He said.
Mace's hand dropped from his face and hit his knee. "I'm sorry?"

Ben shrugged, drawing breath for a prepared defense. "Mace, he knows more about Sifo Dyas than perhaps anyone else in the Order."

"No," The Master of the Order's word was final. "We can't ask him. Even if he has information, we can't ask him, we can't tell him why we need to know about Dyas. For all we know, he could be reporting to Palpatine right now."

"Mace... I don't think he's a Sith," the words fell out. Did he really believe them?

"Really?" Mace said incredulously. "And what makes you think that?"

"Well…" a feeling. A guttural, primal feeling that welled up from that spot in his soul that received direction from the Force. But it was not uncorroborated. "Palpatine didn't know it was me," Ben said. "I changed the name on the report so that he wouldn't be able to connect the dots, but the fact that he didn't see through my lie is because he didn't know any better. Dooku and I talked about Alaris Prime just days after I returned - if he were reporting back to Palpatine, I wouldn't have been able to get away with changing that report."

Mace closed his eyes and shook his head softly, trying to comprehend what he was hearing. There were too many claxons firing at the same time. "You told Dooku about Alaris Prime? No, wait… you lied to Palpatine's face? Honestly, Ben, I can't decide which is worse." He stared at the man. "And you honestly think that because you have - or at least, it appears that you have - gotten away with it, that means somehow that Dooku is innocent?"

"Well…" Ben really hated talking with this man sometimes. He always managed to make everything Ben said sound utterly absurd. He huffed. "Yes."

Mace's eyes bore into him, searching his very soul for answers. If the man found any, they were not the kind he'd been looking for. "Dooku is an unknown, Kenobi. As much as I would love to be able to consult his knowledge, we simply can't trust him."

Ben held his tongue. The word of the Master of the Order was final.

"I have a few more contacts to speak with in the legislative district who may be able to provide us a lead. Continue your search here - and keep Dooku out of it."

If Mace did not want Ben to consult Dooku on the matter of Sifo Dyas, then where in the nine hels did he expect him to look? Holed up in front of a private console in the Temple Archives, Ben scrolled through the news holograms with partial interest.

"More on this story at nine, when we will also review this year's worst moments in celebrity fashion…"

"...a new precedent today in the Galactic Supreme Courts, after the ruling on Hosnian Prime Cabinet versus the Condlar Pilots' Guild."

"...tensions running high at the Galactic Senate this week as rumors circulate on a possible investigation into the dealings of the Galactic Trade Federation, with some reports claiming that Vice Chair Mas Amedda is calling for sanctions following what are, as of now, undisclosed infractions by the Federation leaders. We will bring you more information on this story as it becomes available."
The Galactic Banking Clan and the wider Republican community are saddened by the news. Hego Damask II was just a few months shy of his eighty-fifth birthday when a friend found him in his apartment late last night. It appears the renown banking mogul Damask passed peacefully in his sleep. In light of his death, the IGBC will be taken over by one of Damask's top employees, San Hill, who gave his condolences to the-

The oruscant Weather Commission has promised blue skies and breezy afternoons after last week's inconvenient rain cycle. Lower level occupants should be on the lookout for elevated chances of electrical storms as the sinking humidity mixes with the incoming warm air.

Down fifteen points already from last quarter, taking a sharp nosedive after Vice Chair Mas Amedda's comments to the G-RAN took the holonet by storm. Federation PR associates have yet to respond for comment on this developing-

"Master Ben!"

Ben jumped, turning to see whose voice had cut through the daze of holonews.

"Aola!" He broke into a smile. The Twi'lek padawan bounded to him in long, happy strides, ignoring the Archives' rule of silence to smile brightly at him and say,

"Long time no see!"

Ben chuckled and stood to give her a hug. "Likewise. I would have seen you weeks ago, but I understand you were a bit preoccupied." He pulled away and gave her a questioning eyebrow. "And?"

She was unable to keep her smile from growing. "I'm done!" She squeaked, and Ben smiled with her.

"Congratulations, Padawan - excuse me, Senior Padawan Tarkona," Ben bowed in mock formality. Aola giggled.

"Thank you, Master Kenobi." She looked around at the console he was using, replete with all kinds of newsfeeds, paperwork, and reports. "What are you doing here?"

He glanced back at the small library he'd collected, a heap of false leads into the affairs of Sifo Dyas. "Oh, nothing much," he said. "A slew of old projects. Nothing promising, I'm afraid." He turned back to her. "And what about you?"

She jerked a thumb back at the main desk of the archives. "Just returning the last of my textbooks. I can't believe I'm done!"

Ben chuckled. After a moment of thought, he closed out his session on the console. "I think I shall be done for the day as well." He glanced at the desk, where Jocasta Nu was serenely tending to her carts and droids, looking very pointedly not irritated. Ben knew better. "Come on, we'd best be gone before your excitement spoils the atmosphere."

After they were out of the archives, Ben was happy to walk side-by-side with Aola, who was becoming more of a woman and less of a girl at eighteen standard years. The crests of her indigo lekku reached nearly to Ben's ear, so he had to look only slightly downward to speak with her.

"I hear you and Master Jinn got up to some trouble on your last mission," she said.

"Oh? And who told you that?"
"Obi-Wan," she replied. "Apparently Master Jinn talked about it for hours, and managed to work in a lecture or two on the way." She shook her head. "Poor Obi doesn't deserve it. He's been cooped up long enough as it is."

Ben remembered Qui-Gon's annoyance at his ignorance and felt guilty. "Well, when you are a Jedi Master, you can decide what your apprentice does and doesn't deserve. I'm sure Qui-Gon was just making up for lost time."

"That's what Obi-Wan said," Aola told him, peering up at him with a funny little smile. "You and he are a lot alike, you know."

Ben's smile faltered. He glanced down at her and thought of what he'd told Qui-Gon in the jungles of Alaris Prime. _She deserves to know._ "So we are," he said absently. Struggling with his mouth, he started to say, "Aola, there's something-"

"Oh look!" the Twi'lek pointed, "There's Obi now. Obi-Wan!" She called, and the taller apprentice turned to see them both.

"Ah, hello. Where are you two headed?" The elder padawan asked.

"I just found Master Ben in the archives, we were catching up since we haven't seen each other."

She smiled at the master, who replied in kind, more subdued. "And what about you?"

"I was about to get some lunch - care to join me?"

They agreed and joined Obi-Wan on his path to the refectory. Ben resolved to speak with Aola at a better time. For now, let her see the Kenobis and their similarities through the lens of ignorance.

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Their meal was a pleasant family affair, Obi-Wan and Aola acting like siblings and Ben as the spectating uncle, catching up on each other's affairs and asking for the juicy details of Ben's assignment to Alaris Prime. He indulged them, mostly for Obi-Wan's benefit - if his involvement in the mission were ever to come into question, he'd have to be prepared.

Eventually, Aola rose and excused herself, saying, "Master Gard has a meeting late tonight, so our spar's moved up to this afternoon. Force be with you both."

"And also with you," said the Kenobis, Ben painfully aware of how similar their voices sounded. Aola did not seem to notice.

"I ought to go soon too," Obi-Wan said, finishing up his second helping. "I have training with Master Dooku in a few hours."

"Oh?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "It was supposed to be Qui-Gon and I today, but he got called in to sub for Master Radaaak's Ataru class last minute."

"I see."

They chewed in silence.

"Obi-Wan," Ben asked eventually. The apprentice looked up at him. "What do you think of Master Dooku?"

Obi-Wan frowned and swallowed his bite. "How do you mean?"
Ben lowered his voice so that others would not eavesdrop. "You've said yourself that he is a rather… grey individual."

Obi-Wan considered this, and shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I guess I thought that, for a while. Maybe he is grey. I don't know."

"But?" Ben guessed.

"But he's not a bad Jedi," Obi-Wan concluded.

Perhaps it was the war and years of bias weighing him down, but Ben blinked and had to say, "I don't understand."

"I mean… he's not a light Jedi, sure. But he's not dark. He was a Sentinel, years ago, so I can't really blame him if he's a bit rougher around the edges than the likes of you and me. But that doesn't make him bad." He looked down at his plate and picked at what was left of his bowl of rice. "I know he still makes Qui-Gon uneasy, and maybe that will never change. But Qui-Gon doesn't stop him from teaching me, and I'm learning a lot from him - a lot that I know is right. He's not dark. He toes the line, but he's a good Jedi, deep down."

Deep down. That was the problem. It was too inconclusive for Ben's liking. "I see," he said eventually, not knowing what else to say.

"Why do you ask?" Obi-Wan turned the question on him, looking very curious indeed.

Ben drew in a breath, and considering trying to explain. In the end, he let it out in a huff and said, "Just trying to get the lay of the land."

The following day, late enough to avoid presumption and early enough to avoid a rebuff, Ben Kenobi knocked on the door of Jedi Master Yan Dooku.

The door slid open, and a smile spread across Dooku's face. "Ah, Master Kenobi, what a surprise. A good afternoon to you."

"Master Dooku," Ben smiled back. "A few days ago, you offered me a standing invitation to a duel," he said.

"Oh?" the taller man chuckled. "Yes, I do recall. Shall we make an appointment in the dojo, then, if you're so eager?"

"Actually, Master, I wondered if you would like to share a friendly game of chess instead," Ben said. "I find it can be a far more constructive endeavor than sabers."

Dooku's smile hardened in competitive zeal. "Indeed it can, Master Kenobi." He paused, and stepped aside to let him inside. "I'll get the board ready."

For any other matchup, an afternoon would have afforded ample time for three, perhaps four games of chess. But Yan Dooku and Ben Kenobi were both master strategists in their own right. Pitted against each other, the match lasted for hours.

This was by design. The unrushed intellect of their duel gave them time to talk. Dooku was a man of refinement and subtlety. Ben was a man of supreme intuition and integrity, the sort of man whose very presence invites company to let down their guard. Put together, their conversation was very keen.
It took hours to make any headway with Dooku. In the end, Ben found that the key to this conversation was a young boy who'd won both of their hearts.

"What are your intentions toward Anakin?" Ben asked rather suddenly, interrupting Dooku's contemplation of Ben's bishop. Dooku glanced up briefly, but ultimately turned eyes back to the board.

"I've told you already, Master Kenobi, I intend to train the boy."

Ben set aside his protective urges and hummed thoughtfully. He pondered his own pieces and moved a pawn innocently forward to pass the turn to Dooku. "I admit, Master, I did not see you as the teaching type, before you began tutoring Obi-Wan."

Dooku chuckled at this, studying the board and not looking up to say, "I suppose not. Qui-Gon is my only living testament to masterhood, and he's set himself rather far from my teachings. I thought he would make a fine Sentinel, back in the day."

"Are you disappointed in him for choosing another path?"

"No, of course not. It was not the will of the Force." He moved a knight and sat back.

"Do you see Anakin becoming a Sentinel, then?" Ben asked, rubbing his beard as he considered Dooku's queen.

Dooku shrugged. "I admit, I do not have the gift of foresight, Ben. But I do recognize potential in the boy, utterly unrivaled by his peers. He will do great things, and I know firsthand that the Sentinels could use such talents. Especially in such dark times." His expression sobered, and Ben looked up from the board to see Dooku wilt slightly, looking older and more frail than he ever did in public. "You know," he said, free to speak as Ben was occupied with his turn at chess. "I would never have considered it, years ago. I'm getting far too old to teach, much less raise up another generation."

"I would hardly say that, Master, you show Obi-Wan what for every other day," Ben pointed out, and hesitantly moved a pawn. Dooku waved a dismissive hand and leaned over the board.

"I do, yes, every other day. I only run him through his katas so often because I know I can't keep up with his stamina." The admission gave Ben pause. "I may be a Makashi Master, perhaps the very best alive right now. But I'm not the young man I once was. These are dark times, and I have no hope of being the Sentinel I want to be, the one the Order needs right now. I'm far too old for that."

He slid a bishop a few squares away from Ben's knight, and leaned back again, knees popping. "My prime is well over. The galaxy is darkening with every passing day - surely you feel it."

"Yes," Ben said.

Dooku nodded. "Those who don't who must be blind. There are too many fools in this order. I'm powerless to stop them on my own. The Jedi Order is mistaken in so many ways."

"How so?" Ben asked, quietly.

Dooku's eyes seemed to glaze over, as if gazing across to some far-off horizon. Ben dared not move. "About ten years ago, the Council asked me to lead a unit of Jedi to the Galidraan system to suppress a violent group of Mandalorians who were slaughtering political activists there," Dooku told him. "The confrontation was one of the bloodiest of my career. Half a dozen Jedi, killed in minutes. Even more Mandalorians, slaughtered on our blades. My own apprentice bragged the most kills - and what kind of boast is that?"
"Qui-Gon?" Ben asked, confused.

"No, he's long been his own master. This was a different apprentice… I never saw her knighted."

"I'm sorry," Ben said. Dooku shook his head.

"She did not die. Just… did not graduate."

"Oh." Quietly, Ben took possession of one of Dooku's knights, which the other master seemed too distracted to register.

"After the fact, I found out that the entire battle was a farce. The Governor had both the Mandalorians and the Jedi in his pockets. He manipulated our systems to play puppetmaster. The Council let him - they sent me and a dozen other Jedi into a bloodbath for no better reason than a politician's lust for power." He shook his head, and considered the board. "This Order is not prepared to overcome the darkness if even our Council cannot see it."

"No," Ben agreed, and thought of Mace Windu, and all that he'd learned through Ben's life. Was the Korun master too over-invested to see clearly?

Dooku took a brisk inhale, and moved a bishop in a particularly cutting angle to remove a pawn and a rook from Ben's resources. "Damn," the younger man whispered. Dooku smiled.

"I very seriously considered leaving the Order after that," Dooku went on. "That battle was so pointless, so ill-considered that I couldn't face the Council for my anger towards them. My apprentice left, and then I left soon after her. I had no real intention to come back."

Ben looked up at him. "But?"

Dooku nodded. "But then I got a call from the Acquisitions Division who'd somehow tracked me to Alderaan. They asked me to pick up a small boy by the name of Anakin Skywalker," Dooku said, with a fond, soft look in his eyes that Ben could not reconcile to the memory of Count Dooku. "And lo and behold, that ridiculous boy made me want to come back here again." He moved a rook to guard his king. "And here I've stayed, for hope of seeing him grown into his path."

"I see," Ben said, emotion pricking at the back of his throat. He thought back to all the times he'd seen Dooku at the creche door and resented him for it. He felt guilty. He took one of Dooku's pawns. "And what do you think that path will be?"

Dooku shook his head. "I've already told you, Ben, I am not one for foresight. I can see the looming darkness, and I can see the fools who ignore it. But I've also seen a young boy who might just prove something better than the darkness," he shrugged, and took Ben's second rook. "And for old men like me, waiting on something like that becomes something of a pastime." It felt like an understatement.

"Slotted in alongside drilling grandpadawans in their katas, apparently," Ben jibed, smiling as he studied the board.

"Quite so, Master Kenobi."

The game was long. In the end, the only pieces remaining were two kings and Dooku's solitary bishop. "It appears, Master Kenobi," he said, drawing up his eyebrows in a way suggesting he had not had opportunity to make this pronouncement in a very, very long time, "we have reached a draw."
Ben looked down at the pieces, his single black, Dooku's two white. There was no possibility of
checkmate. And yet, it was Dooku's bishop who still ran about the board with speed and mobility.
"So we have," he said, and glanced out the window. It was growing late. "Thank you for the match,
Master Dooku, it is always a pleasure."

"Indeed it is, Ben," Dooku smiled, and the kindness behind it made Ben uncomfortable, because he
already knew that his heart had made a decision. "And please, do call me Yan."

It could not hurt; a new name for a new person. "Very well, Yan," Ben said, and bowed. "May the
Force be with you."

It'd been awhile since Ben's meditations had been interrupted. Through the grapevine of the Force
that only supremely insolent grandmasters had access too, Master Yoda sensed this and came to
amend the problem.

"Troubled, you are," he said, which made Ben start violently and turn to glare at the small Jedi, who
humped his ancient laugh. Grass rustled against the hem of his robe as he shuffled closer to where
Ben was sitting, barefoot, in the gardens. Sitting down, Ben was the same height as Yoda, and they
stared at each other eye-to-eye.

"So I am," Ben said, because there was no use hiding it.

"Troubled about the future?" Yoda asked, "Or the past?"

Ben sighed heavily. "Neither," he said, "and both."

"Hmm. Accuse Master Yoda of speaking in riddles, you do," he prodded Ben with his stick. "A
hypocrite, you are."

Ben shook his head. "I apologize, Master. I mean that I am troubled over the differences between the
two."

Yoda lowered himself to sit beside Ben in the grass, short legs bent so that his clawed feet met in the
middle. "Change, you wanted. Change you have made." He looked up at his grandpadawan with
patient green eyes. "But know what these changes are, you cannot sense."

Ben sighed. "There are almost too many changes, now. Everything is different. I can't trust my own
knowledge anymore. I don't know who to trust. I have to let other people help me, I know that. But
it's hard to tell who is on my side."

"Side?" Master Yoda exclaimed, ears perked. "Unaware I was that Obi-Wan Kenobi was his own
side," he said in an overly incredulous tone. He glanced up at Ben to see that the point had landed.
"On what side are you, Master Kenobi?"

The question baffled Ben for a split second. "The side of the Light," he said eventually. "The side of
life."

"Hmm," Yoda nodded, pleased with this answer. "Always moving, the Light is. So it must, for the
diversity of life. Sequester yourself to one corner of its rays you must not, Obi-Wan." Ben couldn't
help but glance around them, hoping no one else heard the grandmaster call Ben by his true name.
Yoda seemed unworried. "Follow the guidance of the Force you must."

Ben was afraid he'd say something like that. "But master…" he trailed off, feeling like a youngling
seeking the solution to a problem he'd been presented in class. In years past, Yoda had sat with
young initiate Obi-Wan to mull over such dilemmas. Now, he did so with Master Obi-Wan, quietly offering support without granting explanation. "How do we know where our own ambitions end, and the Force's guidance begins?" he asked, screwing up his brow in fierce confusion. "I have acted rashly in fear before, Master. I do not want to make the same mistake again."

"Hmm," Yoda seemed to consider this. "Act rashly sometimes we must, to follow the Force's direction. Considered this have you?"

"Yes, Master, against the judgement of my betters."

Yoda chuckled merrily, eyes scrunching up in old laugh lines. "Do your master proud, you do. But the will of the Force, is it? Search your feelings."

I have been for hours, Ben wanted to say. But he made a nominal effort and looked inside. He saw his motivations only how he'd left them: confused, muddled, and needing to move.

"Hmm," Yoda drew out the syllable as only a eight hundred year old creature could. Ben often wondered if Yoda could see others' thoughts before they'd arrived in the minds of their hosts. "If act rashly you do, act in fear, would you?" He asked. Ben thought hard on this.

"No," he said eventually.

"Afraid are you?"

"Yes."

"Of what?"

Ben swallowed, staring ahead into the air. "Of what the Force may be asking me to do," he said.

Yoda nodded, and stood. He came to stand in front of Ben and rested both foreclaws on his gimer stick. "Then overcome your fear you must, young Kenobi." He gave a small, craggy smile. "Sometimes, to move from one beam of light to the next, only to step we have. But sometimes, leap we must." The shriveled old master began to walk away. "Patience, forbearance paves the path of clarity," he quoted Ben from years long past, "but in the end, always act we must."

Ben watched him go, and heaved a colossal sigh.

No one, except perhaps the Force itself, was going to like this.

The following day, as the sun beat down toward the horizon, Feemor strolled back to his apartment with his padawan Aola in tow. He yawned hugely.

"Master," Aola scoffed, "tired already? Surely you're not that out of practice."

"Insolence," cried Feemor, stepping through the door, "insolence and disrespect. I will have you know that being a master is tiring business. And one day, you will have a horrible padawan of your own to mock you in your old age."

Aola only shook her head, and headed straight for the kitchen cupboards. "I think there's a message for you," she said, glancing at the comm on the counter, which sported a blinking red light. Feemor came over and pressed the button to playback the message aloud.

A huge, crackling sigh could be heard. "Feemor... I'm afraid I'm about to do something incredibly brash, and possibly very, very stupid." It was Ben Kenobi's voice. "Qui-Gon won't like it. Neither
will Obi-Wan. Mace Windu may or may flay me for it." Another deep, distressed sigh. "I really wish you had answered, then someone might've talked me out of it. Being that you haven't, I would like to put this down for the record, just in case Qui-Gon kills or maims me before I can remind him: I act only as the Force guides me. He taught me that, so he really oughn't complain." Another sigh, shorter and more anxious than the two preceding. "Force help me." The transmission cut off abruptly.

All humor and fatigue gone from his face, Feemor stared, horrified, at the comm. Aola eyed him.

"Master?"

Feemor did not look at her. His eyes were moving in minute patterns, trying to decipher the panicked tones of the message.

"Master?" Aola tried again. "What is he talking about?"

Feemor said nothing. He took up the comm again and called Qui-Gon.

"Jinn."

"Master," Feemor cut to the point immediately, "have you seen Ben recently?" He checked the time on the message, "Within the past hour?"

"No," Qui-Gon said, tone calm but quickly abandoning the feeling for panic by association. "Why? Oh, wait, Obi-Wan's just walked in," he moved the comm away from his face and asked, "Obi-Wan, have you seen Ben recently? Feemor's looking for him." A soft muttering noise, unintelligible.

"What was that?" Feemor asked.

"He says he saw him heading to Dooku's apartments not too long ago," Qui-Gon said, still unsure as to why he should be alarmed. "Why?"

Feemor's face, normally a healthy, glowing brown, went sooty grey. "Chssk," he cursed, and darted from the room.

"Master?" Aola set her would-be dinner aside, and hesitantly began to follow. She walked, and then jogged to catch up with him. "Master, what's going on?"

Unfortunately for Feemor, the damage had already been done.

Approximately half an hour before Feemor received the message on his comm, Ben Kenobi had knocked on the door of Yan Dooku's apartment. From the cosmic plane of eternity, the Force watched as he prepared to leap.
en-shaedn and I are both so very happy to see this chapter posted, because it was a royal pain in the backside, start to finish. Enjoy!

"Ah, Master Kenobi," greeted Yan with a smile, eyes crinkling in seldom-seen patterns, "do come in." He stepped in. The door shut. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Standing there under the weight of expectation, Ben was sweating more than if he'd been fighting. Dooku noticed his uneasiness and his pleased expression faltered. "Are you quite alright, Ben?" He asked.

Ben was wrestling with his fear. Silence would be a comfort. Speaking was what he was afraid of. But he would overcome his fear to serve the promptings of the Light, Force help him. Yan Dooku was a master of subtlety and nuance. He was a better strategist than Ben, a better conversationalist, a better decoder of social graces. So Ben would abandon all that, and serve him with a proposition so bald-faced and ridiculous that it could not possibly be construed as misdirection.

"Master Dooku, there is something you should know about me," he began, feeling distinctly separated from his body as he spoke.

"Oh?" Yan seemed confused. It was not an orthodox way to open a conversation.

Ben braced his shoulders, swallowed, and leaped. "My name is not Ben Kenobi."

This seem to puzzle Yan, who, despite not being one for foresight, sensed a disturbance in the Force hurtling toward him at high speed. His eyebrows twitched in confusion. "Is it not?" He asked politely.

"No," said Ben, or Apparently Not Ben, in a frazzled tone. "My name is Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Master and former apprentice of Qui-Gon Jinn, and seven years ago I traveled to this world from the future."

Absolute silence. The disturbance crashed into the present and sent shockwaves across its spectators. They stood against the onslaught, wordless. Ben's heart felt fit to beat out of his chest.

Yan Dooku was unused to dealing with frankness, and it had been years since he'd heard of anything so absurd as time travel. But he had memories. Over the course of a lifetime, a Jedi Shadow grew privy to all sorts of obscure cults of thought, from the heretical, to the evil, to the naive and misguided. So when another Jedi might've laughed, or blinked dumbly, or said something predictable like "that's impossible", Yan Dooku said nothing. He stood, unblinking and unmoving, and stared.

Ben couldn't tell what he saw or what he was thinking. He resisted the urge to shift his weight or lick his lips, knowing that the older man would notice it all. Perhaps Dooku could even hear the tempo of his heart, Ben thought, it sounded loud enough. A battle drum beat in his breast.

After coaching his breathing, Ben said, nerves forcing his voice into a wavering whisper, "You know I'm not lying." It rang with truth, an aftershock to the tidal wave.
Yan blinked at last. Then, he turned slightly and moved, in a slow, deliberate float, to sit down. "I think," he said carefully, looking up at his guest with a vague look of betrayal, "that you had better sit down."

Obi-Wan fell into a seat.

"Did he say anything?" Qui-Gon demanded, eyebrows creased into a stern line.

Obi-Wan the younger looked between his master and Feemor, alarmed. He looked past Feemor's shoulder to give Aola a beseeching expression. The Twi'lek shrugged helplessly back at him.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon pressed. The apprentice looked back up at his master.

"Not really," he replied. "I only saw him in the hall, I asked if he wanted to stop in for tea, and he told me he was on his way to see Master Dooku." He could sense his master's panic. "Why?"

Qui-Gon turned to Feemor instead. "Why did he call you?" He asked.

"He said he was hoping I'd talk him out of something stupid, but was going to do it anyway."

"And Dooku…" Qui-Gon's imagination ran down the list of possibilities.

"He said you wouldn't like it, that's probably why he didn't call you as well," Feemor said, in a pointed tone. "He said Mace and Obi-Wan wouldn't be happy either."

"Oh no," Obi-Wan finally put two and two together.

"What?"

"He was asking me about Master Dooku yesterday," Obi-Wan told them. "About what I thought of him, if I… if I trusted him. He said he was trying to get the lay of the land. But…" He looked up at the two masters, whose expressions were very quickly migrating toward panic. "You don't think he'll actually tell him, do you?"

"Force damnit," Qui-Gon growled, brushing past his apprentice as he rushed out of the room. Feemor sighed heavily.

"Tell him what?" Aola burst, unable to remain silent any longer. Feemor looked at her with a deep sense of guilt. Obi-Wan was sure some sort of silent conversation must have occurred in the next few seconds, because after a brief staring contest, Aola scoffed and Feemor winced, looking like a man who knows someone is about to be very disappointed in him. Obi-Wan glanced surreptitiously at Aola and tried not to look as guilty as he felt.

Seven years. Ben had been here for seven years, by Obi-Wan's calculation. Aola had been around for most of it, but she was the solitary member of their Jedi family who did not know who Master Kenobi really was. Obi-Wan had considered breaching the topic with Ben, or even with Aola, but it had never felt pressing. He and Ben were different people, he reminded himself, there was no need to introduce their confused shared history. They weren't lying, they weren't masquerading as anyone except themselves. Knowledge of Ben's identity shouldn't make a difference to Aola's perception of him, so it was perfectly fine not to tell her. Obi-Wan told himself all of this, but the guilt remained, weighing down his shoulders like bricks.

"What the hel is going on?" Aola demanded, looking between the two men with the rare light of anger in her eyes. Obi-Wan glanced up at her.
"Aola, I'm..." he tilted his head, unsure how to phrase it, "I'm so sorry, Aola, we never... that is, I never thought that it would be..." He stopped, breath trailing off in an uncharacteristic loss of words. Feemor stood by, tight-lipped.

"What?"

Obi-Wan opened his mouth, but only air came out. He gaped like a fish.

"Ugh!" Aola stormed past him to the door, marching down the hall in the direction that Qui-Gon had gone.

The apartment was quiet as Feemor and Obi-Wan stood there, both contemplating the consequences of their inaction.

"This is bad," the apprentice said at length.

Feemor inhaled, and then exhaled. "I should go after her," he said. He did not move.

A tense pause. "We'll have to tell her now, one way or another," Obi-Wan said. One way or another. As if there were 'another'. Obi-Wan knew exactly what was happening across the residential wing, and he was trying very hard not to think about it. Against his better judgement, he tried to imagine Master Dooku's reaction to learning of Ben's origins, and found that he couldn't.

"I should have told her ages ago," Feemor lamented quietly. Obi-Wan looked at him.

"It's not your fault," he told the older man. "Ben or I should've told her. We should've agreed to tell her at some point a long time ago."

"It doesn't matter," Feemor insisted. "I'm her master. I should've said something ages ago, no matter what either of you said. No offense."

"None taken."

Feemor sighed and put his head in his hand. "I'm a coward."

We both are, Obi-Wan thought. Perhaps Ben was the brave one. But Dooku? As he had that thought, there was a disturbance in the Force, a cresting wave moving downstream from a great epicenter some ways off. Across their bond, Obi-Wan could feel Qui-Gon's frustration radiating in panicked waves. He clenched his jaw, and hoped that Ben had gambled wisely.

"Do you know," Dooku said, staring at some point on the far wall, one hand stroking his trimmed silver beard, "in all my long years, I never dreamed I would meet a time traveller."

Ben chuckled halfheartedly, looking down at the floor. "To be honest, master, neither did I."

The silence was unbearable. Ben sat there unmoving, staring at the carpet for one minute, two, or maybe ten thousand, before eventually daring to look up. He was surprised and slightly alarmed to find that Dooku was already looking at him.

"You look quite different with a beard," the older man decided, leaning back in his seat. He frowned silently, face twitching as a series of questions paraded themselves across his brain, each as weighty and important as its predecessor. Frown still in place, he asked, "Why are you telling me this? Why now?"

Ben frowned, and shifted in his seat. "It's- It's not-" His voice cords failed him momentarily, offering
airy squeaks in place of words. He cleared his throat and settled on an unhappy, "It's rather complicated.

Dooku sighed, the sort of sigh heaved by a man who'd spent a lifetime learning all the different definitions of the word 'complicated'. "Ah," he said, and waved a hand toward a tall cabinet near the kitchen, where he kept his stash of drinks. Two glasses and a bottle of brandy floated from their places and set themselves on the low table between Dooku and his guest. The bottle opened itself and poured equal portions into the two tumblers. "I think this may call for something a little stronger than wine," he said, and took up his own glass with as much grace as ever. When Ben looked closely, he thought he could see the glass shaking in his hand.

"When we spoke yesterday," Ben started, not touching the offered drink. "You were right about one thing. These are dark times. And they are going to get worse." Dooku looked up at him sharply. "I lived through it all once. The Jedi Order fell, along with the Republic. The Dark Side won. I was killed by the Sith. And now, I've been sent back to make sure that none of it can happen again."

Dooku stared at him. He held the look for a few moments, and then lifted his glass of brandy to his lips. "Oh," he said mildly, eyebrows high. He took a sip. "Is that all." After another generous drink from the glass, Dooku closed his eyes and asked, "And how is your… task proceeding, thus far?"

Ben had not anticipated him taking it this well. Feeling vulnerable and unprepared, Ben said, "Well, that's why I've decided to tell you. I need your help."

"With what?"

"With…" he realized that he could not explain Sifo Dyas without first explaining a great many other things. "Perhaps I ought to start at the beginning," he said.

At that moment, the door slid open with a loud hiss. Ben and Dooku whipped their heads around to see Qui-Gon Jinn framed in the doorway, looming. He stepped inside.

"Qui-Gon," Dooku said, sounding surprised. "Hello."

Qui-Gon was silent. He glared at Ben, eyes frantic. Ben looked back at him with careful nonchalance.

"Master Kenobi," Qui-Gon greeted, voice low.

Ben straightened his back ever so slightly and stiffened his gaze. "Master Jinn," he said.

Yan looked back and forth between the two with interest. He wondered privately how he'd never seen it before: the authority Qui-Gon naturally assumed when they were together, the quiet defiance in Ben's eyes when he tilted up his chin, the fact that they could carry on whole conversations - and arguments - in complete silence. "Please," he interrupted what was no doubt a rousing interrogation and gestured to a chair. "Qui-Gon, sit down." He waved over another tumbler and poured his old apprentice some brandy. "Master, uh…" He glanced at Ben meaningfully. "...Obi-Wan here, was just telling me a rather interesting story." He looked at Qui-Gon to gauge his reaction. It had been decades, but he could still read the man's expressions like a book. "But I assume you already know about that. How long have you known?" Dooku asked.

Qui-Gon's eyes slid over to his master with thinly veiled aggravation. "Longer than you," he said, sharply. Ben winced. Dooku raised one eyebrow.

"Please, Master Kenobi," He turned his attention back to his friend, his grandpadawan? The time traveller. "Continue."
No sooner had Ben drawn a breath than the door opened once again. Aola Tarkona stood just outside. She peeked in.

"Aola?" Qui-Gon straightened. "Is there something you need?" He asked, in the way that Masters asked when they wanted to politely dismiss their apprentices.

"I want to know what's going on," Aola said plainly.

"You ought to go find your master," Qui-Gon said.

This was going far differently than how Ben had envisioned it. "No," he put out a hand, and sighed. He had not planned on having an audience, but then again… The Force worked in mysterious ways. His fear waxed and waned. "No, Aola, please, come in. You need to hear this as well."

"Hear what?"

"You've not told her, either, I assume," Dooku observed, running a finger along the edge of his glass. Ben ignored him.

"I shall start at the beginning," he reiterated. He was looking at his hands, and could not see how Dooku watched him so carefully, nor how Qui-Gon glared at Dooku, nor how Aola had her brow screwed up in concentration, eyes fixed on him. Three representatives of three generations of Jedi gathered to hear the words of a fourth, the one out of his time. "My real name is Obi-Wan Kenobi. Seven years ago, I travelled back in time - to this time - from a future that I now seek to amend."

Aola gasped softly. A muddle of emotions flooded through the Force, but Ben took a deep breath, willed himself to overcome, and continued to speak.

He did not disclose everything about the past. He did not discuss the future in depth. There was nothing of Anakin, of Dooku, of Palpatine. He mentioned that there had been a massive war; he discussed the rise of the Sith without using names. He even talked about his hermitage in the Outer Rim, and his death. And then he talked about how he'd arrived here, how things had changed in the seven years he'd been Jedi Master Ben Kenobi, and not just Old Ben.

"But things have changed too much now," Ben told the group. He still had not looked up at anyone, but his audience remained rapt to his story; they watched him as if there existed no one else in the world. "I cannot hope to proceed on my own and meet with success. I can't keep my identity or my cause secret from everyone anymore. I need help. I need all of your help." He glanced up at Dooku, and met with a surprisingly soft expression on the man's face. "Your help especially, grandmaster."

He'd never had opportunity to call Yan that. The word tasted strange, full of longing for something that had never been.

The group was silent. Qui-Gon leaned back in his seat, arms crossed and brow furrowed in deep thought. He had not heard Ben's story told all at once before, and he'd never heard details of the war. He did not understand exactly why Ben needed Dooku's help, but it was impossible to say anything about it. Ben was a Jedi master. Moreover, this was Ben's secret to tell. And yet, Qui-Gon could not repress that small corner that insisted he must have some say in the matter. Ben was - or had been in some reality - Qui-Gon's apprentice. Moreover, Dooku was Qui-Gon's old teacher. If there was anyone in the galaxy who knew how wily and how ruthlessly cunning this man could be, it was Qui-Gon. He could hardly conceive of what Dooku could do with the knowledge of Ben's identity. He could ruin everything, if he wanted to. Did Ben really trust Dooku that much? Certainly, he trusted Dooku more than Qui-Gon did. Then, there came a more humbling thought: did Ben know Dooku better than he did?

Next to Qui-Gon, Aola was frozen in her place. Unusual for her, she had remained completely still
through the entire story, eyes fixed on Ben, eyebrows drawn down in fierce attention. She said nothing. She asked nothing. She only stared, as if studying him for the first time.

Dooku was, despite all of the world-shattering revelations, the most composed of all. "Who knows?" He asked.

"You. Qui-Gon. Aola, now," Ben said. "Obi-Wan, of course. Feemor," which made Aola's eyes widen in surprise, "the Council - though they don't know the details. The only person who knows everything is Mace Windu."

Dooku nodded, processing this information stoically. "And what help might I offer you?" He asked.

Ben thought about it for a moment. He finally reached for his neglected glass of brandy and took a drink. "Master," he glanced at Qui-Gon, "Aola." It was hard to look her in the eye; he knew she was comparing him to Obi-Wan. "Could you give me a moment alone with Master Dooku, please?"

After a brief hesitation, Qui-Gon stood, fixing Ben with a hard glare. "Come along, Aola," he said softly, putting his hand on her shoulder to direct her out of the room. Aola stood and followed her grandmaster, casting one last look over her shoulder as they left. The door hissed shut.

"Last week, you and I discussed my mission to Alaris Prime," Ben said, businesslike. "You asked if there had been any excitement aside from the gundarks and Wookiees. I said no."

"Yes," Dooku agreed, tone anticipating a crucial conjunction.

"I lied."

"Ah."

"The Trade Federation has set up illegal, unauthorized caches of merchandise in at least one sector of the moon - though I personally suspect there are far more."

"That explains a great deal," Dooku said. He sounded actually pleased to hear the news. "The Senate has been buzzing about the Federation ever since you got back, but I couldn't make the connection, and no one seemed to know. So," he took a drink. "What sort of merchandise merits lies, classification, and tabled reports?"

It was refreshing to speak with someone who could follow the complex web without prompting. "Battle droids," Ben told him. "Thousands of them."

Dooku's eyebrows rose, and his glass paused halfway to his mouth. "Battle droids?" He repeated, voice shaded with incredulity. "What in the galaxy for?"

"For a war," Ben said plainly. "The Sith plan to start a war between the Republic and an enemy of their own making. They've already started amassing armies for both of their players."

"Two sides? But why..." Dooku trailed off, and slowly, realization dawned. "Oh, now that's..." He couldn't help but smile. Dooku had always been too intelligent for his own good. He admired intricacy and cunning even in his greatest enemies. "That is... an incredibly clever plan, actually," he said, stroking his beard.

"And it worked rather well for them last time," Ben said, with none of the affection Dooku seemed to harbor for a plan well executed. "But this time, I know better."

"So you do." Dooku continued to ponder. "So they've tapped the depth of the Trade Federation's
coffers for one side of the board, and you've dragged them out into the light." His eyes glinted, calculating, the look of a chess master introduced to a game in progress. "And this second army. You know where to find them as well?"

"I do, but I have to prove it. Which is why I need your help. I believe you were once friends with a Jedi by the name of Sifo Dyas."

This sudden shift in subject seemed to throw a wrench into the complex mechanisms of Dooku's mind. He blinked, trying to reset his attentions. "Dyas?" He asked, frowning as he factored in this new information. "Yes, I know him quite well. What of it?"

"Dyas shares your… perspectives on the Council, on the darkening of the times, does he not?"

Dooku seemed saddened by the thought. "Yes, he's always been able to see farther into the future than I, too far for his own good. He tried to help them see it too, when he held a chair on the Council." The frown grew deeper and deeper, until Dooku's deep brown eyes were half obscured behind his eyebrows. "Why?" He shot a look up at Ben. "Are you saying he's involved?"

"Dyas is the one who ordered the creation of the second army."

Dooku was absolutely nonplussed. "What?"

"He foresaw the war," Ben explained. "He foresaw the rise of the Sith, and it terrified him. In his fear, he's sought out to equip the Jedi Order and the Republic with an army to combat the threat."

Dooku's face was drawn taught with sadness and disbelief. "That's not the Sifo I know," He said, softly. "Why… he would've thrown a fit. He would've pulled strings and broken the code, and maybe even have left. But he wouldn't build an army." He mulled over the problem in his mind. "Unless… unless someone else gave him the idea."

"Or just put it straight into his head." It was a sickening, horrible weapon that Ben knew well. He thought of Anakin, and his sleepless nights spent agonizing over Padme. He closed his eyes. "The Sith can do that. Jedi who experience visions are… particularly susceptible." Ben let that sink in. "They do not wish to fight us directly. They don't have the numbers."

"They seek to rip us apart," Dooku concluded.

"Yes. In our minds, or, if we allow them to draw us to war, in our hearts. The war will ground our ideals to dust. We cannot let that happen."

Dooku nodded. "You want to expose this army, then,"

"Yes. Ever since I returned from Alaris Prime, Master Windu and I have been attempting to find leads on Sifo Dyas' location and movements over the past few years. Unfortunately, we have been completely unable to do so."

Dooku was not surprised. "He was a secretive man - paranoid, even." Because of the Sith, perhaps? He sighed. "I suppose this is where I come in."

"Yes. I… we," he skirted around the fact that Mace Windu had given him explicit instructions to not involve Yan Dooku in this particular affair, "need you to use whatever avenues, whatever connections you may still have with Master Dyas to hunt him down and follow the trail to this army."

"I see." Dooku began mentally filing through his arsenal, picking up loose threads and weaving them
into various potential plans. "I suppose you already know where it is," he said, envying Ben's foresight, "this army."

"Not exactly. Everything has changed, moved forward." Ben huffed. "I don't even know how many are finished yet."

Something about that phrase sounded odd. "How many what?"

"Clones."

"Clones?" Dooku frowned. "Of a sentient?"

"Yes, of a human, a bounty hunter, actually, goes by the name of Jango Fett."

"Fett?" Dooku spat the name as if it burned. Ben looked at his grandmaster with with considerable surprise.

"You know him?"

"He's a Mandalorian," Dooku said. "He's a ruthless fighter. He was one of the ones on Galidraan. He killed Jedi for the fun of it."

Ben did not know what to say. This was entirely new information. He thought of Rex, and Cody, and Wolffe, and Fives, and all the others who shared a face with Jango Fett. He thought of that day on Utapau, when he'd fallen from a cliff face, nearly incinerated by Republic canonfire on the way down. It was rather ironic new information. "Oh," he said aloud.

"But that doesn't make any sense," Dooku said, brain's mechanisms firing up again, running at full speed. "Dyas wasn't on Galidraan. I never told him much about it. Nearly all the Jedi who would know the man are dead by now. What possessed him to choose Fett?"

Ben shrugged. He had no idea, and frankly, it was a problem for another time. "I'm not sure, but the fact of the matter is, he did choose Fett, and if we don't hunt him and the cloning facility down soon, there will be a lot more people - millions - of military-grade Mandalorians to deal with."

Dooku fell quiet for a moment. He rubbed his beard furiously, mind organizing and reorganizing everything he thought he knew. "I've only heard whispers of cloning technology. Where in the galaxy have they found a cloner willing to create an entire army?"

Ben sighed. There was the rub: he knew, and he didn't. "I can tell you that it's on a planet called Kamino, which is in the Outer Rim."

"Kamino..." Dooku squinted in thought, and shook his head. "I've never heard of it. Where is it?"

"Unfortunately, that's what I can't tell you. It's been ages since I've been there, and I never memorized the coordinates." He sighed. "Never thought I'd need them again. All records of the planet have been erased from the Archive maps."

"Erased?" The idea was unthinkable. The Jedi Archives was the most expansive collection of memory in the Republic. "By whom?"

"Sifo Dyas, I suspect."

"How would he do that? He'd have to be an Archivist - or a Councilor, but he lost his seat ages ago."

"Yes," Ben had thought long on the problem. Fortunately, his experience as a former Councilor had
given him insight into an extremely simple, maddening answer: "I suspect it is because the Council is complacent and never remembers to change access codes. I'm from decades in the future, and my codes still work, if it tells you anything." It had been his key to the basement levels for years.

Taking a break from their topic, Dooku took a moment to smile in surprise. "You were on the Council?"

Ben flashed a grin. "Yes. I still haven't told Qui-Gon about that, actually."

Dooku laughed, his unasked question answered. "Well done," he added. He stroked his beard some more, eyebrows drawn in perspective angles as he worked through the problem. "There's one other thing," he said after a while, "how is this army being funded? The Sith cannot possibly fund two armies from one source. Cloning must be horribly expensive, especially on such a scale. Who is paying for it?"

Ben chuckled. This fact was a particularly biting reality. "The taxpayers of the Galactic Republic," he said brightly.

"Pardon?"

Ben nodded. "I've looked into it. This past year, when the Senate passed the annual budget, they set aside twelve trillion credits for 'Genetic Studies'. The year before it was eight trillion, and the year before that, five. All of that money has been put into what has been labeled a medical science grant, but technically, under the conditions of the grant, the cloning of sentient lifeforms qualifies as a medical expense," Ben explained. "And if some of the spare change were to be used for... oh, say, military training of those clones, it would be carried out in the strictest of experimental environments, with observations and reports all neatly recorded and going toward the betterment of science." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "And in between the hundreds of thousands of other initiatives passing across the floor, no one's sniffed out the dubious clauses."

Dooku was horrified. "The Senate? The Sith have a hold there?"

It was impossible to overstate how right he was. "Why do you think I spend so much time there?" Ben said. Dooku sat back. Things were far more serious than he'd anticipated. "But if we can find Dyas, we can pull ahead of their careful planning."

Dooku nodded briskly, moving past his surprise. "Of course," he said, features returning to their normal stony lines. He stared off into some mental plane where he could see a giant chessboard laid out before him. He surveyed his pieces. "I have a few ideas. I'll need a ship, and time."

Ben nodded. A thought hit him."And Council clearance," he said, subdued panic causing him to run a hand hard over his face. His whiskers prickled under the pressure.

Dooku frowned at him. "I take it you have not disclosed your plan to Master Windu," he said, disappointment leaking through.

"No. In fact... In fact he told me very specifically not to involve you."

Dooku was insulted. "Why?" He had always considered himself on amiable terms with the Master of the Order. As young and headstrong as Mace was, they were not a dissimilar sort.

Ben looked up at his grandmaster, weighing the consequences of lying and telling the truth. With Dooku, lying often only bred more lying. "I'm not happy to say it, Master, but... last time, you weren't exactly on our side."
Dooku seemed bewildered. "Whose side was I on?"

Ben could not bring himself to say the word. "You were one of the ones who planned this entire gambit," he said. "The armies. There's a reason why you found it all very clever."

Perhaps the saddest part of watching Dooku's reaction was the sheer lack of surprise on his face. "I see," he said, after a lengthy pause. "And Mace knows your entire history, and he does not trust me."

"No."

Dooku watched Ben's face. "And you do?"

It was a good question, that, in days past, would have taken much longer to answer. Now, Ben was assured. "I do now."

Dooku glanced at the door. "Your master doesn't."

Ben thought of Qui-Gon's severe expression, the mental inquisition he'd faced when the man had walked through the door. "No. I need to speak with him," Ben said coldly.

While Ben looked away, Dooku studied him. "Did you get along with him?"

"What?"

"Before. Were you and Qui-Gon good friends?" He looked sad. "I would hope that he did better by you than I did by him, in that respect."

The admission gave Ben pause. Eventually, he said, "Not exactly good friends. We didn't have the chance. He was killed just before I became a knight. By the Sith."

Dooku actually sat back. "What?"

"It's all changed now," he reassured. "It can't happen like before." He thought on it, and added, "You know… I always thought that…"

"What?"

"Qui-Gon's death, in some way… pushed you to do what you did." It was a guess. He did not know for sure. But knowing Dooku now, and looking on Dooku then… "I'm sorry."

Dooku said nothing for several moments. Eventually, he cleared his throat and said, "The Jedi are not perfect. But they are the only family I've ever known." The tacit disavowal of his powerful relatives on Serenno surprised Ben. Dooku sighed, begrudgingly fond. "And so long as I'm following the direction of one who knows, even vaguely, what in the nine fiery hels they're doing," he nodded at Ben, who repressed a smile, "I suppose I shall have to suffer life here for a few more years." The tenuous thread of trust between them hardened into a secure tether.

"I shall have to talk it over with Master Windu," Ben said.

"I'll come with you."

"No, no," Ben put out a hand, "I really don't think that's a good idea."

"You misunderstand me, padawan," Dooku stood, and Ben was reminded exactly how tall the man was, taller even than Qui-Gon. "I am coming with you. I served on the Council when Mace Windu earned his first chair and made a complete mess of it. I will not be cut out of and reinstated into the
inner circle without voicing my dissent." He smiled, and despite the fact that he was - and never would be - Count Dooku, it was the same pointed, shrewd smile that Ben knew from years past, the one that said *I will take you down with minimal effort, and you won't ever see it coming.* It was, in essence, Makashi on a human face.

Ben was terrified and glad in equal measure. He'd never dreamed to have this man on his side. "Of course, grandmaster," he nodded politely, and stood. The top of his head came up to Dooku's chin. "We'll need you to start your investigation as soon as possible."

They left the apartment together, cloak and cape, for once, swaying to the same determined rhythm.

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Per Ben's expectations, Mace Windu was not happy. He was not happy with Ben for going behind his back, he was not happy to have been in the dark while Ben was spouting off his secrets, he was not happy to need to resort to Yan Dooku as pointman on this mission, and he was not happy to have to listen to the man's eloquent and unrelenting critique of Mace's automatic disregard - the last of which Mace sensed was entirely for show and Dooku's own enjoyment.

He was, though he would never say it, deeply relieved and perhaps even pleased that Yan Dooku had pledged himself to the Light. He was a Shadow still, and all shadows were grey. But he only cast a shadow because he was standing within the light. Mace made a mental note to edit their list of grey Jedi. That would be later, though, after he had put Ben back in his place and huffed a good deal about this misstep.

It would have been entirely accurate to say that Mace's lasting irritation was largely due to the hour. Ben had not approached Dooku until dusk, and they'd spoken well into the night, and had decided that since their mission was of dire galactic importance, they could wake the Master of the Order for a good ear lashing in the middle of the night.

By the time they sorted out the details, it was nearly dawn. Dooku was given a ship, provisions, and clearance to leave on 'independent research', a mission brief whose vague classification was enjoyed by Shadows and Councilors only. He was sent on his way just before breakfast, leaving Ben and Mace Windu as the two earliest occupants of the refectory at 0500 standard in the morning.

Mace had hours ago resigned himself to operating another day on the meager sleep he'd managed before Ben and Yan had awoken him. It was far from ideal, but as a Jedi, he had taken his frustration, balled it up in an angry wad, and tossed to the Force's therapeutic oblivion. He recalled his endurance training from days in Master Yoda's tutelage. "Have you slept at all, Ben?" he asked, blinking heavily and willing himself to appear as Masterly as possible as other Jedi began to file in for breakfast. Ben's alertness was enviable and alarming.

"Not at all."

"You should try it sometime. I end up in less trouble when you do." Mace stood and picked up his used dishes. Ben sighed over his tea. Somehow, no matter what he did, he was always on this man's bad side. Mace could guess at the man's thoughts. He looked over one shoulder. "And Ben?"

Ben looked up at him, anticipating another scathing remark.

"I'm glad to hear about Dooku. Change is finally starting to pay off, I suppose."

Ben's expression softened instantly. "Yes," he said, and smiled. "I suppose it is."

"You can tell me next time. At very least, before midnight."
Ben laughed. "I'll try," he said.

For once in his life, Mace Windu did not quote Master Yoda. "And I'll try to listen."

As soon as he left the refectory, Ben's energy finally began to wane. A seven hour deficit in his circadian rhythm was barrelling toward him, promising the sort of retribution only those over the age of thirty-five can understand. By the time he made it back to his apartment, he was prepared to shutter the windows, fall into bed, and ignore whatever duties he might be called upon to fulfill that day.

What he actually did was open the door, look inside, pause, and try not to look irritated. "Morning," he said, stepping around his visitor.

Upon seeing him, Qui-Gon's face twitched with concern. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

Ben sighed, and lowered himself into the couch across from his old master. "That bad?"

"You overdid it."

They sat in awkward silence. There was a tea tray on the table, with an empty bowl and an empty pot. Ben wondered how long Qui-Gon had been sitting here waiting for him. "How is Aola?" Ben asked. "I need to apologize to her."

"She and Obi-Wan were supposed to be practicing together today, but something tells me they'll find other things to talk about." Qui-Gon fixed him with a pointed look.

Ben looked up at him, exhaustion eroding his usual diplomacy. "What do you want me to say, Qui-Gon?" He shrugged. "I'm sorry? Because I'm not sorry, not one bit."

"You shouldn't trust Dooku so easily," Qui-Gon warned. "Telling him was incredibly risky."

"Yes, it was," Ben shot back, "and from whom do you think I learned risk management?"

Qui-Gon fumed. He pursed his lips and tried to temper his words, but they came out biting: "Do you have any idea how ruthless that man can be? You've spent the better half of a decade tight-lipped about everything you know for fear of the consequences, and then to bear your neck to him? You don't know how he could hurt you-"

"I know exactly how he could hurt me," Ben snapped venomously. "Don't you say I don't know what Yan Dooku is capable of, I know the very worst of it."

"You've known him a few years, Ben, I grew up under the shadow of that man, he's got a thousand tricks that he could turn on you if he sees fit, and you-"

"He was a Sith, Qui-Gon," Ben interrupted loudly. Qui-Gon shut up. "I told you I never knew him before. I meant I never knew him as a Jedi. He was a Sith, and the leader of an entire army in the Clone Wars. He killed Jedi. He even tried to kill Yoda. I spent three years of my life fighting him and every one of the underhanded, sadistic tricks he's never told you about." Ben paused to watch Qui-Gon's expression, but the man's face was frozen in complete astonishment. Ben brushed his brow and continued on, "He was... he was a Sith. That's the only way I ever knew him. And now... He's not dark, Qui-Gon. He's not, and I don't think you understand..." Ben had to pause, surprised to feel his throat constrict. Perhaps it was the lack of sleep. "You can't understand what that's like. No matter how many Sith I kill, no matter how many threats I avert... to see someone come back from the dead, not just physically, but as a person. I'm not sorry."

"Not anymore. But in another life, yes."

"I knew he was grey, he's always been. A true neutral. But…" Qui-Gon's eyebrows drew down, and Ben was surprised to see adolescent shades of hurt on his master's face. "He turned? Why?"

Ben had several theories. "Your death sealed it, I think," he said.

Qui-Gon looked up at him. "What?"

"He's resented the Council's decisions for years, you know that. He's made no secret of it. He left the Order while I was still an apprentice. Then you were killed. I suppose, in his eyes, the Council played a role in it. His grief drove him to the dark side."

Qui-Gon expression was still, and somehow boyish. "I don't understand," he said.

Ben felt a wave of pity wash over him. He'd known for a long time that there existed a considerable rift between his master and his grandmaster. He did not know its origins, nor did he think he could completely understand. He'd never spared a thought for how deeply the fault lines ran. "He cares about you, Qui-Gon. I know he doesn't show it, I know you don't see eye to eye, but… You were his apprentice. If you spend ten years or more of your life raising a child, no matter how insufferable they are, you can't help but growing attached to them. Believe me," he chuckled, "I would know."

Qui-Gon said nothing. After a while, Ben spoke again: "I trust you. And I trust him. Just… please, trust me."

After looking at the ground and examining his own heart for a lengthy stretch of silence, Qui-Gon spoke softly, "You're a far better man, a far wiser man than I am."

"Perhaps for now," Ben said, because maybe it was true in some ways. "But not more than the man I know you can be. Things change. Dooku is on our side. And that itself is a victory I never thought I'd live to see."

Qui-Gon nodded. Silence fell in the room, but it didn't last long; Ben's yesterday had turned into today with no break in between, and when he yawned, it was both cavernous and involuntary.

"You ought to rest," Qui-Gon told him. Ben shrugged indifferently; he'd had worse, and something was nagging his old master. Seeing that he had the opportunity, Qui-Gon asked, "The Clone Wars?"

"What?"

"You've mentioned a war a few times now, but you called it the Clone Wars just now."

"Ah. I told you on Alaris Prime that there were two armies in play?"

"Yes."

"The war was named after one of them."

"Clones?" Qui-Gon was taken aback. "Force."

"I know," Ben chuckled. "That's why I needed Dooku's help. He knows the right people to track them down."
"Of course he does." All Jedi knew people; it just so happened that Dooku knew considerably more people who were considerably more important. After some wrestling with his mouth, Qui-Gon added, "You're lucky to have him on task. Is there any way I can help?"

"Not right now," Ben admitted. "It'll be a waiting game until Dooku can find a new lead."

"Of course. In that case… you really ought to get some sleep." This time, Qui-Gon wasn't going to take a resigned shrug for an answer; he may not be this Obi-Wan's master any more, but the man was dead on his feet. Qui-Gon wanted to mull over this new information, but not until Ben promised to go to bed.

Ben laughed. "Yes," he said, bags under his eyes weighing down like lead, "I think I might just."

Qui-Gon left the apartment and went to walk in the gardens. The weights in his mind had shifted; some lifted, some pushed down. Some had been dug up from decades ago. He'd not bothered to meditate on them for years. He strolled through the greenery and listened to the fountains, and wondered to himself how he'd trained someone so wise when he himself was a fool. But all was the same in the Force, he was reminded. Being a learner once more was only a matter of course. And if he must be forced to relearn the way he looked at things, learning from Ben Kenobi was, all things considered, the best he could have hoped for.

True to what Qui-Gon had predicted, Obi-Wan and Aola were not practicing their saberwork. They were still in the apartment that Aola shared with Feemor, sitting on the sofa in the main room and talking, but not looking at each other. Feemor was gone for the afternoon, leaving the apprentices alone to their conversation. There was a lot to talk about.

Aola had her legs folded and tucked up under her chin, bare arms wrapped around them so her face rested between her knees.

"Is it weird?" She asked. "With him being… well, you?"

She had asked this question, in various forms, twice already. "I suppose it is a bit," Obi-Wan confessed, after telling her twice that it wasn't. "But the older I get, the more different we are from each other. So it's not as weird as it was at first."

"I suppose that makes sense." She tilted her head slightly, lekku shifting their weight across her shoulders like scales of thought. She fell quiet.

Obi-Wan was not used to an reserved Aola, and her new demeanor made him uncomfortable. He felt terrible for having caused it. "I'm sorry we never told you," he said earnestly. "We should have, years ago."

Aola said nothing for a while. Eventually, she shrugged. "I was mad, at first. I guess it made me feel stupid for not knowing, 'specially since Master Gard knew," She studied the fabric of her breeches up close on her knees and picked at a pull in the knit. "But… we talked about it. I've thought a lot about it." Ben hadn't been the only one to get little sleep last night. "And I'm glad I didn't know."

Obi-Wan frowned, and for the first time since they'd begun talking, looked at her. "Really?" He asked, "Why?"

She shrugged again, and looked up at him from the corner of her eye. "I never knew either of you until both of you were here," she explained. "If I had known that you were both… well, you, before, I would not have gotten to know either of you as… you. This isn't making any sense," she lamented. "You're Obi-Wan. He's Ben. But if I had known that he used to be Obi-Wan, I would've only ever
seen him as an old version of you, and I would only have seen you as a young version of him. And you're more than that." She frowned again. "Damnit, it still doesn't make any sense." She buried her face in her knees.

"I think I get it," Obi-Wan said, smiling, "and I'm touched. I have to say, I'm glad you know now."

"Me too." In a quiet show of forgiveness, Aola let herself fall over slightly to lean on Obi-Wan. He chuckled and leaned into her as well, head resting on her right lekku.

"Why do you think he wanted to tell Master Dooku?" She asked aloud. Obi-Wan frowned. He'd been turning the problem over in his mind for some time.

"I'm not sure," he said. "But I have a feeling it's really important."

"Do you think it's about the Sith?" She asked quietly.

"Most things that Ben does are, these days," Obi-Wan said with a sigh. "He says that things have begun to move quickly, faster than he'd anticipated."

Aola pulled herself into a tighter ball. "Do you think it'll be as bad as what Ben talked about? Like the last time?"

Obi-Wan had also wondered this before. Sitting there in the warmly lit apartment, enjoying the scents of Rylothian spices and caf that characterized the home of Feemor Gard and his padawan, Obi-Wan felt as though he were looking out into a storm from a safe haven and trying to predict where the lightning would strike next. It was impossible, so best settle down and enjoy the campfire while it lasted.

"Even if it is," he said in a voice far more assured than anything he felt in his heart, "the Force will be with us. That I know."

"Yeah," Aola agreed, shifting an arm away from Obi-Wan's bony elbow. "So will you," she poked him in the side. He laughed.

"All two of me," he said.

"No. You're one of a kind."
Chapter Notes

If you like this chapter you can thank en-shaedn, who encouraged me that a short, action-packed chapter might give a nice breather after all the exposition-heavy plot and melodrama that has become my modus operandi. Enjoy!

Dooku's mission carried on in silent urgency. No one, not even the Council, was sure of his movements or location at all times. He was gone for two weeks, and then three, and now over a month.

However, Jedi, even those trying to avert galactic war and genocide, did not hold their breath over things they could not control. Training continued even in Dooku's absence.

"Obi-Wan," Ben warned, arms crossed as he watched the match with an eagle eye, "a Jedi knight does not gloat."

Obi-Wan grinned, blue light from his saber reflecting off his teeth and giving his eyes a playful glint.

"A Jedi knight also knows how to block properly," Aola piped up, cutting in through Obi-Wan's defense to send the older apprentice barrelling awkwardly to avoid a hit, "padawan Kenobi,"

"Aola," Ben snapped. "That goes for you too." He shook his head and muttered softly to himself, "Honestly."

Senior padawanhood was a time of both focus and expansion. While apprentices were expected to deepen their understanding of the Force and refine their fighting style, they were also expected to do so outside of the tutelage of their own masters. Jedi Knights did not work in isolation, so the second half of apprenticeship was often used as an acclimation period, teaching padawans to work closely with other masters and knights. With Obi-Wan and Aola now both officially in this transitional period, Ben had been more than willing to tutor them in saberplay. Unfortunately, their comfort around Ben resulted in lax standards of decorum with each other.


"I was never this bad."

"We were all this bad, once," Qui-Gon corrected philosophically.

Ben sighed. "Our species is a ridiculous one."

They watched as Aola made a high backflip - completely unnecessarily, Ben thought - and came down, violet sabers spread to take on Obi-Wan from both sides. Obi-Wan somersaulted beneath her just in time. "To be fair," said Qui-Gon, "so is hers."

"Hmm," Ben thought about it. "Maybe it's just adolescence."

"As I said."
Ben glanced at him again, irked. "Have you come to take him off my hands?"

"Oh no," Qui-Gon put out empty hands in defense. "I am a lowly spectator, Master Kenobi."

"Ow!" Aola hissed involuntarily. Obi-Wan stepped back.

"Hit," he said.

Ben looked up, having seen the move from his peripheral vision. "That's a match," he announced, much to Aola's annoyance. He stepped toward the pair, eyebrows drawn in calculation. "You're both being far too extravagant with your moves. This is a dojo, not an acrobat's arena. Aola, that flip was entirely unneeded and would've only worked against you in a longer fight."

Aola bit her lip and nodded. The businesslike tone in Ben's words must've reminded them that they had enlisted the help not of Ben, but of Master Kenobi.

Ben continued, "Obi-Wan, if you spend all your time looking for a perfect time to strike, you'll forget you also have to block. You almost lost at least six times that I saw." He glanced at Aola. "Aola is a superior gymnast, but don't interpret that as a challenge."

Obi-Wan flushed slightly, but nodded. "Yes, Master," he muttered.

"Good. Now, go again, a single point bout." Ben stepped back again, arms still crossed. Obi-Wan and Aola took to their ready stances, nodded respectfully to each other, and launched into the fight.

Made aware of their mistakes, this fight was more deliberate than before. Neither of the combatants said anything as they darted back and forth, lightsabers thrumming. Between each strike they circled each other like panthers, Aola readjusting her grips on her sabers, Obi-Wan adjusting his footwork every time the threat shifted. At the last moment, he changed his grip to a lithe Makashi hold and leaped forward with a lighting-swift fleche. Aola knocked his blade away with one hand, but he was back on the offense as soon as she turned, his swing aiming for her stomach. She rolled out of the way and leaped up, tucking up her legs so his sideways swipe was made in vain, before falling back down on him with a diagonal strike. He made the block in time, but it was exceptionally close, a violet blade glancing past his face with centimeters to spare.

"Watch your upper guard," Ben said. Obi-Wan grit his teeth and carried on. Facing a jar'kai duelist with one saber was not impossible, but it was exceptionally difficult, especially with a duelist as flighty and nimble as Aola. The twi'lek padawan was indeed the superior gymnast, but Obi-Wan was the superior swordsman. With careful planning - and a good deal of blocking, too - Obi-Wan kept in the fight until he could spot a weak spot in Aola's otherwise relentless offense. Once offered his chance, Obi-Wan launched into her with remarkable speed, cutting past her defense to grab one saber arm by the wrist. At such close quarters, it was difficult for her to maneuver her other saber around to block in time, and Obi-Wan landed a sound hit to her side.

"Dammit," she hissed quietly. Ben chose to ignore the profanity. The two combatants disengaged their sabers, chests heaving for breath, and looked to their instructor.

"Very good. Obi-Wan," Ben said, face still stern, "waiting for an opportune moment should not detract from your defense. Aola, there's little you could have done there, at least with Ataru." He gave her a look and she nodded in understanding. "Knowing the weaknesses of your form is just as important as knowing its strengths. You must learn to compensate for them, or go into battle prepared to deal with the consequences, understand?"

Beside Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon's expression was grim. Aola considered the prospect within her own
imagination, and grimaced.

"Good," sad Ben, "take a break, why don't you? You've both done well."

The padawans bowed to the master and went the side of the dojo where there were towels and kegs of water.

"You are a relentless teacher, you know," Qui-Gon told Ben as the apprentices retreated. Ben shrugged.

"From a certain point of view."

Qui-Gon resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Instead, he shot Ben a glance and said, "Anakin?"

Ben nodded. Qui-Gon chuckled. "He was a menace," Ben explained, shaking his head, "I might as well have been training ten children, not one. I dare not imagine what he'll be like when he gets to the padawan dojos."

"And you'll be teaching him then, will you?" Qui-Gon quirked an eyebrow. Ben opened his mouth, and hesitated. He did not have time to find an answer, as a loud voice interrupted his thoughts:

"Aha! I thought I could hear the sound of arrogance floating in on the aircon," smiled a lanky newcomer as he came around the doorway, padawan braid swinging.

Obi-Wan looked up from his water. "Garen!" He grinned, tossing his plastiform cup away, "Takes one to know one, you insufferable rake. When did you get back from Malastare?" He went up to embrace his friend, and glanced beyond Garen to the much shorter, assured redheaded female who was coming up behind him. He bowed hastily. "Master Rhara," he said, "I didn't see you there."

She pulled her lips taught in a contained, amused smile. "Padawan Kenobi," she nodded, "silver tongued as ever, I see." Obi-Wan blushed. Clee Rhara chuckled and moved past him to greet the other masters.

"Garen! You can't run ahead like that!" Bant appeared in the doorway after them, walking in serene strides alongside her master, Kit Fisto.

Garen turned away from Obi-Wan and made a face at her. "I said 'I'll race you', what did you think I was going to do?"

"The Temple halls are not meant for racing," Bant insisted, trying to exude a serene Jedi air as she walked. Kit Fisto, a notoriously laid-back master, seemed amused by this.

"She would never say such things if the halls were filled with water," he said, which made Bant scoff. He glanced up at Garen and Obi-Wan. "But you two know it better than anyone; people still talk about that fountain swimming incident, years ago." The boys chuckled and Kit turned to his apprentice. "How old were you, again?"

Bant drew in a breath and sighed it out again, vexed. "Thirteen, I believe."

"Hmm," Kit smiled widely and eyed the older apprentices, enjoying this inside joke. He looked past Obi-Wan's shoulder. "Padawan Tarkona, it's good to see you. Planning on handing Muln's backside to him again?"

Aola smiled when Garen scoffed. "Only if he lets me," she replied, throwing away her cup. Garen shook his head.
"Oh no," he said, marching to meet her on a dueling square, "I have a score to settle with you, and you are not getting a singular slice of this." He gestured to his entire person.

"Careful," Obi-Wan warned, "She nearly took a hunk out of me, she'll make mincemeat out of you."

Garen shot him a sour look, and glanced at their mutual Mon Calamari friend. "Bant, slice him up for me, will you?"

She smiled brightly. "Alright," she agreed, a bit too cheerily for Obi-Wan's taste.

"Oi!"

Bant laughed, and went to stake a claim on an empty fighting square. Obi-Wan followed her, walking backwards so he could tell Garen, "Might want to cover up any important bits, Garen," he gestured vaguely at the other man's body, "armory is that way."

Garen turned away from Aola to reply, deadpan, "Is it? Well, I'd borrow your suit, but some of it's far too small for me."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "You always do overestimate yourself."

Behind Obi-Wan, Bant Eerin's globular eyes rolled in massive, exasperated circles. Aola regarded the males impatiently. "Shall we leave you two alone?" she asked, loudly. The boys looked at her in unison. "The only bits either of you have got large enough to merit armor are your massive egos. Now, are you ready or not?"

Obi-Wan and Garen gave each other parting scowls, while Bant smiled at Aola appreciatively. With the fierce, remorseless competitiveness of friends, they fell into their respective duels.

"You know," said Kit Fisto, approaching Qui-Gon, Ben, and Clee, "this is why I always knew I wanted a female padawan."

"They'll grow out of it," Ben defended, and ignored Qui-Gon's amused expression. "Eventually."

Kit grinned. "We shall hope so." Then, of Qui-Gon, he asked, "You should be getting ready to wash your hands of yours, shouldn't you?"

"Just about. All in good time."

"Of course. He does you proud, Master Jinn." They all cast a look back at Obi-Wan, who was, all immature jokes aside, performing beautifully against his clanmate.

"I do hope we have not upset their training regiment," Clee Rhara spoke up, eyeing Ben.

"No, quite the opposite," Ben assured her, "they've been fighting no one but each other so far, the variety is good for them." They watched the duels for a moment, and Ben was gratified to see that his younger self was holding his defense much better than before.

"Aola has made admirable progress as well," Clee nodded, and laughed. "Garen can always be taken down a peg or two. It's good for him. Her master must be very proud - where is he?"

Qui-Gon opened his mouth to answer, but from behind him, a voice answered, "Just arrived, actually," Feemor came up between Ben and Qui-Gon. He raised his eyebrows at the two duels going on on the opposite side of the dojo. "Quite the rounds you've put them through, Ben," he commented. Ben shook his head and raised empty hands.
"They've started this on their own," he said. Feemor laughed.

"Aye, so they have. Youth."

They all chuckled. Kit Fisto, who was arguably the youngest of their group - when Ben's true age was taken into consideration - stood up a little straighter. "Youth indeed," he chuckled. Expression disguised by unreadable black eyes, it was difficult to tell what he was thinking. At length, he said carefully: "What do you say, Master Kenobi, would you like to show these younglings how it's really done?"

The question took Ben by surprise. He was suddenly aware that four sets of eyes swerved on him as one, waiting, extremely curiously, for his answer. It was no real secret that Ben Kenobi did not spar. He fought with Qui-Gon, and Feemor, and their respective apprentices, and no one else. Ever the incident with Pong Krell, Ben had very intentionally avoided duels.

But, Ben realized, that had been years ago. Seven whole years. He was more comfortable in his own skin, now. He'd proven that not all Grey Jedi would fall. He'd changed things, shone light into the darkness of his own memories. And surely, there ought to be some reward in that. "Do you know," he said, smile slowly growing, "I think that would be rather fun."

The Nautolan beamed, and of all Jedi, Kit had an incredibly handsome, infectious smile. A lively wave of competitive energy bounded across the Force. Ben and Kit passed by the apprentices to take up a spot beyond them.

"Oi, Ben," Feemor called out, and Ben turned to look at him. "Winners face off?" he said, and patted Qui-Gon's shoulder. The elder man looked down at the brown hand and sighed.

"Oh dear."

Ben smiled and nodded.

"Come on then, master," Feemor smiled at his old mentor, "it's been far too long."

"Master Rhara, would you care to arbitrate?" Qui-Gon asked as Feemor led him away.

"My pleasure, Master Jinn."

A single senior dojo wasn't usually so busy at one time. With a capacity to accommodate thousands of Jedi talents every day, the Temple's training levels had more than enough space to allow each duel its own arena. But in the confined space, the duels fed into each other's competitive energy, and soon there was an impromptu tournament in the works, masters fighting other masters, padawans dueling padawans. "The best of you has no hope against the best of us," Clee reminded the upstarts from across the dojo after Kit defeated her - of course, Ben had defeat Kit just previously.

Obi-Wan, who had just claimed an easy victory against Garen, smiled impishly. "The Force is a powerful ally, Master Rhara. We shall see."

"He's going to be as bad as you, you know," the short pilot accused Qui-Gon. The taller man smiled.

"Oh, I know," he said, replete with chagrin and pride.

And so the tournament proceeded, continuing in three-point bouts, winners fighting winners and losers fighting losers for second chance slots. It would have been a short affair, but the energy of the room was drawing newcomers: masters and senior apprentices training nearby were drawn in by the commotion and all too happy to join the fray. Some solitary knights came in as well, the younger
ones allying with the padawans whilst the older ones pressed their luck against the Order’s best.

On the younger side of the dojo, Obi-Wan and Aola were both having a fun afternoon. Aola was disqualified first, but she was not put out in the slightest, and became one of the most enthusiastic - and most vocal - spectators.

Obi-Wan was another story entirely. It was impossible to overstate how well he fared against his peers, plowing through matchups as if he were practicing katas. However, true to Kenobi form, he was so polite and self-deprecating to everyone (except perhaps Garen) that no one said anything about it. He continued on, an undefeated and polite juggernaut mixed in with the other matches. But when he started taking on Jedi knights - and winning - his fellow apprentices started raising their brows and muttering to each other.

Obi-Wan himself was somewhat baffled by the whole thing. He'd been training primarily with Qui-Gon, Dooku, and Aola for several years, and had not realized exactly how much he'd improved. The same victories that made his peers mutter and shake their heads in astonishment caused Obi-Wan to blink in confusion. Was that it? He thought to himself more than once. Qui-Gon had been saying more and more often that he was an excellent swordsman, but secretly, Obi-Wan had always thought it was his master's sentimentality coming through. Dooku certainly never said anything of the sort. It began to occur to Obi-Wan that, perhaps, he really was getting good. But the thought made him uncomfortable, so he tossed it away and focused on fighting.

On the other side of the dojo, Ben had the pleasure of facing off against Alara Dahn, the Togrutan knight who'd accompanied him to Herdessa so many years ago. She'd been a freshly minted knight when they'd met, but was now accompanied by a young Kiffar girl, whose blue tattoos accentuated the lingering baby fat on her face.

"You're holding back," Alara accused halfway through their fight, when Ben had let her score the first hit.

"Your apprentice should see her Master in the better light," he said. It was not an uncommon courtesy given to new masters while in the company of their padawans.

Alara laughed. "Not beside you, Master Kenobi. I'm afraid I've told her too many stories. She's helbent on learning your style of Soresu."

"Is she now?" Ben was surprised and flattered in equal measure. "Well then, she'll want to watch closely." Ben landed the next two hits in a sound - but, he was proud to say, not easy - victory.

The newcomers were arriving and leaving so quickly it was as if the event had been broadcasted to the entire Temple. In a way, it had. News of the sudden tournament spread from the dojo to classrooms and all the way to the council chambers, by word of mouth and through the Force itself.

"What are the standings, then?" Vokara Che landed on the bench beside Qui-Gon Jinn, who started slightly at her sudden appearance. She bit into a large fruit - her lunch, apparently - and surveyed the busy room.

"Ben's topping off the Master's side, though he's got some strong competition. Obi-Wan is leading the padawans, I'm happy to say. Last I saw, he and Quinlan Vos were about to go toe-to-toe."

"Oh, now that's a pair, I've arrived just in time."

"You're here to compete?" Qui-Gon asked, eyeing her food dubiously.

Vokara seemed to find this humorous. A lightsaber hung at her belt as it had since the day she'd been
knighted, but in all his acquaintance with her, Qui-Gon had never once seen her use it. "Don't be ridiculous, Jinn, it wouldn't be fair. I have an intimate knowledge of all anatomies represented here today, including their weaknesses. You'd all be finished before you knew we'd started." She sucked back half a glass of water. Absently, Qui-Gon wondered if all healers were wont to inhale their food. "I am here as an impartial spectator."

"Will the Halls implode without you this afternoon?"

"We shall see if they do. Luna's on task," the Twi'lek finished off her food and dusted her hands. "It'll be a good exercise in crisis management for her. Besides, I wager there will be a few overzealous ones in this lot that I'll have to take care of. Maybe Ben will try to take someone's arm off again. That would be something."

"He's been doing rather well," Qui-Gon told her. "In fact, I think he might be having fun."

"I'm glad to hear it," and she was genuinely happy to see the progress Ben had made since the days when they met in her offices every week. Still... She narrowed her eyes at him. "It would still make things more interesting."

The maverick and the head healer laughed together. "It certainly would," Qui-Gon agreed.

Soon, there were junior padawans in their midst too, a whole classful of them, led into the margins of the arena by Cin Drallig. Their sabermaster pointed out different forms and moves to those closest to him, while others stood agog at the dazzling show.

It was when councilors started to appear that things got really interesting. Plo Koon, Yarael Poof, Saesee Tinn, and Adi Gallia edged their way into the competition, working their way up the brackets. Their apprentices found their own melees on the other side of the room.

Adi Gallia and Plo Koon were the only two councilors who Ben faced personally. Saesee and Yarael did not seem bothered by this; both of them had always been more focused on the academics of their path rather than the fighting. Their spectatorship did, however, compel both masters and padawans to push themselves even harder to impress their superiors.

Adi Gallia was first, and seeing her fight again was a bittersweet moment for Ben, who'd last seen her saber when he'd retrieved it from the site of her death. But she was alive now, alive and in her prime. Ben was surprised at how easily he met her stroke for stroke; she had always boasted decades more fighting experience than him, and he'd even trained under her tutelage as a padawan. But now, in his second lifetime, it was Ben who held the upper hand. He had just as many years' practice under his belt as she did and his unusual style of Soresu gave him the element of surprise.

When he'd defeated her with a neat cut at her shoulder, Plo Koon had stepped right into the ring, playfully suggesting he'd avenge his fellow councilor.

Ben knew better than to underestimate Plo. He was still far older than Ben, all time travelling mathematics taken into account, and was exceptionally crafty.

"I have not seen you duel in quite some time, Master Kenobi," said Plo, swinging his saber in slow, preparatory arcs, "but Master Drallig tells me it is something to behold."

Ben nodded gratefully. "I must defer to the judgement of my betters, of course."

He did not know if Kel Dor could smile in the same sense humans understood the gesture, but if they could, Plo would be doing so with wicked glee. "Good!" the councilor said, cheerfully, "Listen to mine carefully, then."
Form V, particularly in the skilled and energetic hands of Plo Koon, was a force to be reckoned with. More than once, Ben found himself physically driven back by Plo's strikes as the Kel Dor landed a saber blow and a Force-push as a single strike. Ben's saving grace was, as ever, his defense. Their matchup was one of the longest on the masters' side, and actually compelled many padawans to pause in their own tournament to watch.

Plo landed the first point, but with much patience, Ben was able to wait until the energetic Form V wore Plo down and offered small but exploitable mistakes. With quick bursts of Ataru grace, Ben claimed a victory that took even Plo by surprise. A ripple of shock ran about the room, some masters even sounding offended by the councilor's defeat. Plo himself accepted it gracefully.

"We must all defer to the judgement of our betters," huffed the Kel Dor as he bowed and shook hands with Ben. "And unfortunately, I now owe Cin Drallig twenty credits."

Ben laughed with him.

Eventually, the duels began to dwindle, leaving more spectators than participants. There were eight duelists left on either side, and then four, and then two, and then, the victor of the masters and the victor of the apprentices met in the middle of the room for the final match.

"Oh, now this is going to be good," Garen Muln grinned like a lothcat.

The opponents bowed to each other.

"Master Kenobi."

"Padawan Kenobi."

Out of the corner of his eye, Obi-Wan could see Feemor, Aola, and Qui-Gon standing together. Aola's grin was wild with excitement, eyes darting between the two Kenobis - now more alike in her mind than they had ever been - eager to see the fight unfold.

Ben looked past Obi-Wan to the door, where he was surprised to see Masters Windu and Yoda slip into the room.

Yoda laughed at the scene before him and stepped up to the edge of the fighting area. In unspoken accord, the Jedi around him all looked to their grandmaster for a word.

"Work in curious ways, the Force does. Interesting this will be." He waved a claw. Standing behind him, even Mace Windu was smirking.

"You ready?" Ben asked his younger self. Obi-Wan was very nervous, he could see, but the padawan would never show it.

"Are you?" He shot back. Ben smiled, and launched.

As much as the two Kenobis had trained together in the past, they very rarely crossed blades. They had dueled each other in earnest once before, shortly after Ben had arrived in this time, but then Obi-Wan had only been fifteen. Now, at twenty-two, he was a different person and a different opponent entirely.

In the Clone Wars, Ben had been through more than his fair share of saberfights. Maul, Ventress, Dooku, Opress, Grevious, even the separatist MagnaGuards, if you could count them. Of all these duelists, Yan Dooku had been the only one to ever actually defeat Obi-Wan Kenobi. Ben was reminded of this fact as he fought his younger self, and another fact as well: Dooku had been training
With a parry that Ben had taught him and a wicked Makashi strike, Obi-Wan landed the first point against his older self. Ben was nonplussed.

"A point to Kenobi - er, Padawan Kenobi," called Cin Drallig from the sidelines. Quiet murmuring amongst the crowd.

Obi-Wan dared to look smug. Ben realized he must've looked astonished. "Savor it while you can," he advised, and let the padawan lead them back into the fight.

Ben's mastery of Soresu had led him through the tournament thus far. His defense was second to none in the Order; a solid, indefatigable wall. But Makashi, seldom-studied and rarified as it was, had always been his weakness. Dooku was the only real master of the form, as far as Ben was aware, but here Obi-Wan was, using his saber as a scalpel to slice away at the finest chips in Ben's armor. If Ben made the slightest mistake, Obi-Wan was there. He'd been chiding Obi-Wan earlier in the day for his sluggish guard, but now the tables had turned, for every time Ben parried Obi-Wan's lightsaber, it glanced off centimetres from his skin. After one too many close calls, Ben switched his form, using one of the only Vapaad moves he knew. The distracting change was enough to let him land a hit on Obi-Wan's left shoulder.

"A point to the master," Cin Drallig called. "Tied even."

The muttering grew excited once again. It would've been boring if the master had dominated the fight straightaway, and it would've been pitiable if the apprentice had done so. But the pair were evenly matched. Given Ben's superior experience, it should not have worked, but it did: endurance pitted against precision, patience against impulse, defense against offense. Their familiarity with each other was enough to make their differences more threatening.

The last point took the longest. Both growing tired, Ben and Obi-Wan both reverted to the style they both knew deepest in their bones. Ataru was an acrobatic fighting language, and the latter half of their spar spread to the edges of the dojo, occasionally causing spectators to duck.

"Watch yourself," Ben reprimanded when Obi-Wan nearly hit a youngling.

"Speak for yourself," Obi-Wan huffed, deflecting a hit.

Obi-Wan's footwork was nearly on par with Ben's, these days, which was particularly frustrating when the twenty-year age gap between their knees began making itself known. As Ben tried to coax his joints into holding on a little while longer, Obi-Wan launched forward, sword hand in front, left hand extended back in a fencer's pose. Ben only just swung in time, dashing the blade away from his leg. On the spot where it would have landed, the scar left by Dooku's blade decades ago burned. He barely had time to register the flashback before Obi-Wan was rebounding his offense on Ben's unguarded right side. The master dashed in sloppily to guard himself. In a move of last resort, he stepped on top of Obi-Wan's foot and threw his elbow into his gut.

Obi-Wan bent over himself without taking eyes off Ben. He rolled through the pain, adjusted his grip, and feinted to the right.

The grip change was his undoing. It was, perhaps, one of the very, very few weaknesses of Makashi in a duel. Unlike Ben's Soresu grip, which was solid, planted in the middle of his saber, Dooku had encouraged Obi-Wan to adopt a Makashi grip, placed further back toward the pommel. It gave a fighter's wrist a wider range of motion, and allowed greater leverage on the blade. Unfortunately, this leverage worked both ways.
Ben parried against Obi-Wan's first, second, third strike in one fluid, desperate motion. For a moment, the heat of the apprentice's blade was so close, Ben was sure he'd hear Cin Drallig call out the third strike. He did not, so Ben pressed forward, determined to end this before he lost. He feinted low, and when Obi-Wan went to block him, he caught the younger man's hilt with the tip of his saber and, with slight leverage against the metal, flicked it from his grasp. It deactivated and spun to the ground.

"Match point, Master Kenobi wins," Cin Drallig called. The room erupted in cheers, some claps, and a smattering of halfhearted "aww"s, from defeated padawans.

Obi-Wan smiled at his older self, shaking his head. "Of course," he shrugged, and bowed politely.

Ben was not smiling. He looked - and felt - winded. "You nearly had me there," he panted. Obi-Wan shook it off.

"Yeah, right."

"No, really," Ben said, and Obi-Wan met his gaze, smile fading into surprise. Ben shook his head, breathing more heavily than the apprentice was. "You very nearly had me." He smiled absurdly. He summoned Obi-Wan's saber to his hand and handed it over. "Well done." The master bowed.

Flushed with shock from the praise and the fight, Obi-Wan bowed back. He glanced at his master, who was beaming with pride. His eyes glanced also over the herd of Master Drallig's initiate class, who were watching him with unabashed hero worship.

The audience began to file out. "What a show!" Cin Drallig approached the victor and his young companion. "Talent must run in the blood. Honestly, it's a crime that you don't spar more, Master Kenobi," the sabermaster jibed, "forget padawans, you could teach us masters a thing or two."

Ben chuckled. "I'm flattered, Master Drallig," he said, still catching his breath.

"And Obi-Wan," the master turned to the younger Kenobi, "I've seen plenty of padawans focus in two forms, but Makashi and Ataru is a new one, even for me. It's remarkable what you've done there."

Obi-Wan was frozen in an uncharacteristically awkward haze. As a hot-headed, overconfident initiate, he'd grown up under the severe critique of Master Drallig. Although Cin had been outspokenly impressed with Obi-Wan's progress over the years, receiving his praise remained a foreign sensation. "Thank you, Master. I do have the advantage of lineage in that respect," he demurred. "I'm sure I would never have managed it without Master Qui-Gon and Master Dooku's help."

"Of course, I've seen you working with Dooku. Very impressive." He nodded. "Well, I must get back to classes. Very well fought, both of you, you especially, Master Kenobi," he acknowledged the victor. Ben bowed. Cin turned as if to leave, then said, "And Obi-Wan?"

"Yes, Master?"

A half smile spread across Cin's face, laughter lines drawing it up into his cheek. "I'd like to duel you sometime. Got to prove to the initiates that I can still run with the best of them, yeah?"

"Of course," Obi-Wan began to reply robotically, but then his brain caught up with the implicit compliment. "Of course," he stammered, cheeks very quickly growing red. "Um," he was unable to compute a suitable reply in time for his mouth to use it, "Tha-thank you, master," he said, distinctly baffled. Cin Drallig drank up the response with a laugh.
"Well done, Obi-Wan," he turned and left.

"Ah, now you see, you've put poor old Jinn in an awkward position," Feemor approached the two as the crowds dispersed. "Which one is he supposed to congratulate first?"

"They both did very well," Qui-Gon said mildly, coming up to the group to stand by Obi-Wan. He put a hand on the padawan's back. "Very well indeed," he smiled. Obi-Wan could not catch a break from blushing red. It was the exercise, he told himself.

"That was amazing!" Aola was leaping as she made her way toward them. She hugged Ben first, and then moved on to Obi-Wan, who laughed at her exuberance but hugged her back. Bant and Garen were on their way over as well, both smiling, Garen throwing endearing obscenities at his friend.

The gaggle of padawans carted off their champion for convivialities, and Feemor laughed at their antics. He wiped his forehead on a thoroughly soaked sleeve and grimaced. "Ugh. If you'll excuse me, I did not escape so unscathed as some. The showers are beckoning." He slapped Ben on the shoulder as he passed by, smiling. "Well done, little brother."

Ben turned to smile back, "you as well," which Feemor accepted with a dismissive toss of his hand.

When Ben turned around, Mace Windu was making his way over. "Very well done, I'd say," he graced them with a rare smile.

"You missed out on all the fun," Ben accused the Korun master. "It would've been far more interesting with you in the mix," he said, and glanced at Qui-Gon. "I haven't seen you two face off since… oh, since I was a boy. I wonder who would win," he said with exaggerated interest. It was no secret to him that Mace Windu had once allowed Qui-Gon to win in order to impress Obi-Wan - much as Ben would have done for Alara earlier that day. Mace smiled. Qui-Gon affected not to understand the reference. Ben chuckled.

"Another time," Mace said. "I would have come earlier, but was otherwise occupied in the briefing rooms. It seems Master Dooku has found what we've been looking for."

Qui-Gon and Ben both straightened. "He's found Sifo Dyas?" Ben asked.

"Not as such. I told him we'd comm back when we had you in the room." He looked at Qui-Gon, somewhat apologetically. The taller man stood back, ready to back out of what was obviously a confidential conversation.

Ben glanced at his master. "No, let him come too," he decided. "It's high time he was brought up to speed on things. We'll need all the help we can get."

Pleasantly surprised, Qui-Gon leaned back into the circle of conversation. Mace merely nodded. "Very well. Follow me."

They met Master Yoda at the door and proceeded on toward the nearest turbolift. As they walked, Ben winced at his sore muscles. Yoda cast him a critical glance.

"Limping you are, Master Kenobi," he said. Ben sighed.

"I'm not as young as I once was."

"Hrumph," Yoda stood a little taller as he leaned on his gimer stick. "No excuse that is."
They packed into the lift, Ben squished in between Qui-Gon and Mace. "You know," muttered the Master of the Order in an aside, "you really ought to know better." Qui-Gon tried and failed to hide his smile. Ben sighed.
The Pawn

Chapter Notes

Playtime is over, buckle up.

Mace, Ben, Yoda, and Qui-Gon walked into the briefing room together. The rest of the High Council slowly trickled in, some just arrived from the impromptu tournament. Their competitive airs were gone, replaced by solemn consideration. It was an air Ben knew well from the Clone Wars. Once the entire assembly was present, the lights dimmed and the large comm unit flickered to life. A blue projection of Yan Dooku appeared above the holodesk, looking toward the head of the room. "Masters," he greeted the august company, "and Qui-Gon, what a pleasant surprise."


"I see your protégé has dragged you into this with the rest of us. I'm glad."

While the reminder of Ben's odd relationship to Qui-Gon - and to Dooku, for that matter - made some councilors fidget. Qui-Gon himself gave a small smile. Ben's mind was already plunging far ahead into the matter at hand. He rubbed the edge of his beard between forefinger and thumb. "What have you found?" he asked the hologram.

"To the point, as ever, Master Kenobi. I've followed a tip from one of my contacts in the Coruscanti Orbit Control, and have been tracing Dyas' steps for the past three weeks - he's left rather a convoluted trail, I can tell you. I have sent Master Windu the details," Dooku looked to the Master of the Order.

"They're being reviewed," the Korun told the assembly, "but on a first glance, do not seem to offer any new insights. Please, Master Dooku, continue."

Dooku nodded. "I shall not bore you with the details, but after much searching, I have found Dyas' ship."

"Oh?" Ben seemed surprised.

Dooku sighed. "Yes... orbiting in the asteroid fields of Bothawui. There are multiple breaches in the hull."

"Any sign of Dyas?" asked Mace.

Dooku's face fell. Only Qui-Gon and Ben, who knew him best, knew to be surprised by the uncharacteristic show of emotion. "He was on the ship during the attack, but as I said, the hull was breached, and I suspect the ship has been floating for several months, at least. There is... not much left to recover. I have, however, found his lightsaber."

The council members all nodded solemnly. "Receive it we will," Master Yoda said. The subsequent silence was taut with the unspoken question: should Dias be honored as a Jedi Knight in death, or were his actions too far outside of the Code to consider it? There would be an investigation, but that would come later, after they had paid their respects to the dead - whether they were Jedi or defectors.
At length, Ben said, "What on earth was he doing on Bothawui?"

Dooku seemed happy to return to business. "Bothawui is a major junction between several hyperspace lanes. I do not think he was headed for the planet itself. I suspect he was in transit to another system when he was shot down and the debris drawn into orbit."

"So you believe this was an assassination?" Saesee Tiin frowned. Dooku turned to look at the Iktotchi and give a short shrug.

"Assassination, a hit, a bounty. Whoever did the deed, someone paid them - handsomely, I'd wager - to murder a Jedi."

Ben was the only one in the room who looked completely unsurprised. Years as a war General had given him a dark sense of humor, so he drew a few alarmed looks when he laughed and said, "Yes, two guesses as to who that might be. Were you able to recover any useful data from the ship?"

Dooku shook his head. "Whoever attacked this ship knew what they were doing. The navigation history and databanks have all been wiped clean. However," his mustache quirked up in a smile, "they forgot Dyas' astromech droid. It was in pieces when I got here, and quite beyond repair, but I've managed to recover some of its shortstorage memory, which includes an order from Dyas, given just moments before the droid and the ship were destroyed." Dooku fiddled with something out of view, and the comm audio crackled, now broadcasting a static-laden recording of Sifo Dyas' last moments.

Ion blasters boomed in the background. A loud series of beeps emanated from the droid itself, it's band wheels whirring against the ship's floor. Voice growing louder as the droid drew closer, Dyas shouted, "R9! You've got to get us out of here, set coordinates for 709,-073,006, and - ahh!" A huge explosion of blasterfire. "Force damnnit - now, R9! Now! We've got to get-" static, and then silence. Dooku's projected gaze bore down on Ben Kenobi.

"Do these coordinates jog your memory, Master Kenobi?"

The councillors all looked to Ben, who smiled, just slightly. "They do. Those are the coordinates to Kamino."

"Home of the galaxy's finest cloners, or so I've been told," Dooku rustled through some records while the council muttered. They had all heard whispers of Ben's suspicions, of course. Mace would never keep his fellow Councilors completely in the dark, but they had been slow to believe the scale of what Ben claimed. "Also among the droid's memory were some orders Dyas gave to it earlier that day… unfortunately, my investigation compromised the fidelity of the record, but I was able to transcribe the pertinent details. Dyas submitted an inquiry into the activity of a bank account on Coruscant - Ben, I believe you know more about this than I."

"Is it to do with the Medical Studies grant?"

"I suspect so, though of course that is hardly revealed by account numbers alone. I will send you the transcript." Dooku's brow drew down in concentrated confusion. "I cannot play back his exact words, but I must say… Dyas sounded distinctly disturbed when he put in the call. Almost suspicious."

Ben frowned, trying to make sense of it. "As if he were not the only one accessing the account?"

"I suspect so."

Mace Windu did not like being put out of depth, and turned to Ben with an inquisitive expression.
"What is this medical grant you're talking about?"

"I'm afraid the clones have been funded by a public grant," Ben explained, which raised quite a few brows around the room. "I've been tracking it for several years, but have not found anything concrete enough to warrant further investigation."

"Until now, apparently," Qui-Gon put in. Mace sighed.

"We'll have to look into it."

"Yes," Ben agreed, "but not directly, not per protocol. We don't want them to know we suspect their use of the grant, or they will withdraw, leave us with no leads, and furthermore know that we're onto them. I'll investigate myself, as I have been already. I'll find a way to do it without bringing Kamino into question."

"You'll never be able to gather all the information we need without a warrant," Adi Gallia pointed out. "Working your way in under the radar will only get you so far."

Ben smiled. "I do not intend to work under the radar, Master Gallia - just on a less dangerous side of it. Republic Grants are always wrapped in bureaucratic tape, I'm sure I can uncover a doorway somewhere." He nodded at Yan. "Master Dooku is not the only one with advantageous contacts. I will look into the accounts and see if I can determine who has been accessing the funds - aside from Dyas."

"I would like to know how Dyas used funds in the Order's name without our knowing," Plo Koon said, arms crossed, fingers drumming curiously against his forearm. "If he ordered the creation of these clones for the Order, the Council should have received word about it within days. Are we sure the order was even finalized?"

"Follow the money in the accounts, and we'll see," advised Ki Adi Mundi.

"If the Sith are behind this, and they have ways of manipulating Republic finances, exactly how far within our Senate has their corruption spread?" asked Master Rancisis.

Ben and Mace shared a nervous look. They were the only two present who knew the identity of the Sith master. They had discussed revealing this information before, but Mace was convinced that some councilors would demand immediate action, which, considering Palpatine's extensive contingencies, could prove disastrous for the Order and possibly the Republic. Ben was compelled to agree.

Master Yoda looked at Mace for a moment before he tapped his cane on the ground for attention.

"Important, all of these questions are, and some more easily answered than others. Investigate the financials Master Kenobi will without alerting the Sith. Master Dooku," Yoda looked up to his older apprentice, who looked back, attentive. "Continue your investigation into Dyas you will. Determine who killed him and who paid for it, you must."

Dooku bowed. "Yes, Master."

"And answer Master Koon's question, we must. Send someone to Kamino, we will."

"I will go," Mace Windu volunteered. The Councilors all seemed happy with this, but Ben was frowning.

"With all due respect, masters, the Sith will be watching this planet very closely. The presence of a Jedi will be poorly received enough, but a councilor?" He shook his head. "We must make this look
"We have to send someone who has been briefed on the situation," Mace reminded him, and glanced around the briefing room of councillors. "If not a council member, who did you have in mind?"

Ben opened his mouth to say "me", but then realized he'd already volunteered for an equally as important mission. His mouth paused in frustrated silence. Unspoken deductions weaved silently through the air. There was only one person in the room who was not a Councilor and who did not already have a mission.

Qui-Gon cleared his throat politely. "Let me go," he said. Ben immediately shook his head. "No. Absolutely not. You've already bared your neck showing up on Alaris Prime and-"

Qui-Gon cut in: "Which means the Sith see me as a threat, but not an official one."

Ben scoffed, but Mace was intrigued. "How do you mean?"

Qui-Gon shrugged. "So I show up on two separate occasions to interfere with this Sith's business. I am still no councilor, I hold no high office of authority here. I cannot control where I am sent and when. The Sith will be forced to conclude that any threat I pose is one of happenstance."

"If he sees you meddling so often, he will not ignore it. Councilor or not, it puts you in considerable danger," Ben insisted. Qui-Gon fixed him with a reproving look. "And who would you send into that danger instead? Someone who didn't know the risk?" He held his former padawan's gaze until the younger man looked away, and glanced around the room. "Let me minimize the threat to others here. I've already drawn his eye once, but I am not a powerful player."

"Qui-Gon is right," Yan spoke up from across the galaxy. "We should not expose the entire Order to the Sith's interest. Keeping him occupied with smaller pieces may be the best way."

Ben refused to think of Qui-Gon as a small piece in the puzzle. He rubbed furiously at his beard. "What we need is a pawn," he muttered, "or better yet, a powerful piece that looks like a pawn."

Qui-Gon heard him and answered to the room, "I've been told I can appear very pawnlike, when I want to." He glanced over at Ben, who glared back. Stubborn Is and Stubborn Does held a staring contest as the rest of the room waited on a verdict.

Cutting through the tension, Yoda attempted to placate his grandpadawan, "A reconnaissance mission this will be. Minimal the risk is."

"Alaris Prime should have been low-risk," Ben retorted. "But now the Sith are sure to be watching everyone involved."

"You don't know that," Qui-Gon said.

"I do."

"You have no concrete proof."

"And we have no choice," Mace Windu cut into the master-apprentice squabble. "If you have a better suggestion, Master Kenobi, please, tell us."

They waited. At length, Ben sighed. "We will have to work quickly."
"The files should be transferring to you now, masters," Dooku said.

"I will draw up an official mission request to investigate the last movements of fallen Jedi Sifo Dyas, in the…" Mace glanced down at his datapad, where he'd pulled up the coordinates relayed by Dooku. An empty spot blinked back up at him where Kamino should be. "...Abrion sector, and forward summons and details to Master Jinn. Are we agreed?"

The Council was unanimous. Ben gave begrudging agreement. Qui-Gon hung by his side as they left.

"I have a bad feel about this," Ben grumbled to the universe at large.

"You always have bad feelings about things," Qui-Gon noted.

"Yes, and unfortunately, they're rarely wrong."

The next twenty-four hours were a buzz of activity as Councilors drew up mission details for Kamino and dug deeper into their intelligence contacts. Ben could feel the tension building in his bones, as if he could hear the Council's anxiety through the Force itself. As ever, he opted to occupy himself with more pleasant trivialities.

"Careful there," Obi-Wan said as he rounded the corner, diving out of the way of Ben's unruly cargo. Ben dodged and carefully lowered the potted plant from in front of him.

"My apologies," he said, trying very hard not to step on the trailing vines and leaves, "it is a bit too big to be carrying around like this."

"Force, is that your dorva vine?" Obi-Wan whistled lowly. "It's gotten too big to stay on your fridge, I take it."

"Yes," Ben chuckled, kicking some vines out of the way of his feet. "It's gotten a bit unruly, so I've asked the groundkeepers' permission to rehouse it in the gardens."

Obi-Wan smiled, "That's great - I'm sure they'll appreciate it. Would you like some help?"

Ben glanced down at the vines, which looked far shorter when dangling off the top of his refrigerator. "You know, I think I would."

Obi-Wan stooped to gather the trailing vines delicately in his arms. They began walking toward the gardens together, Ben in front, Obi-Wan in tow. With the extra help, Ben was now free to hold the pot low enough to see over it. He glanced back at Obi-Wan.

"I'm grateful for the assistance, but what are you doing here? I'd expect you to be working with Dooku this time of morning."

"Oh. No, just running some last minute errands. Qui-Gon and I are leaving today… for the, uh…" he glanced around at the busy halls, "...you know."

"Oh." Ben blinked. He was embarrassed to realize that, because Qui-Gon had been the only one present for the mission brief, he'd hardly even thought of Obi-Wan. "Yes. I suppose you would go with him, of course," he said, more to himself than to Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan understood. "He offered to let me stay behind. Tried to make excuses about all the risks, the doubled exposure to the Sith after the whole Alaris Prime debacle. It's insulting, really."
"Insulting?"

Obi-Wan gave an exasperated sigh. "I know he's trying to look out for me, but my place is at his side. It always has been, it always will be. I think I'm old enough to take my own risks."

"And by offering you the option to stay behind, he's giving you the opportunity to choose those risks. He's being courteous, not overprotective."

Obi-Wan shrugged. In his stage of life, with a parental figure like Qui-Gon, it was very difficult to differentiate between the two. "I suppose."

Once in the gardens, Ben went to the spot the groundskeepers had reserved for him and planted the dorva vine into its new home atop a ridge by the waterfall. From a few metres in the air, its vines could stretch to their full length, which was far more impressive than Ben's cramped apartment could allow.

"Wow," breathed Obi-Wan as they stepped away from their work. "It looks a lot bigger than it did in your kitchen," he glanced around at the large, expansive gardens. "And also a lot smaller."

"So it does," Ben smiled, and considered the flowerpot he held in his hand. "I'll have to find something to do with this. Perhaps I'll get another plant."

"You're practically a one-man greenhouse."

They laughed and walked out of the gardens. As they passed, Obi-Wan spotted a familiar, if not far larger and older, friend. "Wait a moment," He paused along the path, and pointed to a bushy, long-leafed plant. "Isn't this your woosha from eons ago?"

Ben walked by it often. "It is," he smiled.

"Force, it's huge! Didn't it used to sit on your coffee table? It's big enough to be a table."

Ben laughed. "Imagine that." He studied the plant fondly, wide, long leaves springing up from the center stalk like they'd been this big their entire lives. He still remembered the hardships of those early days, cooped up in the temple under censure, not sure of himself, never knowing how or when he would be ready to embark on his real mission. And now, here they were, a whole organized team, going to Kamino and the Senate and the farflung reaches of the Outer Rim for answers. It was a delicate game, but he was not alone. His network had grown just like the leaves of his woosha, and he now felt so at home it was as if it'd always been that way.

He glanced up at the dorva vine, still visible from a distance. Its vines waved in the breeze tossed up by the waterfall. A few leaves were torn off by the buffeting air and water, but Ben knew that over time, it would thrive.

Obi-Wan followed Ben's gaze. "Does it still stop growing if you look at it wrong?" he joked. Ben gave a small shrug.

"Yes, but it always comes back stronger. I'm very proud of it."

Obi-Wan shook his head, laughed, and continued on to the door. "I hope I'm never so sentimental about plants."

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A few hours later, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan departed from Coruscant and began their journey across the galaxy. Although Kamino did not appear in the ship's navigation computers, thanks to Sifo Dyas'
coordinates, they knew exactly where they were going. On the map it appeared as a blank spot to the Galactic South of Rishi, just over the border of the Outer Rim and a few parsecs away from Hutt space. Out of the way, but well within reach of hyperspace lanes. Convenient, Qui-Gon thought, for surreptitious visits from clientele.

The journey from the Core was long and quiet, and left plenty of time to think. Unfortunately, most shades of 'thinking', when undertaken by Obi-Wan Kenobi, had the tendency to evolve into corresponding shades of brooding.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Obi-Wan announced to the silence of the bridge. Qui-Gon had been reading to pass the time, but looked up at his apprentice with a long-suffering expression.

"I don't sense anything."

Obi-Wan frowned in concentration. "I'm not sure what it is. It's this mission."

"Or perhaps this mission's connection to the Sith?" Qui-Gon suggested.

The apprentice pursed his lips. "Perhaps… It eludes me." His brows scrunched together as he attempted to analyze his own perceptions. Qui-Gon watched the effort for a moment before instructing,

"You should not focus on your anxieties, Obi-Wan. Keep your focus on the present moment."

"Yes, Master," he answered to the familiar reprimand. To distract himself, he reopened the very scant dossier they'd been given for their mission. It had been written almost entirely by Mace Windu, with a few notes from Ben.

"What sort of people are these Kaminoans?" Obi-Wan asked, flipping through the holo-less pages. "I've never met one."

"Neither have I," Qui-Gon admitted. "Even if I had, I doubt one sampling would be a true representation of the whole. I suspect it takes a certain type of Kaminoan, as it would take with any species, to condone the manufacture and distribution of millions of sentient clones."

Obi-Wan had been struggling with the ethics of such an undertaking. "It's like livestock," he mused, sadly. Qui-Gon hummed his agreement.

"They likely see no moral or ethical downfalls to their own actions. We must be very careful with what we say, and how we say it."

Obi-Wan smiled. In this area, he excelled. "Of course, Master."

Mace's descriptions proved accurate. Kamino was a tumultuous aquatic planet, rampant with stormy gales and waves that could sweep a starship right out of the sky. The Jedi visitors were forced to communicate extensively with Kamino's air traffic control in order to land safely.

"It's a very clever place for questionable projects like cloning," Qui-Gon mused after they'd gone off the comm with ATC. "You either know who's coming to visit, or you'll see the debris of their ships in the water the next morning."

It was a brutal but efficient strategy.

They landed at the Kaminoan cloning facility after spending nearly an hour battling the whims of the atmosphere. Massive, circular structures built on stilts stood like rocks amid an ever churning
maelstrom. Water slapped up and over the sloped buildings, but the mid-sea city never budged an inch. Up close, it was impossible to see the extent of the structures against the darkness of the storms, but from above, the Jedi had seen rings of white lights, delineating the edges of the buildings. There complex went on for miles.

Nearly as soon as they stepped off of their ship, master and apprentice were soaked through. Jedi cloaks were designed to wick water, but 'wicking' was a weak ability when faced with an entire ocean of water falling from the sky.

Metal clamps emerged from the floor of the docking bay to latch onto their ship's landing gear, holding it in place as waves continued to wash over the edge of the artificial land. At the bulkhead, a door opened, creating a rectangle of bright white light amid the stormy world outside. "Masters Jedi," a tall, slender figured raised its voice above the roar, "we've been expecting you - please, come inside!"

The Jedi were only too happy to accept the welcome. They ran inside and their Kaminoan greeter shut the door after them. Without the roar of the storm gone, the Jedi's ears rang. The loudest sound became the incessant dripping of their clothing.

"I must apologize for the timing of your visit," said the Kaminoan, who Obi-Wan knew must be male because he sported a thin white crest on his head. "Our weather is unpredictable and violent, not like what you are accustomed to on Coruscant."

"It's quite alright," answered Qui-Gon for both of them, "I must apologize for tracking water into your home."

Kaminoans did not have lively senses of humor. This one blinked its fathomless eyes and nodded its long neck in a serene bow. "No apologies are needed. We are a world of water, after all. My name is Pauw Qan."

Qui-Gon bowed in turn. "I am Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn, and this is my apprentice, Obi-Wan Kenobi." Obi-Wan bowed politely.

Pauw nodded. "Of course. We are so glad to finally receive an emissary from the Jedi Order. Please, take of your cloaks and let them dry." As he spoke, a small droid buzzed up to them and extended a long, telescopic appendage that sported a claw at the end. It snapped expectantly at them. The Jedi handed over their cloaks, and the droid took them away. Pauw watched it go and turned back to his guests.

"Please follow me. I will take you to Taun We. She is expecting you."

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon as they walked. "I don't suppose you know who Taun We is?" he asked, mentally. Externally, Qui-Gon looked as confident and self-assured as he ever did, even while soaking wet.

"Not the slightest idea. This is a reconnaissance mission, Padawan. We're only supposed to look like we know what we're doing."

"Ah," Obi-Wan allowed the smallest of smiles to break his stoic facade, "it's business as usual, then."

They followed Pauw through long, silent corridors. The smooth white curves of the walls and doors were an utter contradiction to the harsh climate of Kamino, and soundproofed against the chaos outside. The Kaminoans themselves were tall, willowy creatures, who moved with lithe grace around them as they passed. Some paused to bow their heads respectfully. It was an incredibly surreal
experience, for Obi-Wan. He'd never heard of the Kaminoan culture, and he'd never seen its like before.

Suddenly, the walls turned into windows, offering a panoramic view of their surroundings. They were walking through an elevated tunnel in a massive metal warehouse, filled with towers and structures whose purpose remained a mystery. Thousands of lights shone at them from every direction, distended glass bulbs glowing in evenly spaced rows, on the walls and around the towers and along the edges of the floor.

"What is this place?" asked Obi-Wan aloud.

"The nursery," Pauw explained, looking out into the chambers with a fond Kaminoan smile. "I expect Taun We will tell you more. This generation is developing well, and she is very proud."

Obi-Wan looked closer, and his eyes grew wide in fascinated horror as he realized that the bulbs were not lamps, but fluid-filled tanks. And the things inside them were not diodes, as he'd assumed, but were in fact backlit silhouettes of human fetuses. As he watched, one of them moved, kicking and sucking its thumb, blissfully ignorant of its own existence. And now that Obi-Wan saw it, he felt it, too: thousands upon thousands of tiny human lives, still developing, hearts beating in perfect and unnerving unison. He swallowed.

"Kriffing hell," he thought, broadcasting without realizing. Qui-Gon said nothing in reply, as was too occupied by looking out of the opposite set of windows to even glance at his apprentice.

"This generation," the master repeated. "How many generations are there?"

"This will be the third," Pauw said, sounding almost apologetic. "I understand you must be anxious to see the full five orders met in good time, but I can assure you that we strive for quality. The first generation had some… problems." He paused, and added, "Taun We will be able to tell you more. Just this way," he gestured to the hall up ahead.

They passed through the opposite side of the nursery and the windows were replaced by plain white once more. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon finally shared a look to communicate their amazement as well as their alarm. This was far, far bigger than they'd thought.

They did not have time to discuss the ramifications of what they'd just seen before a door opened and a tall female Kaminoan turned her head to look.

"Mistress Taun We," Pauw bowed, "these are the ambassadors from the Jedi Order, Master Qui-Gon Jinn and his apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi."

The Jedi bowed respectfully. Taun We nodded slowly and gracefully, which Obi-Wan supposed must be typical among her species. "We are glad to welcome you here, Masters, and appreciate your interest in our work."

Qui-Gon nodded. "We are grateful for your accommodation, of course."

"Of course. But you are not here for accommodations. You will want a tour of the facilities, to see that your order is being filled as per the Order's specifications."

Qui-Gon resisted the urge to look at his apprentice. They had not communicated any specific mandate to the Kaminoans when they'd arrived. They hadn't had to. They'd merely announced themselves as ambassadors from the Jedi Order and had been let in without question. "You seem to know our mission better than we do," Qui-Gon teased with subdued irony. Taun We smiled and began walking.
"This way. I will show you your army. We are very proud of the result."

They left Pauw behind and let Taun lead them through the facility. Away from her gaze, the Jedi shared a look, neither entirely believing what they were seeing, but knowing they ought to brace themselves for more.

Taun led them back through the nursery, and onto the birthing room, a place of squalling trauma that made Obi-Wan grimace. Then it was onto the creche, where dozens of completely identical toddlers played with each other and educational toys, mediated and coddled by droids.

"Their growth rate is double that of a normal human - until they reach physical maturity, of course," Taun We was saying. "So the first few months of their lives are critical. We do all we can to optimize the proper brain functions and neural pathways necessary to successful adult life."

"I see," Qui-Gon said, still trying to absorb everything. It was difficult to mask his surprise.

Then it was on to the adolescent classrooms, where young clones were separated by age into automated learning stations. Surrounded by screens, suits wired with sensors, helmets equipped with eye-trackers and headphones and more input devices that Obi-Wan could not identify. Even through the windowed tunnel, Obi-Wan could hear a cacophony of studious energy as the teens rattled off answers to quiz questions, practiced speaking alien languages, and recited various codes of conduct.

A few of the boys looked up to see Taun, and paused when they saw the Jedi. More than one face began frowning and looking at Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan intently.

"You must excuse them," Taun said, carrying on without breaking stride, "they have never seen a human who does not look like them - at least, not in person."

Obi-Wan looked over his shoulder as they passed, and locked eyes with one of the clones. Despite his clinical surroundings, the boy looked very much like any other boy Obi-Wan had ever known or seen in the mirror. He was a thinking, intelligent person, with a personality and thoughts and dreams and, maybe, a name. The boy turned his body to watch Obi-Wan go, and as he did, the Jedi spotted a patch on his uniform, a string of four numbers in the place where a nametag should be. Their eye contact was broken when Obi-Wan walked through a doorway.

He wanted to say something about it to Qui-Gon, but he wasn't sure where to begin.

"We start their physical training almost as soon as they are born, but we cannot begin intensive military training until they are matured. This is the second generation," Taun We gestured to the upcoming chamber, "and I believe they will prove the gold standard for their younger brothers."

White. The warehouse below was crawling with it, white plated armor made in the Mandalorian style, strapped over pitch black bodysuits. They marched in unison, brandished their weapons in unison, turned and walked and saluted in exact, intimidating unison. Obi-Wan could not help it when his mouth fell slightly open. He covered it with a hand, pretending that he was stroking his chin thoughtfully.

They watched the display in silence for several minutes before Qui-Gon asked, "How many are there?"

"Twelve thousand born, ten-thousand of them acceptable - many in the first generation have some untoward genetic mutations that made them largely unsuited for military use. We have another ten thousand in gestation. As I have told your colleague, we have started with small generations in order to ensure quality DNA variations throughout the entire cloning pool. The generations will increase in
size to meet your orders as time goes on."

"Our colleague?" Qui-Gon asked. "Who do you mean?"

"The other Jedi, Sifo Dyas."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged a look. "We were under the impression that Sifo Dyas was dead," Qui-Gon said.

Taun blinked slowly. She tilted her head in confusion. "You must be mistaken, Masters. Sifo Dyas arrived here only hours before you did. I believe he is still here - I understand he had some concerns about our neural programming modules. I thought you knew."

The Jedi were nonplussed. Sifo Dyas? Alive? Here? "Perhaps you could show us to him?" Said Qui-Gon, as calmly as he could.

"Of course," Taun We nodded, and tapped an order into the keyboard on her left vambrace. She led them into a small anteroom where they took a lift up several floors. The lift was encased in glass, and gave them an ascending view of the the armored clones and their marching exercises. *Ten thousand*, the number echoed in Obi-Wan head. It was not the millions that Ben had spoken about, but Ki Adi Mundi's suspicions against the fulfillment of the order were well and truly debunked.

They arrived at a new level and Taun offered her fingerprint to let them into a wide, simply furnished room. It offered similar views of the clones below, and connected to hallways that branched out to other sectors of the facility. However, there were also computer consoles, holovideo feeds, and chairs. Obi-Wan wondered if they could control the clones from places like this. He hoped not.

"Ah," Taun said, seeing a far door blink green as a newcomer was admitted. "This must be him."

The door slid open to reveal a new figure. "Master Dyas," greeted Taun, "are you finding everything to your satisfaction?"

Sifo Dyas did not answer. He looked down at the pair of Jedi before him with surprise. The Jedi looked back up at him with equal, if not greater shock. Qui-Gon drew his lightsaber.

"That is not Sifo Dyas," he said. Obi-Wan drew his lightsaber as well.

Taun We glanced between the three with alarm. "Master Jinn, I assure you you are mistaken," she said, attempting to manage a civil tone amid the hum of the Jedi's lightsabers.

"Yes," replied the giant, looming Zabrak called Sifo Dyas. His black and yellow tattooed lips raised in a sneer. "They are."

He reached behind his back and brought out a thick metal shaft. He pressed his thumb to it, and wicked crimson lightsaber blades sprouted from either end.

"Sith," Obi-Wan breathed, almost too shocked to believe it. Qui-Gon was quicker on the uptake, and interposed himself between Obi-Wan and the attacker as the Zabrak made a leaping first strike.

Blades clashed in sudden, white hot contest. Taun let out a shrill noise, screaming something in the Kaminoan language. She fled the room and hit a button by the exterior door panel. A klaxon blared, and metal doors slammed shut around both ends of the room, sealing the combatants inside.

Qui-Gon took the first blow, but when it knocked him off his feet, Obi-Wan recovered to take the rebounding strike. Qui-Gon darted to the door and found it locked. He plunged his weapon into the
wall by the door panel, and the lock inside the wall exploded with burst of sparks. He threw it open with a massive Force-push.

"Master," Obi-Wan warned, just as the Sith's lightsaber came barrelling down. Qui-Gon ducked and came up to block a strike aimed at Obi-Wan's neck, a close call which the padawan noticed only afterward.

"Into the hallway," Qui-Gon instructed telepathically, "it will restrict his movement."

Obi-Wan nodded and darted through the gutted doorway, baiting the Sith to follow. The confined space made it harder for Obi-Wan to move, but it made it almost impossible for his saberstaff-wielding opponent to do so. Still, he plunged forward toward Obi-Wan, orange eyes hungry for violence. Qui-Gon followed them into the hallway, effectively trapping the Sith in between the two Jedi. As one, Master and apprentice leaped into action on either side of their opponent.

The Sith growled in frustration as he realized his mistake, and redoubled his efforts against both Jedi, alternating between his blows and parries on either side. His saber screeched against the glass walls of the walkway, scoring it in haphazard patterns. The lines glowed red the moment after impact and faded. They remained hot, however, as Qui-Gon found out when he tried a too-wide Ataru attack and the Sith tossed him into the wall. The hot glass burned through his tunic sleeve and left a line of blistering flesh along his arm. He yelled through the pain and brought his saber back to a ready stance.

Very suddenly, he remembered what Ben had told him about Ataru, years ago. He'd not been practicing Soresu as often as he had when he was actively training with Ben, but now, with a painful reminder of his form's weaknesses, he tried to drudge up whatever muscle memory remained of those lessons.

On the other side of the Sith, Obi-Wan was faring well, if only because of the tight space. Makashi required great mobility forwards and backwards, space which he had in ample supply. But the side-to-side room that his enemy needed was blocked in by glass and a long, long drop. The Sith struck more often than Obi-Wan did, but the Jedi had only to step out of the way and wait for his own chance. When Obi-Wan struck, the Sith had to parry or attack in retaliation.

Switching between the two very differently styled opponents, the Sith proved himself to be a formidable fighter. But Ben killed you, Obi-Wan found himself thinking fervently between bouts, or he killed someone just like you. How are you here?

Qui-Gon was struggling, alternating between Ataru and Soresu with choppy grace. He was a true Jedi master, and in a fair fight would have a good chance at besting this Sith. But this was not a fair fight; it was contained in a very small space, he was injured, and his opponent was considerably taller and larger than he was. He was at a disadvantage, and he knew it. The Sith knew it, too. He redirected the brunt of his attacks from Obi-Wan to Qui-Gon, whose saberwork grew more frustrated with the space and the pressure.

"No," Obi-Wan growled, striking desperately at the Sith to regain his attention and only succeeding in letting the Zabrak demonstrate his superior blocking skills. They had trapped the Sith between them, but by the same token, they had trapped each other on either side without immediate backup.

In a burst of energy, the Sith tossed Qui-Gon back toward the room from which they'd fled. In the same instant, Obi-Wan landed a hit on his armored shoulder. The blade cut through to flesh, but glanced off when the Sith turned. With an enraged scream, the Zabrak rounded on Obi-Wan and shoved him back with a devastating saber-on-saber blow. Before the Jedi had time to think, the Sith whirled toward him, slicing a giant 'X' in the glass walls as he did so. The Sith lowered his blade and
extended his hand. Compelled by a dark perversion of the Force, Obi-Wan flew toward him, lungs seized, neck landing hard against the Zabrak's palm. The Sith grabbed him by the throat and hurled him against the glass. It shattered, and Obi-Wan fell.

"Padawan!" Qui-Gon screamed, still scrambling back to meet his opponent.

Obi-Wan had not yet hit the ground far below when the Sith turned to the fallen boy's master. "Either you just watched him die," the giant threatened, "or he is about to watch you die, master." He spat the name like poison and leaped, sparing no more caution for their close quarters. The glass above them shattered as his saber plunged through, and Qui-Gon ducked in a protective Soresu circle of shelter. Flecks of burning hot glass peppered his back and arms, burning through his tunics and making him hiss in pain. No longer caged by the walls or ceiling, the Sith was free to use every ounce of power he'd not had room for; but so was Qui-Gon. Driven by adrenaline and decades of practice, Qui-Gon launched himself into a high Ataru flip, twirling just over the Sith's blade and landing on his other side. A long hallway stretched ahead. Qui-Gon had no idea where it led, but he knew he had the low ground here. He ran.

Many stories below, in the small crater made by his desperate Force-push to cushion the landing, Obi-Wan lay moaning on the floor. Disoriented, he rolled over. There was a throng of identical faces hovering above him, all clad in white and black, some with helmets and some just taking them off, all peering at him with concern and fascination. He propped himself up on his elbows and looked up just in time to see glass shards falling to the ground. Far above, two red and one green saber flew in a wild storm of light.

"Are you alright?" asked one clone. Did he have a name? Obi-Wan blinked and looked for a number somewhere on the armor; there was one, but his mind could not read it fast enough for his discombobulated mouth to speak it. "You need medical attention, sir," the clone said, in somewhat uncertain tones of authority.

"No," Obi-Wan insisted, rising. "No, I need to go - I have to help my master. That man, the one with the red sabers, he's evil, he's going to kill people," he rambled, wondering if these sheltered clone men even understood what he was saying.

"But... he's a Jedi," The clone said, an obvious conflict of interests waging in his mind.

"No, I'm a Jedi," Obi-Wan breathed, "and Qui-Gon is too - that man, the tall Zabrak, with the red sabers, he's a Sith. Sith kill people, and they like killing Jedi most of all," he panted, feeling sore. "Please," he tacked on, when there was no immediate response. "Help me, I need to get to him. Now."

The clone looked uncertainly at his blaster, and uncertain in general. It was beginning to dawn on him that the real world might pose significantly different challenges than his training exercises, and at significantly higher stakes. "These are just training blasters," he said helplessly, "but... I can show you where to go." He pointed to Obi-Wan's lightsaber. "Can that cut through doors?"

Obi-Wan nodded. The clone nodded hurriedly back.

"Follow me."

They jogged across the open training grounds, breaking up marches and drills. "Trooper! Back to your station!" shouted clones who Obi-Wan supposed were of higher rank. His newfound companion plowed on, still holding his training blaster, as if it would do him any good.

"Can't!" He shouted back, "Emergency, or don't you have ears?"
Klaxons were firing across the entire complex, slowly spreading mayhem as the Sith and Qui-Gon - *wherever in the damned nine hels they are*, Obi-Wan thought - carved a path of destruction deeper and deeper into the building.

All around him, clones were reacting to the mounting red alert.

"-the hel is going on?"

"It's just a drill."

"They don't run drills like this."

"It's not a kriffing drill!"

As he ran, the small part of Obi-Wan's brain not occupied by fear or pain or the determination to overcome both wondered when or why the Kaminoans had taught that particular word to their creations.

"Here," his clone friend was skidding to halt on a door that said, in bold red letters, *DO NOT OPEN - ALARM WILL SOUND.* "Cut it open."

"I suppose another one won't hurt," Obi-Wan mumbled, and sliced a neat circle around the door's lock. It slid open, leaving a smoldering wedge of door on the lock that pleaded with him one last time to *DO NOT.* Another klaxon joined the chorus, the pitch a sharp, ear-splitting contrast to the rest. The Jedi and the clone jogged through the opening and down the service tunnel beyond until they came upon a turbolift.

"The building's on lockdown, the lifts won't work," Obi-Wan said.

"Nope," agreed the clone, before he turned, braced his footing, and open fired on the lift control panel. After a dozen or so stun blasts, it shorted out. "But when the electrics go down, all lifts will use their last charge of energy to evacuate to the highest floor. This one goes to the fifteenth, the main floor, that's where you friend is - or was, from what I saw."

"Right," Obi-Wan pried the doors open and climbed inside. The clone made sure he got in safely, holding the door open a moment.

"I-I learned in class that you Jedi have a saying, a sort of good luck thing," he said suddenly, uncertainly. The sirens continued to wail. "I'm not sure I buy the whole Force thing, to be honest, but… may it be with you, I guess," he said.

Obi-Wan smiled, absurdly. "Thank you, uh…" he peeked around to see the number emblazoned on the left pauldron. He read at an award angle, "Two, two, two," he could not see the last number.

"The lads call me Cody, sir," the clone offered. He looked over to see a security droid coming to investigate. "Chssk - you have to go. Good luck." He slammed the door shut. As soon as the latch hitched, the lift shot upwards double its normal speed, red emergency light washing out all details of the dimmed controls.

It opened on the fifteenth floor. When Obi-Wan stepped out, a trail of jagged sabermarks and sparks was there to welcome him, winding down the hall and around a bend. He followed them with his eye and could see faint red reflections on the walls ahead. The sounds of saberplay echoed toward him.

Drawing his saber, Obi-Wan picked up his feet and ran, heart pounding in his chest.
Some ways around the corner, Qui-Gon was fighting for his life, quite literally. There had already been five or so moments when he was sure, had he not paid attention to Ben's instruction in Soresu, he would have been killed. Unfortunately, even those lessons were beginning to fail him. He was one man, he was injured, and - with the sort of sinking feeling Qui-Gon never thought he would feel - he had to admit: He was old.

Sweat poured down his forehead and into his eyes as he ducked again, parrying the Sith's one-two, one-two-three attack in mad whirl of defense. He had no offense left in him. He had no Ataru grace, even though he had ample room for it. His energy was gone. He had grey hairs clinging to his face and sweat in his brow. The Sith had knocked out the hallway lights some time ago, and in the dark the dizzying haze of red and green and red again blinded him, confusing him past his best attempts at focus.

He would have tried to meditate, but it was too fast, too brutal. Survival was his only ambition. He wondered, briefly, where Obi-Wan was.

Neither the Jedi nor the Sith noticed it at first, hidden among the sounds of their own weapons, but a third contender was barrelling down the hall. Only when both combatants paused their movements did the Sith hear that third hrum growing nearer. He turned to see Obi-Wan charging flat out toward him, saber drawn. Unable to ignore the threat, he turned his back on Qui-Gon to face the apprentice.

Despite his prowess against his peers, Obi-Wan was not as good a swordsman as his master. But he was young, and he was brave, and he was loyal to a fault. So the fight that he gave this new Sith was, Qui-Gon would say later on, one of the most vicious displays of Makashi fury he'd ever seen, barring perhaps Dooku.

Their duel whirled in circles, back and forth down the hall. Tired but emboldened by his apprentice's strength, Qui-Gon pressed the Sith from behind, distracting him and giving Obi-Wan openings to strike. The apprentice landed a hit to the Sith's shoulders, and then his thigh, enraging the man even more. The massive red saberstaff whirled in progressively more aggressive arcs. One such arc sliced through the panel of a door, severing its lock. The Sith clenched a massive hand and yanked the door off its mounts to send it slamming toward Qui-Gon. The master ducked to protect himself, but it still managed to knock him clear across the floor.

"Master!" Obi-Wan yelled. Left alone with the Sith, Obi-Wan's chest was heaving. He was growing tired. He swallowed and his mouth tasted like wool. He had to tip his head back to look up at the Sith, this monster that towered over him by nearly a meter, crowned with horns, eyes raging orange with hate. Ben had faced a Sith before, and won. But he was not Ben, Obi-Wan realized. He was just him. It suddenly occurred to him exactly how completely, utterly terrified he was.

In his fear, Obi-Wan let the Sith press him back through the door he'd just destroyed. They tripped an alarm, and an emergency rayshield erupted over the open doorway.

"INTRUDER ALERT - INTRUDER ALERT - INTRUDER ALERT" announced an overhead voice.

"Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon shouted, running toward the sealed doorway, too late to act. He plunged his saber into the bulkhead of the room, but the walls, built for security, were too thick to allow him purchase on the interior controls.

"Obi-Wan?" The Sith said. It was the first time Obi-Wan had heard him speak. The Sith grinned, teeth wicked and sharp. "Kenobi," he recognized the name, and sneered in fury and perverted relish. "He killed my brother," he advanced. "I will kill his nephew."

The next strike tossed up sparks so thick it was like a cloud. The glass hallways had been cramped
quarters; this room was nearly unnavigable. It was small, and cylindrical, with a massive mechanical pillar in the middle. Glass capsules lay behind thick transparisteel all around the walls. As he desperately tried to gain his bearings, Obi-Wan thought he saw the word DNA more than once. He saw Qui-Gon beyond the rayshields, saber digging into the wall. The Sith stepped in front, blocking out all view of his master. He struck, hard, forcing Obi-Wan into the defense.

The saberstaff was a disadvantage here as much as it was in the hall, but here, Obi-Wan was faced with the greater challenge; in such small quarters, he was forced to walk backwards in a circle, his right elbow cornered against a pillar and constricting his movement. He could not move forward; backward was a never-ending trap. His opponent was nearly twice his height and had three times his reach with that saberstaff, so if he tried to flip above him he'd surely be cut in two.

Gulping, chest shaking with adrenaline, Obi-Wan switched his saber to his left hand, and fought.

He fought like he'd never fought in his life. No number of katas or exercises could have prepared him for this. He could not miss. For a while, he did not. He blocked and parried and dodged. And then, the moment came to strike: the higher blade of the saberstaff came whirling toward him and he blocked it, sending it glancing off at an awkward angle. In the split second before the Sith could recover his grip, Obi-Wan pulled his saber up and cut the staff clean in two. One blade remained; the other skittered to the floor in one piece, deactivated.

It was a remarkable hit, and a sound victory. It lasted only a moment.

No longer restricted by the length of his weapon, the Sith unleashed his rage. Deft and merciless strikes fell like rain. Dark tendrils wrapped his Djem-So in in a power unlike anything Obi-Wan had ever felt. He blocked them desperately, feeling with every blow his arms buckle closer to his chest. He stepped back, and back again, until he was practically falling over himself. The Sith still had the advantage, able to maneuver his dominant right hand around the pillar while Obi-Wan was stuck using his clumsier left.

Desperately, he reached out to Qui-Gon across their bond for help; for some source of center. But even while Qui-Gon stood there, strong and present, Obi-Wan felt helpless. There was only so much that one Jedi could give.

Their blades met in a white-hot clash. The mix of blue and red light stung Obi-Wan's eyes. He pushed the Sith back with a shout of exertion and carved an angry line down his arm. With a shout of pain, the Sith stepped back and raised his arm to strike, and Obi-Wan scrambled to defend himself.

But he was using his left hand, and he was tired, and his high guard, as ever, was infinitesimally too slow. There were no centimeters to spare. The blow broke through his guard like flimsi.

The blade hit his face first and slashed across his body like a lightning bolt. He fell, almost instantaneously, to the ground. He could not feel it when his saber fell out of his hand. He could not see Qui-Gon, or the Sith. He could hear them.

"OBI-WAN!" Qui-Gon shouted, at a volume and a pitch Obi-Wan had never heard in his life. He waited to die. Something moved near him, and then away.

The Sith bent to retrieve Obi-Wan's lightsaber and strolled, almost leisurely in spite of his injuries, to the door where Qui-Gon waited. The wall around the door controls was red hot and melting, but not fast enough. The Sith smiled through the rayshields, and held up the padawan's saber.

"I said one of you would watch," he said, "You chose for me." He lifted his own saber and sliced Obi-Wan's in two, emitter to pommel. The crystal shattered to pieces at his feet.
Qui-Gon was frozen in anger and fear, and he could not say or think or do anything but exactly what the Sith wanted him to do: watch. The Zabrak saw the defeat in his face and laughed.

Behind the rayshield and the gloating Sith, Obi-Wan's hand scrabbled through the mess of his own blood to grasp at something, but his fingertips were too slippery. Concentrating, digging into that well he’d thought he’d dug dry just minutes ago, he summoned a last wave of strength, clenched his fist, and called on the Force to help him complete the impossible.

When a lightsaber screeched to life behind him, the Sith turned to look, but he turned too late. The red blade ran straight through his chest and into the wall behind, cutting deep through the bulkhead. The Zabrak choked and tried to take a step forward, but physics had taken over. His body fell dead to the ground. Beyond, Qui-Gon could see his apprentice: propped up on the pillar, blood streaming down his face and pooling around him, hand outstretched and absolutely luminous with light and power.

The lightsaber deactivated. The interior control panel that it had skewered exploded, and the rayshield dropped.

Obi-Wan collapsed onto the bloodstained floor, his hand landing with a wet thud.

"Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, running into the room and kicking aside the jagged half-saberstaff that had saved Obi-Wan's life. He slid to his knees at the apprentice's side. "Padawan - sweet Force," He could hardly look at the wound. "Obi-Wan, can you hear me?" No response. "Obi-Wan…?" he was whispering now, unable or unwilling to stay silent. "Padawan, stay here, come on, come on." He shook his head, trying to apply pressure to the wound, wondering if there was a concussion, or a skull fracture, trying remember if applying pressure to a head wound with unknown bone integrity was a good idea. The fact that a lightsaber had drawn blood meant that it had struck an artery and moved too quickly to cauterize the wound, but this knowledge gave him no way to staunch the bleeding.

He tried to reach across their bond, and was met with silence. Not death, but silence, and a very soft sliver of light. "Don't do this," he begged, though the apprentice would not hear him, "Obi-Wan, you damned rule-follower, listen to me very carefully, you're not allowed. That's an order." He was not a crying man. He couldn't see for tears. "Force's sake, child, you should've stayed behind."

He heard commotion outside, people coming toward him. "Help!" He shouted over his shoulder, "Over here!"

A Kaminoan and a clone charged into the room.

"Were they damaged? Were any of them damaged?" The Kaminoan asked frantically, before she saw the dead Zabrak, and Obi-Wan. "Oh my stars,"

"Please help him," Qui-Gon was unused to helplessness, "he needs a medic now."

"Trooper, see to it," the Kaminoan ordered, and the white-clad man knelt at Obi-Wan's side. The Kaminoan called someone on her comm.

"He needs to be in a med bay," the clone said.

"His head - we need a stretcher."

"He doesn't have that kind of time," the clone looked up at Qui-Gon and, though he glanced at the man's copious burns and scrapes, said, "Help me carry him." The Jedi did as he was told, and carried Obi-Wan's shoulders and head while the clone carried his legs.
Qui-Gon would never remember the exact path they took or how long it took them. He remembered arriving at the medbay and seeing mouthless, silent creatures cart his apprentice straight into an operating room and being barred from following. He remembered looking down at himself and seeing blood soaked through his tunic, and his sleeves, and on his hands, and realizing that it belonged to his apprentice.

He remembered when Taun We appeared, voicing her shock at how easily the Sith had infiltrated her planet, and utter horror at the devastation he'd brought with him. "Was Sifo Dyas ever a Jedi?" Who have we been in contact with?" She'd asked. Qui-Gon had not been able to answer.

They offered him a comm unit. He took it and without thinking dialed the frequency of Mace Windu. As the dial tone rang, he watched his apprentice through a window: pale-faced, clothes cut open, features obscured by blood and frantically working medics, laid out a stretcher.

"Mace Windu," the councilor answered.

"Mace, you need to send an extraction team to Kamino," Qui-Gon said, in a tone hammered calm by shock.

"Why? What's happened?"

"Obi-Wan, he…" Qui-Gon paused, vision tunneled in on his apprentice. He'd never seen the boy so still. "There was a Sith. The apprentice. Impersonating Dyas."

"What? An apprentice?" Mace said, tone transforming in an instant. "Where is he now?"

"Dead. Obi-Wan killed him. But…" his voice trailed off again. He couldn't say it. He wouldn't say it. "Please hurry, Mace." Ever so slightly, his voice cracked.

The line fell silent for a long moment. "They're leaving now."

"Send Vokara Che," Qui-Gon said suddenly. "We may… we may need her services."

"We will be there as soon as we can, Qui-Gon." A shocked pause. "Just hold on."

Qui-Gon did not have the energy to respond. He set down the comm, and crossed his arms. He felt the stale blood press wetly against his chest and unfolded them again. Frozen in disgust and fear, he watched as monitors screamed and medics crowded around the boy he should've knighted months ago. He could not even clench his hands for the feeling of dried blood on his palms.

Unmoving, he waited.

On Coruscant, the fully outfitted ship was practically off the ground when Vokara Che clambered on board with her apprentice, Luna.

The length of the trip made it harder. They rode in the mobile medical unit for hours in silence. They had not spoken of what they were doing, nor what they might have to do.

"Should I draw it up now?" Luna asked, every fiber wrought with apprehension. "To… to make it quicker, if…?"

"No," Vokara said firmly. "No, I'll write it myself, when… if the time comes. Not a moment sooner."

Luna nodded and set the datapad aside. "Yes, Master."
Among the many services Vokara Che afforded to the Jedi Order, she was duty bound to affix her signature to every death certificate of the fallen. She bit her lip and stared into space. "The Force will provide a solution," she whispered, hoping it was true.
Ben Kenobi had many talents, and one of the best was his ability to bluff. Not only to bluff, but to take a lie so obviously false that it belonged in a waste heap, polish it up, and spout it off so convincingly in such detail for so long that everyone within hearing distance began to believe him.

In another life, Ben suspected he could have made a devastating politician.

Luckily for the citizens of the free galaxy, he was a Jedi, and was duty bound to use his powers for the greater, if not somewhat underhanded, good.

"Could you repeat the number?" asked the overworked, underpaid clerk who definitely didn't have time for this nonsense.

In the dull confines of a municipal customer service lobby, Ben's smile was deeply offensive. "Of course, it's nine five one one seven one zero zero zero zero eight six two five four..." the clerk hit the keys one by one, not looking at them as she did so.

"And you said this was for..." Her chair creaked as she leaned over to examine the twenty-page form that Ben had just spent two hours filling out. She scrolled. "...reimbursement for... expenses of childbirth?"

"Yes," the Jedi nodded. Through the perforated glass screen through which they'd been talking, the clerk looked at his lightsaber, blinked at it, and looked back up at him with a blank expression. Low-ranking civic employees were notoriously hard to read through the Force; their monotonous duties often lulled them into a natural state of mental shielding without their knowing. There were two published studies in the Archives on the phenomenon, and one ongoing.

Ben cheerfully interpreted the clerk's uninterested expression as a silent request for clarification.

"You see, earlier this year there was a supreme court witness in Jedi custody who was twelve months pregnant at the time - a Yontari, lovely people - and while she was in at our Temple she went into labor. Naturally childbirth is not a typical undertaking of our medical facilities, so when it came time to finish the paperwork, there was no clear avenue through which to appeal for reimbursement, and the Senate keeps our Order on a very tight budget, let me tell you, but a friend of a friend of mine let me know about this grant, and after talking it over with my superiors, I think we could apply for a cut of the funds - a very, very small one at that, it wouldn't really be a big deal - to cover this unusual circumstance, which will make life so much easier for myself and everyone else who has to fuss with the paperwork and-"

"Okay, whatever," in a break with all municipal employee codes of conduct, the clerk displayed an emotion. She waved her hand at him. "Give me a minute."
"Of course, thank you."

When Ben did not budge from where he stood, smiling and holding his hands politely in front of him, the clerk glared up at him through the glass. "Take a seat, sir," she instructed, jerking her head toward the sitting room.

"Oh, of course." Ben hurried back into the lobby and sat down in a chair that may or may not have been older than he was.

The clerk shook her head, uploaded the paperwork to a datachip, and took it away to process.

Once she was gone, Ben huffed and let his mask fall. He rubbed his head, trying to stave off the headache he'd been nursing since the night before. However useful the quagmires of bureaucratic process were, trudging through them was exhausting. He glanced at the chrono on the wall and did a double take. Had he really been here for four hours?

"No wonder he turned to the dark side…" Ben muttered to himself.

"You know, I don't think I've ever heard a Jedi huff," said Bail Organa, smiling as he came into the lobby.

"Ah, Senator, what in the galaxy are you doing here?" Ben smiled and stood to grasp Bail's arm in a friendly greeting.

"Just turning in my receipts," Bail waved a datachip in the air before depositing it into an inbox by the empty clerk's desk.

"Isn't that sort of thing interns' fodder?"

The Alderaanian shrugged. "I don't employ interns - not that kind, anyway. Besides, it gives me an excuse to get up and walk around." He glanced through the glass window. "Where's Alice?"

"The clerk?"

"Yes."

"Ah. She's running some paperwork for me, I believe."

"Oh." Bail gave Ben a quizzical look. "And what sort of paperwork do they send a Jedi Master to file?"

Ben would not break character, not even with Bail. "A reimbursement form for an obscure medical expense incurred earlier this quarter."

Bail raised an eyebrow, eyes bright with suspicion. "Really?"

"Yes. It took me forever to dig up for the occasion. I'll tell you about it another time, in a less public place. How have you been?"

"Well enough. And yourself?"

Ben shrugged nonchalantly. "I've been in the Treasurer's Bureau since it opened this morning," he said. Bail glanced at the chrono, horrorstruck. "I don't suppose you have time to keep a Jedi Master company for a few minutes, do you?"

Bail shrugged. "I don't see why not."
And so, they sat and talked, alone in the dingy waiting room of the lowest applications office in the Republic Treasurer's Bureau. Inevitably, the topic migrated to familiar territory.

"The Alaris Prime scandal continues," Bail said while cycling through the latest gossip, "though I doubt it can grow much larger."

"Oh?"

"Yes, Federation stock has plummeted ever since the Senate opened an investigation. Unfortunately, the Federation is so large and the offense so strange, it's not likely to bring anything to light for years, at least, and you know they have to be sweeping things under the rug in the meantime."

"Yes," Ben nodded, "but they won't be able to carry on with whatever they were doing on Alaris Prime, that's the important thing."

Bail shrugged. "I suppose so. Other than that, the buzz has gone mostly quiet, and to be honest I'm grateful for the break. The Coalition is trying to move forward with a…"

Inexplicably, Bail's words began to fade away, drowned out by a loud ringing noise. It took over Ben's mind as if from within, his headache grown to a peak degree. A wave of sudden dread washed over him.

"Ben?" Bail asked. The spell broke, and Ben looked up to find that the senator was looking at him in concern, one hand on his shoulder, "Ben, are you alright?"

"Yes," Ben blinked, and rubbed at his chest. "No. I don't… something's wrong," he said, searching his senses, trying to determine where the dread had come from. "I'm not sure what it is."

His commlink buzzed at him. He gathered himself and answered it. "Kenobi."

It was Feemor Gard. "Ben, are you on Coruscant?"

"Yes, why?"

"You'd better get to the temple."

The sinking feeling hit home, dropping a stone into his gut. "Why?"

"Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan are back from Kamino. There was… there was a Sith."

"What?" Ben straightened up in his chair, a shot of adrenaline making his hands feel cold, "What happened? Are they alright?"

"The Sith is dead. They got in late last night. Qui-Gon's okay, but Obi… he…" Feemor sighed shakily, and Ben could almost hear him run a hand through his hair. "It's really bad, Ben."

Ben's face slowly drained of blood, leaving him pale and swallowing hard.

"…Ben?"

"I'll be right there," the master replied, and closed the line. He put away his commlink and looked around himself as if seeing his surroundings for the first time. Bail was watching him with wide, concerned eyes.

"Do you have a cab?" he asked. Ben blinked at the question, as if just realizing he could not walk to the Temple.
"I took a shuttle here."

Bail nodded. "I'll drive you. Come on."

They left in a silent rush.

When Alice returned to her desk several minutes later and found the smiling Jedi master gone, she sighed, sent the processed form to the address listed on the paperwork, set the datapad aside, and forgot about it.

Across the curved horizon, the battle over a single life waged on.

Twenty hours ago, Vokara Che had arrived on Kamino and found the Kallidahin medical team buzzing around Obi-Wan Kenobi in the post-op room. He was unconscious, pale-faced and blue-lipped, despite the blood transfusion, the IV, and the oxygen line. It took several panicked minutes to communicate with the Kallidahin healers - who could apparently speak despite having no mouths - but at length the clones' resident medics were able to bring their Jedi comrades up to speed.

Obi-Wan had been struck across the face and torso with a full-powered lightsaber. The head surgeon communicated the full list of injuries in an even, calm tone:

Third degree burns across the face and torso; hairline fractures in the skull; broken left clavicle; trauma to the right orbital socket; corneal burns; ruptured right temporal and facial arteries; ruptured left subclavian artery; ruptured right temporal, left jugular, and left subclavian veins; torn left bicep; soft tissue damage to lips and the right eye; electrical nerve damage whose severity had yet to be determined; possible concussion; severe blood loss.

It was a grim litany, but Vokara was a professional. She refused to look shaken, even as her apprentice's naturally wide Nautolan eyes grew wider.

"We are trying to stabilize him, but his body is recovering from the hypovolemic shock very slowly. His genetic makeup is different than what we are used to."

The clones, yes; Vokara had seen some on her way in, and they'd done nothing to soothe the dread pooling in her gut. She wondered how much genetic modification they'd funneled into this program. She made a mental note to interrogate Ben about it later. "We need to get him back to Coruscant. I mean no disrespect to your abilities, but we Jedi take care of our own, and just as I am sure clones do, Jedi present their own challenges in the medical field." Namely, they did not require as much medication as normal humans, but needed significantly more Force-induced healing trances. Left to it, the Kallidahins would likely dose Obi-Wan into a fully-fledged coma, and Vokara would not allow that.

"I understand," said the clones' head healer. "But let us stabilize him first."

Vokara nodded, and looked past where they'd been talking to the supine figure of Obi-Wan, still surrounded by healers, tubes and bandages appearing as one conglomerate heap on top of him. There was hardly any visible part of him that looked familiar, save the long padawan's braid that dangled off the edge of the gurney. The monitors beeped away, indicating a high pulse and low blood pressure. As Vokara watched, a Kallidahin replaced the empty blood bag with another.

"How much blood did he lose?" she asked.

"Approximately two liters," the other healer replied. Vokara's eyes widened silently. "He is not out of the storm yet, Master Jedi. He is only at the eye."
Master Che only nodded. This she knew well; either he would recover, or he would take a turn for the worse. Either way, it would happen in split seconds while Vokara watched, and there would be very little she could do about it. And until then, she would have to wait.

"Tell me when he is in a condition to leave," she said to the Kallidahin, and glanced back through a window to an observation room where she knew Qui-Gon had been waiting for her. "I need to see to my colleague."

He was sitting in the exact same chair in the exact same position as the one she'd seen him in when they'd arrived. He was also covered in dried blood, but she did not mention it. Quietly, she sat down next to him.

"Is he going to be alright?" he asked at a whisper.

She would not lie to him. "I don't know." He said nothing. "Qui-Gon, what happened?"

He shook his head. "The Sith was here, claiming to be Sifo Dyas. We fought. Obi-Wan and I were separated. I… I was sure he was going to kill me, and then Obi-Wan appeared, drew his attention, and…" he shrugged helplessly. "There was a rayshield. I couldn't do anything but watch."

There were no words she could possibly respond with. She put her hand on his shoulder. "He's alive," she said, the words for now hanging in uncertain, unspoken tones. "The Sith did not win."

She paused a moment then asked, "Is the corpse still here?"

"I suppose," Qui-Gon realized. He hadn't thought of it. "Where we left it, unless someone moved it."

Vokara nodded. She looked over into the hospital room, where Luna was speaking with the medical staff and running her own tests on their patient. "I think my apprentice has things handled here for now. I will go see if this body has anything to offer us. As soon as Obi-Wan is stable, we are leaving for Coruscant."

Qui-Gon only nodded, eyes still riveted to the boy in the other room, face haggard and exhausted. Vokara wanted to say something to him, but in the end gave his shoulder a strong, wordless squeeze.

Four long hours later, after Obi-Wan's face regained some of its color and his vitals stabilized, they were ready to leave for Coruscant. He was still unconscious, which was alarming, but made him easier to handle for the trip. Qui-Gon refused to leave his side. After seven hours in hyperspace, they were making their approach into the Coruscant atmosphere. An hour after that, the Healing Hall staff was running out to the landing dock to receive them. All in all, the situation was progressing well - better than could be expected, even.

It was perhaps only predictable, then, that as soon as he was in the safety of the temple and Vokara had finally breathed a sigh of relief Obi-Wan decided to leave the eye of the storm and plunge head first into the tumult. Just like she had known hours ago, it had happened in a split second, and there was little she could do about it until the monitors were blaring.

"Master!" Luna sensed the disturbance first, "He's going into shock!"

Vokara ran into the room. On the bed, Obi-Wan's back was seized up in a half-arc, his injured arms stretched in involuntary contractions, twitching and straining against his IV line.

"What's happening?" asked Qui-Gon, who'd been at his apprentice's bedside. Vokara elbowed her way past him to grab Obi-Wan's wrist and force it down on the bed so he would not tear the needles out of his arm. "Neurogenic," she told Luna.
The Nautolan looked out the door where a junior apprentice had come to answer the code blue. "Get me thirty ccs of cortisone," she ordered, and the younger padawan darted off. She dug through her crash cart to prep the hypospray gun.

Obi-Wan's well-toned muscles were proving difficult to control, and Vokara had to lean her full weight on him to keep his arm from shooting off the bed and ripping out his lines. She bumped into Qui-Gon. "Get out of here," she growled, and after a brief hesitation, Qui-Gon left; he could only be in the way if he stayed. Luna took the cortisone shot from her fellow apprentice and slammed it into Obi-Wan's neck. The effect was not immediate; the alarms still blared, his muscles continued to twitch. Vokara let go of his arm and began compressing his chest.

"Why is he seizing?" Qui-Gon could hear the words through the observation window.

"I don't know," Vokara said, easing away as his heart rate normalized. She raised a penlight to look at his eyes - or eye, rather, the one that wasn't covered in bandages. She stormed from the room.

"I need an encephalo and doppramag in ER 1, now!" she announced to the room, and returned to assist Luna with Obi-Wan. Healers and apprentices began buzzing around the anteroom, running to and fro collecting equipment and answering comm calls in the head healer's absence.

"Excuse me," one squeezed passed Qui-Gon on her way to an office.

"Sorry, master," said another as he wheeled a large piece of equipment toward Obi-Wan's hospital room. Qui-Gon quietly backed away, not sure what to do or where to be. He found a chair and fell into it.

He sat there for some time, completely unaware of his surroundings, eyes fixed on the door to Obi-Wan's room, where healers and equipment and scanners and medicine ferried in and out, always in a rush, never stopping to tell him anything.

He wasn't sure how long he'd been sitting there when he heard,

"How is he?" It was a familiar voice, spoken with unfamiliar softness. Qui-Gon turned to look up at his visitor.

"Master? What are you doing here?"

Yan Dooku's eyes lingered on the door before he looked over at his former apprentice. "My investigation has led me back to the Core. I was reporting to Master Windu when he told me…" He glanced back up when Luna jogged quickly into the hospital room. "I came as soon as I could."

Qui-Gon sighed and leaned into his hands. "I don't know. I don't know if anyone knows."

Dooku watched Qui-Gon for a few moments before craning his neck to look at his bloodstained, scorched tunic. "You really ought to change, you know." No response. He examined the tilt of Qui-Gon's shoulders, the lines in the muscle of his jaw. "Has anyone seen to your injuries?" Again, no response. Dooku sighed, and excused himself. He returned a short time later with a clean change of clothes. He gently pulled Qui-Gon up from his chair and found an empty room. He took a bottle of bacta from a supply shelf without asking and unscrewed it while Qui-Gon peeled off his shirt, revealing burns all over his back and his arm; the latter were already beginning to blister. Dooku did not look surprised. They said nothing to each other as Dooku carefully tended to the wounds and wrapped them in bandages. Qui-Gon's gaze was riveted to the door, as if he could see around the corner and through the wall to where his apprentice lay. Dooku sighed.

"The Force has him just as it ever did, Padawan," he said, softly. Qui-Gon looked down at the
ground, unable to respond. "You did all you could."

Qui-Gon did not believe him, and they both knew it, but there was nothing else to do.

The following morning, before most of the temple was awake, Feemor and Aola burst into the Halls with Aola in front, tears still drying on her cheeks.

"She saw it in a vision," Feemor explained when Vokara had come to investigate. Shaken, feeling guilty for not having foreseen the disaster, Aola was glued to the window into Obi-Wan's room as the hours ticked on, occasionally reaching up to angrily wipe tears away. Eventually, when Obi-Wan's vitals had been stable for long enough, they'd allowed Qui-Gon to go back into the room. The master sat down in a chair by the edge of the bed and tried to pick around the bandages to brush the boy's cheek. He was still unconscious.

Feemor came to stand beside Aola at the window. "Do you think he'll be okay?" she asked, needing assurance. Feemor didn't know what to say. There were so many bandages, so many tubes and needles, so little response. He'd heard the healers muttering to each other about electric shock, optic neurosis, concussions, comas, and burns. He'd heard them planning a shift schedule for twenty-four hour watch. Inside the room, Luna wheeled in a large scanning machine and positioned it over the right side of Obi-Wan's face; it was the third time they'd run this particular test that day.

"I hope so," he said numbly. Aola sniffled and rubbed at her eyes.

Feemor stepped away and pulled out his commlink. It was bizarre to see Obi-Wan like this; just days ago, he'd been the talk of the temple after his performance in the dojo. And now…

"Kenobi."

"Ben, are you on Coruscant?"

Intensive care units had an incredibly distinctive, pungent smell. There were whole boulevards in Ben's memory paved with that scent, and even after they'd left Obi-Wan's bedside to congregate in Vokara's office, he found himself wandering down mental roads while Vokara tried to explain the severity of Obi-Wan's injuries.

"But the Sith is dead," Ben repeated for perhaps the third time. In his mind, this was paramount above even his own self's safety.

"Yes," Vokara nodded. "I saw the corpse myself. Struck through the heart, with this." She placed something on the desk in front of her.

It took a moment for Ben to recognize what it was.

"If he had cut the thing any more to the right or left, only one of the blades would've worked, and he would most likely be dead by now." Vokara nodded at the jagged edge of the saberstaff part. "The Force guided his hand, by my oath."

Ben tried to imagine the fight in his mind. He shook his head. "But… how did he have time after he was struck?"

Vokara turned around to pick up a small bin. Metal pieces rattled inside. She placed it on the desk for Ben's inspection. "The Sith stopped to gloat."
He picked at the pieces of his first lightsaber, the casing sliced neatly in two, the crystal in shards. His jaw dropped slightly. "Gloat?" he wondered aloud.

"Qui-Gon was locked on the other side of the door. He was watching."

Ben looked up at her, and she looked back. A memory of what-had-been passed between them; he had mentioned before that he'd watched Qui-Gon die. And now…

Ben let out a long, uncertain sigh. "He's alive," he said, as if to assure himself. "He'll recover."

"I hope so," said the healer, "but I highly doubt he'll make a full recovery."

Ben frowned at her. "How do you mean?"

"It's about time Ben brought you around to meet us," Feemor grinned, forcibly willing lightheartedness into the room. "He talks about you often, I'm glad to finally put a face to the sparkling reputation." Bail Organa shook his hand with a similarly forced smile.

"I did not realize Master Kenobi was in the habit of exaggeration," the senator said, "but I'm pleased to meet his Jedi family."

"Of course." Feemor glanced back behind them, where Obi-Wan lay in a strong healing trance with Qui-Gon sitting at his side, as he had been for hours already. "I would introduce you to Qui-Gon, but…" When Feemor turned back around, his face was somber. "I don't think now is a good time."

"No, I'd say not," Bail nodded, heart grieved to see someone so young in such a state. "I should have liked to have met them under better circumstances."

"Perhaps next you see them, you will," Ben said, coming up between the two men. "Thank you for escorting me, Bail."

"Of course."

"So how bad is it?" asked Feemor, who'd seen Vokara draw Ben aside into her office. Bail joined Feemor in looking to Ben for answers.

Ben looked straight ahead into Obi-Wan's room and sighed. "It's going to be a long road," he said, "but… she thinks he'll be alright."

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*The Second Sith*. That's what they were calling it. The story of Kamino and Obi-Wan's heroics at the cloning facility spread like wildfire, and in its wake came horrible misinformation.

Garen Muln, Reeft, and Bant Eerin had burst into the Halls the day after the rescue operation, whipped up into a panic having heard that their friend Obi-Wan had been killed by a Sith. Upon seeing him alive - if unconscious - even Garen had cried.

Others, including Master Drallig, had been under the impression that it was Qui-Gon who was in critical condition, and were surprised to see him in the commissary - even if he did look like death warmed over.

For the time being, the Council was making no public pronouncement on the matter of the Sith. They debriefed Qui-Gon not once but twice about Kamino, the Clones, the Sith and the Sith's assumption of Dyas' identity. The third time they'd summoned him, it had been to a private meeting with Mace
Windu and Master Yoda, who had only wanted to know how Obi-Wan was doing.

It was impossible to say, Qui-Gon had told them. He was still unconscious.

That had been two days ago. Now, it was around four in the morning, and Qui-Gon had fallen asleep in the chair at Obi-Wan's bedside. Over the course of a week he'd made this vigil into an art form, having learned which way to fold his legs without cutting circulation and where to lay his head so that his neck developed one crick instead of five. Obi-Wan's left arm was folded up in a sling while his collarbone healed, so Qui-Gon had reached across his waist to hold his right hand, careful not to disturb the needles protruding from his arm.

As the pre-dawn darkness wrapped its thickest fingers around the horizon, Obi-Wan's hand twitched weakly against Qui-Gon's. Being asleep, the master's grip gave way, gently sliding off onto the blankets.

An unbandaged eye slid open, delirious and confused. It swiveled around in an unrushed search. It passed over a light, and several ceiling tiles, and another light, and a cabinet, and finally landed on Qui-Gon's disheveled form; bent over, head turned away, hair untied and matted on the bedside. "Master?" Obi-Wan rasped, trying to frown. He couldn't remember having ever seen Qui-Gon's hair untied. He squinted slightly. He couldn't remember having ever seeing his hair look so grey, either. Did Qui-Gon know how silver his head was? Was he asleep? Obi-Wan reached out over their bond in a clumsy attempt to see if he was awake or not.

Qui-Gon stiffened. Fueled by adrenaline, he woke up, sat up, and stared. Awake for only seconds, he was still considerably groggy and looked as though he did not believe what his eyes were telling him. He looked at Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan looked back, and blinked, and then frowned. "Weren't we off-planet?" the apprentice asked, voice quiet and raspy. His lip wrinkled in disgust. "This smells like Coruscant."

Qui-Gon stared for a moment longer, and then broke. He let out a sigh, or perhaps a sob - just one, very shaky and very out of character. He took up Obi-Wan's hand again, and very nearly hugged him before he remembered the injuries. Instead, he gripped the hand harder and set his head face-down on Obi-Wan's stomach. "You're alive," he said, voice cracking. "Force, I thought I'd lost you."

Obi-Wan was not sure what to say. The sheer vulnerability in Qui-Gon's voice made him feel uncomfortable and guilty. He tried to think back in time, back to some moment when he must have done something to end up here, to have turned Qui-Gon's hair grey and to have made him cry. A citadel of foggy, impenetrable walls stood around his memories. He wondered if he was on any strong medications. "What... did I do?" he asked aloud. Qui-Gon raised his head and if Obi-Wan's vision hadn't been swimming from days of slumber, he would've seen the red rims and the weary bags. As it was, he only squinted more determinedly at the man and asked, "I kriffed up, didn't I?"

Qui-Gon let out a laugh, tears notwithstanding. "No," he said around another laugh, brushing his padawan's cheek, "no, you did the exact opposite of kriffing up."

"Are you sure?"

"I was there."

"Oh." A pause. Obi-Wan tried to remember again, and failed. He gave up. "What did I do?"

"You killed a Sith."
Obi-Wan's uncovered eye went wide. "I what?"

Qui-Gon was unable to repress his laughter any longer, euphoric to hear his apprentice's voice again. "You defeated a Sith Lord on your own," he said with unabashed pride.

"Oh," Obi-Wan said, and looked away in thought. He tried to move his head, and winced. "Oh. Not before he got to me, I guess."

"I'm afraid not."

"Huh." The drugs and the drowsiness made the trauma easier to accept. Obi-Wan clenched and unclenched his hands. He looked down at the easier-to-see left arm, which was heavily bandaged and resting in a sling. He then attempted to look at his right arm, but his vision was obstructed. He frowned and very slowly reached up to touch his face, the right side of which was wrapped in a bandage. Qui-Gon could see his left eye moving back and forth, back and forth, testing. Obi-Wan put his hand down.

"There's something wrong with my eye, isn't there," he said.

Qui-Gon's smile faded and he set his jaw. He'd told Vokara he'd be the one to do it. "The Sith struck you with a lightsaber," he explained. "Your eye bore the brunt of the damage."

Obi-Wan blinked, and blinked again. Qui-Gon could not have said what the boy felt underneath the bandage. "Oh," the apprentice said at last. "Is it gone?"

"No."

"Is it functional?"

"Master Che does not think so."

"Will it recover?"

"...Master Che does not think so."

Pause.

"Oh."

Pause.

Obi-Wan smacked his lips, tongue thick in his mouth and tasting of idle breath. He binked slowly, looking about the room with his one functional eye in a drowsy haze. "Well, good job I've got two of them then, isn't it?" he pointed out, and let his head sink back further into his pillow.

Qui-Gon snorted, running a hand through his grey, grey hair and shaking his head. "Yes, padawan," he nodded, hiding the tears in his eyes by rubbing the bridge of his nose, "yes, I'd say it's a very good job indeed."

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Master and apprentice shared a quiet half hour together before a healer peeked in and realized that the comatose patient had awoken. After that, it had been all tests and more tests, and please spit into this, follow this light with your eye, don't worry this won't hurt a bit (it did), tell me your name, your age, and the current Supreme Chancellor. Obi-Wan passed all of the cognitive tests with flying colors, dispelling Vokara's fears of possible brain damage. He did have unusual trouble counting backwards from one hundred, and could still not remember anything from Kamino - aside from the
fact that flying through the tumultuous Kaminoan atmosphere had been, and this quote went on Vokara's official report, "the most uncivilized, awful experience of my life." Obi-Wan had said this straight faced while lying bedridden and wrapped in bandages; the irony did not seem to occur to him.

However, beyond mild confusion and what was probably a low-grade concussion, Obi-Wan's brain was just as functional as ever. In fact, it was too functional. The day after he'd woken up, Vokara had come into his room to find him trying to sit up under his own power. She should've stopped him, but he'd looked so determined she'd stood by and watched.

"I'd like speak with you about the conditions of my release," he said, Corebred accent prim and proper.

She lowered her datapad. "Is that so?" she asked, fascinated, as he rocked himself back and forth until he could appear as though he was sitting upright.

"Yes," he said, with dignity. "I understand I've been here for some time, and now that I'm awake, I think I am more than fit to go home."

She stared at him, attempting to find appropriate words. She knew from experience that Obi-Wan was an incredibly bright young man, a talented scholar and a strategist without peer in his generation. The fact that he could be so incredibly stupid when it came to his own health was one of the thirty-eight wonders of the galaxy. "Padawan Kenobi, you've been in a coma for eight days, you have burns across your entire body, you have a broken collarbone, a concussion, and one of your eyes has been blinded."

"Even so," said the Padawan, dead set on negotiating, "the point still stands. I believe the Yavin Code grants me the right to refuse treatment."

"The Yavin Code was written for prisoners."

"Yes, it was."

Vokara sighed and made a swift note on her datapad. "Very well," she said, and propped her 'pad moodily on her hip. Blank refusal would only goad him on and prove his point about prisoners. She would play his game. "If I let you go, you will of course revert to the custody of your master," she let that sink in. "The master who watched you almost die." Another calculated pause. "The one whom only I have the power to keep from hovering at your side twenty-four hours a day." An even longer pause. "Would you rather be my prisoner, or Qui-Gon's?"

Obi-Wan opened his mouth, and hesitated, and then let it close again. Betrayal flashed across his features.


Over the next few days, Obi-Wan received more visitors than he'd ever had as a healthy person. Mace Windu was one of the first. As soon as Vokara had given Obi-Wan's brain a clean bill of health, the Master of the Order had arrived to see what the boy remembered of Kamino. The memories were coming back in bits and pieces, but the most pertinent details remained shrouded.

Incidentally, while he did not remember the Sith or the fight, Obi-Wan did remember the clone, Cody. "Is he alright?" he'd asked in the middle of his conversation with Mace. "I hope I didn't get him into any trouble."
"I don't know," the Korun had said from the apprentice's bedside. Somehow, he was not surprised that Obi-Wan had managed to meet, learn the name of, and befriend a clone in the middle of a crisis. "But we'll be in close contact with Kamino until this mess is sorted out. I can ask."

"I would appreciate it."

Mace only nodded, and stood from his seat. "If you remember anything else about the Sith, I'd like to hear about it."

"Of course, Master Windu." Obi-Wan had tried to bow from his bed. Mace put out a hand.

"Easy, padawan," he'd chuckled, putting a hand on his shoulder to ease him back into bed. There was a look in his eye like he wanted to say something, but held back. Eventually, just before he left he turned and said, "It's good to see you in one piece. Get some rest."

Later on, Master Yoda and Master Dooku had visited as well. They'd both been interested to hear if his memory had returned, but more interested to see with their own eyes that he was, in fact, alright. He saw Feemor and Aola, who were both so elated to see him awake they'd nearly cried. Aola in particular could not contain herself. "It was bad, Obi," she'd repeated multiple times, "I was so scared for you." It was difficult comprehending how close to death you'd come when you couldn't remember most of it.

After four days, Vokara finally let Garen, Bant, and Reeft into the room so they could see their friend. They'd celebrated and laughed and all promised to hug Obi-Wan within an inch of his life as soon as he wasn't sporting any broken bones and burns.

"Yeah, of course Kenobi's got to show off for the ladies," Garen had patted Obi-Wan's bandages in teasing, lighthearted way. "Can't wait to see that scar!"

They all laughed, and so did Obi-Wan, but when they'd bid their goodbyes his smile faded fast. After the strongest medications and the delirium of sleep had worn off, the severity of Obi-Wan's injuries was beginning to occur to him. The last time they'd redone the dressings over his eye, he'd been unconscious. He had not seen the damage, nor had he seen - or attempted to see - anything with his right eye. Master Che had told him already in plain language that he would likely not ever be able to see out of the eye again.

"As a whole, the eye is still intact," she'd said, in a clinical way. She had to work hard to look at him as she spoke. "But nearly every part of it has been damaged. The worst offender is the optic nerve. As far as I can tell, you absorbed a massive arc of electricity from the lightsaber, and it entered your body through your eye. The only reason it didn't kill you is because you instinctively absorbed the energy with the Force's aid." Which also explained the neurogenic shock and seizures. "Unfortunately, your eye did most of the absorbing."

"So you're saying…" he blinked, and could not help but wonder if blinking would always look so monocular. "...the nerve is sort of... fried?"

"Very fried, actually," the healer corrected. "I'm so sorry, padawan."

Obi-Wan tried to save face. He even tried to hope, though he was not normally one for optimism. He stood up, and began walking again, exercising his left arm to coax the muscles around his collarbone to hold it in place on their own. They removed the bandages from his arm and shoulder to reveal a nasty bruise around the break and a nastier line of scar tissue. But the bandages over his eye remained. The scans and the nerve tests and every healer who looked at him were all compelled to share Vokara's conclusions about his vision. He wasn't sure how to accept it.
"You can keep it on for a while longer if you like," Vokara offered, after she'd told him that his face was healed enough to remove the bandage. Qui-Gon was in the room with him too, but said nothing. Obi-Wan swallowed, toes curled in anxiety as he sat on the side of his bed in loose-fitting robes. He drew in a shaky breath and said,

"No, it's fine." But it wasn't, and they all knew it. He tried to be brave. "It'll have to come off sooner or later."

Vokara glanced at Qui-Gon, who nodded hesitantly. She took up a small pair of scissors and began cutting away the gauze and dressings. She made sure the bandages were completely disentangled from his hair and his neck before she pulled them away. They revealed a gnarled scar, still livid with bacta and healing scabs, that ran diagonally from his right temple to the left side of his chin. It ran directly across his right eye, which was half closed, bloodshot, and already glazed over with a milky film.

Obi-Wan blinked his eyes into the dull, half-fullness of his new life. Though the weight and heat of the bandages was gone, the right side of the room remained a colorless abyss. He sucked in a shaky breath and held it as tightly as he clung to the edge of his bed.

Qui-Gon turned to Vokara, eyes begging her for a moment of privacy. With an understanding nod, the healer retreated from the room and closed the door, leaving Master and apprentice alone.


"Obi-Wan," said Qui-Gon, coming closer. He put his hand on his padawan's shoulder and gripped it hard. Obi-Wan's stiff body swayed under the pressure. The silence broke Qui-Gon's heart. He moved his free hand to brush Obi-Wan's padawan braid aside and grip his other shoulder. Obi-Wan tried to watch him, but could not see his right side. His chin began to quiver. Qui-Gon stepped closer still. The pity and sadness in his eyes was too much for Obi-Wan to bear, so he looked down. Qui-Gon gripped his shoulders more tightly. "Son," he whispered.

Obi-Wan's will broke. His chin wavered and he let out his breath in a crash. After struggling with his mouth, he whispered, "I wish Tahl were here."

Qui-Gon put a hand behind Obi-Wan's neck and pulled him into his chest, careful of his injuries. Obi-Wan clung to his tunic and sobbed. The master held him, one hand in his hair and the other wrapped around his shoulders. "I do too," Qui-Gon told his apprentice in a thick voice. They stayed in the embrace for a long time, Jedi reserve swallowed by circumstance. There were no spectators to cast judgement on their attachment.

Eventually, Qui-Gon pulled away and bent to look his apprentice in the eyes - eye, rather, for the right was mangled and blind. "She is with us in the Force. The same Force that guided her will guide you."

Obi-Wan made himself nod, even though there was no feeling in it. His scar burned; where it ran across his brow and his downturned mouth, all the way to his shoulder and his bicep. The pain made him want to cry, but saline made the sting worse. His chest shuddered with the effort of restraint.

"I'm so proud of you, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. The apprentice tried to smile, but hearing his master's voice waver made it hard.

"I try," he shrugged.
Qui-Gon gave an absurd, bittersweet laugh. "Do or do not, there is no try."

Obi-Wan did not have the strength for a rebuttal. He leaned back toward Qui-Gon without really meaning to. Haunted by the memory of Obi-Wan covered in blood, lips blue, face mangled, Qui-Gon leaned down and kissed the top of his head.

"You did, and you will do perfectly. Rest well, padawan. It'll be alright."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes, letting the darkness comfort him, however misleading it was in its uniformity. "Yes, Master," he replied obediently.

Qui-Gon patted his neck. "Good man."

Over the next several days, Obi-Wan tried to think of his handicap as normal. It would take time, perhaps longer than he'd be here in the Halls. But even as he healed and grieved, life carried on.

Obi-Wan hadn't wondered why Ben hadn't visited him until he showed up apologizing for it. "They've been interrogating me over everything. You'd think I'd been elected to the Council again," he'd grumbled to the room. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan looked equally shocked.

"Again?" the apprentice asked, horror mixed with awe. "You were a Councilor?"

Ben looked between the two, nonplussed. It was very easy to forget what he had and hadn't told his closest friends. "Yes," he said, at length. "The youngest in centuries, I think. Didn't I tell you that?"

Qui-Gon's expression alone would have provided the answer. He turned an accusatory eye on his apprentice, who shrugged animatedly, whole body communicating a silent "don't look at me." The master looked back at his grown apprentice with a new sense of betrayal and, beneath it, pride. "You know, I don't know why I'm surprised." Ben chuckled. "They're wrapped up about Kamino, then?"

"Yes, it'll be an ongoing thing for some time. Dooku's been sent back out in search of Dyas' killers."

"Any leads?" Qui-Gon asked. Ben shook his head.

"None that he'll tell me about."

"I see." It was Yan Dooku's way.

"They actually want to talk to you again," Ben told his Master. "I told them I'd let you know."

"Of course."

"About the Sith?" Obi-Wan asked, standing up slowly from his bed and adjusting his sling. He'd started to remember details about the fight, and had begun keeping a journal to iron out the chronology. He'd promised to give a report to the Council, but had not yet had opportunity.

"No, actually," Ben glanced at his younger self, and back at Qui-Gon. "They just want to speak with Qui-Gon."

"Oh," said Obi-Wan, and sat back down in confusion. A silent conversation passed between Qui-Gon and Ben. Qui-Gon braced himself, gave Obi-Wan a lingering glance, nodded, and left.

"What was that about?" Obi-Wan asked as his master left.

"Who can say?" He shrugged.
"I should think you could, Master Councilor," he teased.

Ben chuckled and lowered himself into a seat. He glanced over Obi-Wan's injures - the scar, the arm, the eye. "How are you?" he asked.

"Oh, you know," Obi-Wan shrugged, and said in a forced casual tone, "half blind, my shoulder won't heal, still can't remember everything that happened, but... all in all, I guess I'm alright." He scratched absently at his arm. "Scar itches like the nine hels."

Ben tried to smile, but it came out pitifully. "I am so sorry," he said quietly, "about all of it." Obi-Wan shook his head.

"I don't need you to be sorry... I just need to..." He looked around, having to move his head a great deal more than he was used to. "Heal. And stop bumping into things. And get out of this Force-forsaken prison." He looked up at Ben in hopeful epiphany. "Councilors outrank healers, don't they?"

"I'm not a Councilor anymore. And no, they don't."

"Damn."

Ben smiled at his pluck. "Qui-Gon told me about the fight," he said. Obi-Wan looked up at him.

"Oh?" Even when Obi-Wan could not remember the event, his master had been unwilling to regale him with details. Now that he did remember, they hadn't talked about it.

"You're lucky to be alive."

"Yeah," Obi-Wan looked at his bare feet. "I know." He shuffled, kicking a small bit of gauze on the floor that had escaped the cleaning droids' clutches. "It was worse last time, wasn't it?" He asked. Ben looked up at him.

"What you mean?"

"Last time it was him. With that Sith you killed. Except he didn't make it. And I - you watched."

Ben stared at him, too surprised to say anything. He had told many people about Qui-Gon's death in his past life - Vokara, Qui-Gon himself, Mace, Dooku. But never his younger self. Obi-Wan sighed and explained, "When I fell, and he went to... gloat, or whatever he was doing, I saw it. I don't know how, maybe it was like a vision, a memory. Like what happened when you first arrived here, with your saber. I just... I saw what happened before. I knew I didn't want it to happen again, no matter what side of the door I was on." He mustered a laugh and brushed his dead eye. "All in all, I think it's a small price to pay."

It was true, but because he was not wearing the scars of that price, Ben could not agree. Instead, he said, "There is a saying... over the past several years I've found it to be entirely true. History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme." He gave Obi-Wan a smile. "And bittersweet as it can be, I should like to think that this rhyme is better than the last."

Obi-Wan nodded, both eyes crinkling equally as he smiled. "Yeah," he said, scarred skin making his smile more crooked than it used to be, "I guess so."

His skin still itched terribly.
That night, Obi-Wan stayed up late reading, too-big hospital robes pooling around his waist. Vokara had promised to discharge him the following day, if he passed all of his tests and behaved well, so he was attempting to occupy his mind so that he didn't end up overstretching his shoulder or picking at his burns.

He was so occupied in his book that he did not notice Qui-Gon standing in the doorway, watching him. It'd been nearly three weeks since Obi-Wan's fight with the Sith. Looking back on the drama of those first hours of crisis, it was absurd in the best way to see Obi-Wan now: calm and collected once more, ever the scholar even when hospitalized. He tilted his head to the right in order to read, now, giving him a perpetually curious look. Qui-Gon watched as his padawan levitated the datapad and scrolled with his right hand, which was not in a sling.

Padawan.

That's what he'd come here about. Adjusting the package he carried, Qui-Gon knocked on the door. Obi-Wan looked up.

"Evening," the apprentice said.

"Good book?"

Obi-Wan shrugged and set it aside. "It'll put me to sleep and keep me from scratching, which apparently is a cardinal sin in these parts."

Qui-Gon chuckled. Obi-Wan peered at the thing he carried. "What's that?"

The master came to sit down on the bed, and Obi-Wan tucked his feet out of the way. "Master Windu gave me permission to return this to you," he said, setting the bin down between them. Obi-Wan saw what it was and let out a noise of despair.

"Oh," he whined, picking up the halves of his lightsaber gingerly, horrified at its demise. "I liked that saber," he moaned, remembering the day he'd made it as a young teen. "And the crystal? Did it…?"

Qui-Gon dug around in the bin of mechanical gore and produced several shards. Obi-Wan let out another, even sadder noise. "Nooo," he drew out, cradling it. Qui-Gon's chuckle was pitiful.

"I'm sorry, padawan."

Obi-Wan sighed. "Oh, it's alright." He set the lightsaber's corpse back into the bin, gazing down at the carnage with nostalgia. "We had a good run." Still, a lightsaber was a Jedi's life. He could not continue his training without it. "I don't suppose we could go to Ilum after Master Che lets me go?"

Qui-Gon chuckled. "That will be your decision," the master said, ignoring it when Obi-Wan gave him a puzzled frown. He began digging around in the bin.

"There's more?"

"Not exactly. Turn your head."

Conditioned by years of trust, Obi-Wan did so without question. Qui-Gon pulled Obi-Wan's padawan braid over his shoulder and let it fall through finger and thumb, measuring it with his eyes, seeing the years' markers and how much it'd grown. He came to the end and regarded the whole.

"I'm going to miss this," he said.
Obi-Wan was frowning, watching Qui-Gon very carefully. "Master?"

"The council asked to speak with me earlier," he said, sitting back slightly, eyes lingering on the braid before looking up to see Obi-Wan's furrowed brow. "They're making me do what I should have done months ago." He gave Obi-Wan a moment to figure it out, but the apprentice only stared, and eventually shook his head, begging the question. Qui-Gon smiled. "They want to knight you."

Obi-Wan leaned back slowly, face trying to go red and white at the same time. "What?" he said. Qui-Gon's smile became a laugh.

"You're surprised?"

"I… You're recommending me for the Trials?"

Qui-Gon frowned. "Obi-Wan, you've just faced and defeated a Sith Lord. The Council is recognizing that as your Trials. They want to knight you."

This was against every single one of the many life scenarios that Obi-Wan had planned for himself. His face wrinkled in baffled disgust. "But… no," he said, catching Qui-Gon by surprise. "They can't just… they can't just do that!" He was indignant. It wasn't right. "It's not traditional!"

Qui-Gon guffawed, leaning back to look at the ceiling and sighing. "Force keep you, Padawan, only you would be upset by such an honor." He looked back down at the man, smug. "Like it or not, you're breaking traditions left and right."

Obi-Wan huffed. He stared, miffed, into a corner as he processed the news. At length, he ran a hand over his hair, and Qui-Gon could see that it was shaking. It had been a long few weeks.

The master reached out to his braid again. "But before we get to that, if you'd let me, one last time?"

The reality of what was happening hit Obi-Wan in the gut. He couldn't speak. He nodded instead.

"Alright," Qui-Gon said, and unbound the padawan braid one last time. He took off the markers and combed it out, split the section into three and recited the familiar analogy that he'd recited to this man so many, many times. The master, the student, the Force, woven together as one. Markers for the years, the trials, the victories and defeats. At last, they came to the end, and Qui-Gon braided the hair until there was no more left. "I could not decide what color was most suited to these past few weeks. But because your master is as much a rule breaker as you now are," he said, digging around in the bin he'd brought, "I found a new color that I think suits the occasion."

It was a small, thin copper wire taken from the wreckage of Obi-Wan's lightsaber. It was scorched black in places from the Sith's blade, but shone bright in the light. Qui-Gon finished binding the hair and let it fall to the apprentice's chest. The metallic wire added an unfamiliar weight. Obi-Wan looked down at it, and then up at his master. Qui-Gon smiled, full of pride.

Not needing to exchange any words, Obi-Wan leaned forward and hugged the taller man, his arm and sling sandwiched between them. When they pulled away, Obi-Wan was smiling. "I suppose you're glad to be rid of me, ready to find the next pathetic life form unlucky enough to suffer your heresies."

Qui-Gon laughed, but shook his head. "No," he said, smile fading to a content, quiet thing. "No, I've known for some time, you'll be my last apprentice."

Obi-Wan was genuinely surprised by this, and almost sad. He mustered a wry grin. "Stop when you're ahead?"
"Stop before all my hairs are grey," Qui-Gon corrected. Obi-Wan laughed.

"Of course, Master, whatever you say."

Qui-Gon stood from the bed, collecting his things. "You know," he said, "you really ought to get used to calling me Qui-Gon." Obi-Wan's face wrinkled up in revulsion. Calling Qui-Gon Qui-Gon? To his face? "I'm not sure I'm ready for that," he said, a statement which opened the mental floodgates to all the things in life that he was not ready for. Qui-Gon laughed.

"Get some rest, Obi-Wan. The day after tomorrow - they expect you to be there at dawn."

Once his master was gone, Obi-Wan couldn't contain his smile. He did not get much sleep that night.

The day after tomorrow, it was still dark on Coruscant. They must've collaborated with Vokara for the scheduling. Almost as soon as he'd been discharged, Obi-Wan began preparing for the the traditional day-long pilgrimage to the Hall of Knighthood.

"You could at least rest first, you're not yet healed," Qui-Gon had tried to convinced him. Obi-Wan had refused.

"This is one tradition I am not going to break."

Qui-Gon had shrugged and let him go on his way. He would, after all, be making his own decisions from now on - and his own mistakes.

Obi-Wan abandoned his sling for a less restrictive brace, worn under his clothes, and assumed the traditional outfit. Barefoot, no tabards, only breeches, a pale tunic and a simple cloth belt. He ascended the Tranquility Spire alone, braid weighing heavily on his chest.

He spent the day meditating in solitude, as he was meant to. He thought of the Sith, but only as they fit into the greater picture of balance. He thought of his master, and Dooku, Yoda, Aola and Feemor, his friends, all the people who had helped him along this path. He thought of Ben. He thought of the man he could have become, in another life, and the man that this life had made him.

He found himself standing on the ledge of a mountaintop. The path beneath him was just wide enough to support his two feet. It looked familiar. The breeze brushed his shoulder, and he was surprised to feel no braid on it. He turned and looked behind him. Far away, standing on a darker, lower path was a fifteen year old boy, lost in harsh winds and holding onto everything he thought he knew in the naivety of youth. He was staring so hard at where his feet were, he did not look up and see his future self. Obi-Wan turned back and looked ahead. His blind eye did not bother him here in the mental plane, and he could see clearly for miles.

The path at his feet wound up and down and around, over more mountains and paths than he'd ever imagined he'd cross. Far ahead, there were dark clouds and unfamiliar territories. He looked back down at his fifteen-year old self far below. While he watched, the boy took a single step. One foot in front of the other. Obi-Wan looked at his own feet and, with a practiced ease and assurance he did not remember possessing when he was that boy years ago, he took a step. The path was firm beneath him.

He opened his eyes. It was not quite dawn.

He rose and ascended the rest of the way to the Hall of Knighthood, a chamber he'd never seen
before. He walked to the center as he knew was customary and stood, head bowed, hands folded in front of him. The masters gathered around. Mace, Yoda, the Councilors, Feemor, Cin Drallig, even Vokara Che was here. He repressed slight disappointment that Yan Dooku could not be present, but the feeling left him when he saw Qui-Gon, going to stand between Yoda and Mace.

One by one, the masters ignited their sabers. The glow cast light and shadows over the prospective graduate, illuminating the fresh scars of his trials for all to see.

Mace Windu let the rites. "We are all Jedi," he said, words that everyone here had heard before except the apprentice before them. "The Force speaks through us. Through our actions, the Force proclaims itself and what is real. Today we are here to acknowledge what the Force has proclaimed."

A pause, and then, the oath: "Who seeks the title of Knight of this Order?"

"I do," said Obi-Wan. He'd studied the responses obsessively the day before.

"By what name do you call yourself?"

"I am only called as a child of the Force."

"Well said," replied Mace, per tradition. Then it was Qui-Gon's turn to step forward, face set with appropriate formality, eyes shining with pride. He held his saber out in front of him.

"Do you, Obi-Wan Kenobi, swear to follow the Force's guidance within this Order, and to follow a Knight's mandate and mission?"

"I do."

"And do you swear to protect the life, the good, and the innocent of this galaxy so long as the Force gives you strength?"

"I do."

"And do you swear," Qui-Gon's voice slowed, heavy with intention, "to uphold the light and resist the dark, at all costs to your person and reputation?"

'Reputation' was Qui-Gon's own addition, Obi-Wan knew. He barely resisted the urge to smile. "I do," he said.

"Then I will ask you to take a knee."

Obi-Wan knelt, heard pounding with adrenaline. Qui-Gon lowered his saber to his left shoulder. "Then by the right of the Council," he moved the saber to his right shoulder, and Obi-Wan breathed a little harder as the blade disappeared from his field of vision. "And the will of the Force,"

Hisss

Without being able to see it, Obi-Wan caught the braid in his hand as it fell.

"Rise, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Jedi Knight."

Obi-Wan rose. If it were not for his dimples, he would have succeeded in keeping a straight face. He bowed to his master - former master - and in a motion that surprised the new knight, Qui-Gon bowed back, chest dipping lower than Obi-Wan's had.

Obi-Wan then bowed again to the assembly, and turned to walk toward the spiral stairwell at the back of the hall. According to tradition, he would continue on and retrace his steps down the spire.
The weight of his own padawan brain swung in his fist.

He stopped in the middle of the hall; in the middle of tradition itself. You're breaking traditions left and right.

Quietly, with dignity and poise, Obi-Wan turned and walked back up into the circle. Even Qui-Gon looked surprised. He produced the braid, the singed end still smoldering, and wound it into a coil. This, he pressed into his master's palm.

You taught me everything I know, Qui-Gon, he said. Including how and when to break the rules.

Qui-Gon laughed out loud, startling several of the members there, and bowed again, smile in place. Thank you, Obi-Wan.

As Obi-Wan turned away to leave - properly, this time - he saw Yoda grinning.

Aola, Garen, Bant, and Reeft had arranged a massive reception for him when he emerged from the spire. Now infamous throughout the temple for his heroics as well as his remarkable recovery, there were apprentices, and knights, and masters, and healers, and even some younglings there to congratulate him.

"You know this means I outrank you now," Obi-Wan teased Garen, flicking his braid patronizingly.

"Just because you're a stuffy overachiever doesn't mean I have to listen to you. I've known you since you were in diapers, remember that."

"And I changed those diapers, remember that," said a booming voice. Obi-Wan's old creche master, Lor Garoon, came elbowing his way through the masses. He laughed upon seeing Obi-Wan turn bright red. "Well done, lad," he said, "you've done your clanmaster proud."

"Over here," said a young voice. Obi-Wan looked up to see Ben Kenobi being led by the hand by someone significantly shorter than himself.

Anakin Skywalker emerged from the crowd, pulling his older friend along behind him. "Hi Obi-Wan!" he waved, and Obi-Wan smiled, walking toward him. "Woah, that's an awesome scar!" he said, shameless. Obi-Wan laughed.

"Uh, thank you, I suppose."


"Aww," interrupted Anakin disappointedly, looking up at Obi-Wan's hair.

"What?"

"They really did get rid of your braid." The boy pouted. "Now you only look sort of ridiculous."

"Alas, you'll have to take my place," Obi-Wan said, choosing to ignore the implication that he broadcasted an inherent baseline of ridiculous. He bent down slightly and flicked Anakin's unadorned initiate braid. "You've got a long way to go."

"And you, Knight Kenobi," said Qui-Gon, coming up behind the man and yanking the padawan-style nerftail that still bound his hair, "have an even longer way to go." Ben and Qui-Gon shared a laugh.
"Are those chocolime twists?" Anakin's eyes grew wide as trays of food passed overhead. He tugged on Ben's hand. "Can I have one, Master Ben?" Ben chuckled, sharing a last fond look with his younger self and his master before he allowed Skywalker to drag him off on another adventure.

Standing now as equals - or something like it, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon spoke quietly amid the noise.

"So," Qui-Gon wanted to know, "What will you do first?"

Obi-Wan thought about it. He realized that he hurt all over, and was exhausted. "Sleep?" He said. Qui-Gon laughed.

"Not Ilum?" Obi-Wan shrugged. His skin itched, and his shoulder ached. Qui-Gon seemed to sense it. "Don't worry, you can request your own assignments now. It's a knight's prerogative, after all."

It was a world of possibilities. But it was a lot to take in. "Yeah…" Obi-Wan's voice trailed off. His vision hurt his head, too flat and and limited for him to see well across the hall. He had to remember to turn his head. He would get used to it. But until then, "Would you come with me?" he asked his former master. "I mean, you don't have to, obviously, but-"

"I'd be honored, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "But first," he gestured to the crowd of Obi-Wan's friends. "Remember to keep your mind on the present moment."

"Of course, Mast-" he stopped himself, wrestled with his mouth, and said, "Qui-Gon." It sounded so, so wrong. The master cackled.

"All in time, Padawan."

Chapter End Notes

...you didn't actually think I was going to kill him, did you?
The Middlegame

Chapter Notes

Alright, folks, here is the end of Reprise II!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Great Rotunda in the Galactic Senate was rarely filled to capacity. Oftentimes, senators whose worlds had little invested in the daily agenda would take the time to work on personal projects, visit home, or (and this was an alarmingly popular choice) spend the day eating, drinking, and being merry. Today, however, the senators had made a real effort. It was difficult to justify having a drink in your office when the agenda included discussions on another Sith Lord, a clone army, and the possibility that the Jedi Order might have been attempting to stage a coup d'état.

Two repulsorpods floated by the Chancellor's podium, their occupants turned to address the hall of politicians over the echoing broadcast system.

"If the Jedi were the ones to commission the creation of this army, then it is the Jedi who must bear the burden of proof." Sheev Palpatine spoke with righteous anger, and turned from the hall of senators to the Jedi Order's chosen representative. "Chancellor, given the magnitude of this incident and the Jedi's involvement, we must demand a full investigation."

Chancellor Valorum regarded the senator with a skeptical, concerned look, before turning to the opposite pod. "Master Windu, what does your Order have to say on the matter?"

Mace Windu, face like a stone and eyes cold as ice, stood and stepped toward the microphone. "The Jedi Order never commissioned the Kaminoan cloners to create any clones, let alone an entire army. We have only recently uncovered the project on Kamino over the course of an investigation into the death of a Jedi Knight who went missing some years ago."

A large holoprojection of Sifo Dyas appeared in the center of the room, rotating for the senators to see. "Jedi Master Sifo Dyas was reported missing in action several years ago. The Order has had no contact with him in all that time, despite our efforts to locate him. Last month, his ship was discovered - destroyed - during an unrelated assignment by one of our knights. We were able to determine his destination from the data recovered from the scene, which led us to Kamino - a planet which, I might add, was completely unknown to the Jedi until we uncovered the coordinates from Dyas' astromech droid." Mace dared a glance at Palpatine, and was deeply gratified to see a flash of surprise, and then anger. He turned to regard the rest of the hall, which was strangely silent; he was used to senators making a fuss. He glanced at Valorum, who was standing tall and unmoving, figure impartial but facial expression drawn in reserved interest. Mace continued,

"We sent a dispatch to Kamino with no other intention than to follow up on the activities of a knight whom we presumed dead many years ago. It is not often that we lose contact with one of our own in such a profound way. Investigating their actions retroactively is procedure."

Sheev Palpatine lifted his chin and edged, almost apologetically, toward his microphone. His voice remained relentless. "Of course, I do not wish to cast any undue aspersions on the Jedi Order, such a lofty and vital institution of this Republic - but if the affair was an internal one, Master Windu, how can this Senate accept your reports without question?"
Mace Windu was at his breaking point, and despite all his efforts to prepare to face a man he knew was the enemy, Palpatine's infuriating smile cut his fuse to the quick. "If the affair were internal, Senator Palpatine," he said, with barely controlled ire, "how could one of my most talented knights have ended up in a coma in the ICU for a week?"

Neglecting Obi-Wan's exact rank and relative skill at the time of the event, the outburst had a dramatic effect. Senators muttered amongst each other and shifted in their seats. Mace did not let the buzz die down before he said, "I understand your misgivings, senator, but you cannot neglect the Sith's involvement. The name of the Jedi has been used in vain by enemies of the Order and the Republic itself."

Sheev tilted his head innocently. "And can you prove it, master Jedi?" he asked, hidden venom welling up. Mace enjoyed watching the anticipation grow until he knew he could topple it all at once.

"Yes, I can."

He did not wait to stand to see Palpatine's shock, though as he stepped up to the console of his pod he could sense the ripples of anger and confusion rolling toward him. A series of forms and account records appeared alongside the projection of Dyas. "In the weeks following the events on Kamino, the Jedi Order has been investigating the affair as far as our jurisdiction allows. We have uncovered startling information. The commission to the Cloners was paid for by Republic funds, from a Medical Studies Grant, the likes of which has been passed in every annual budget for the past seven years. The payment from this account sent to Kamino lists the Jedi Order as a beneficiary, but was was formatted in such a way that neither the High Council nor myself, nor any other person in the Jedi Order was notified of the transaction." He saw a few furrowed brows as senators studied the documents. "In short, the payment was made by someone else without our knowledge or authorization. Due to Sifo Dyas' knowledge of the project and access to Republic resources, we believe that he was the one to send in the commission. Without approval of the High Council, his actions must be considered as separate from the Order and the Republic. We believe that, after going MIA, he may have defected into the ranks of an enemy - possibly the Sith." He let that sink in. Sheev Palpatine watched him like a hawk.

"And how has the Order come across this information, Master Windu?" He asked. Mace looked up at the man and blinked at him, utterly unfazed.

"We are Jedi, senator, we admire discipline; we keep meticulous records of everything." He even got a few chuckles out of that one.

Unfortunately, Palpatine had learned better than to concede. "So you do. And is it not possible, then, that in this intermediate time before the Senate has had access to your reports, that your Order meticulously doctored the paperwork and this supposed evidence of a Sith?"

Mace squinted at him, unbelieving. "You are suggesting treason of an entire institution, Senator."

Palpatine raised his brows and scoffed. "I am suggesting that we must consider the facts and every possibility attendant to them." He addressed his colleagues: "If we disregard the evidence uncovered by the Jedi - and objectively, we must, for it is the Jedi Order now under suspicion of sedition - what proof remains?" He gestured to the projection of Sifo Dyas, which was still spinning slowly in front of them. "What do we know of this Sifo Dyas?" and to Mace Windu, "What do we know of this Jedi Knight who - supposedly - fought a Sith?" He spat it, and for a moment, Mace saw the Sith Lord he'd been trying to ignore standing just across from him. He balled his fists and went to the edge of his 'pod.
"Would you like me to bring him in to show you the scars?"

The hall erupted with sounds of suspicion and pity, and outcries of objection! "Order!" Mas Amedda pounded his staff on the floor of the podium. The Force pooled with confusion and alarm. "Order!" The speaker said again, and pounded his staff. The senators calmed down - somewhat. Palpatine got in the first word as the noise died down.

"We cannot let a grievance of such severity go unchecked. Chancellor, Senators, I move to appoint a committee to investigate the Jedi Order for sedition and conspiracy against the Galactic Republic."

"Seconded!" Called a senator from a pod that Mace could not see. A chorus of agreement went about the room. The Master of the Order swallowed, heart sinking. He straightened defiantly.

"The Jedi Order has served the Republic and outer reaches of the galaxy faithfully for a thousand generations. The Republic is our life, not our enemy. You may do as you see fit, Senators, but the more time you waste on this investigation, the more time the Sith have to regroup, and the more of these meetings you will have to attend - and next time, there will be more than scars to show for it." A rumble of agreement grew from a mutter to a chorus, and it was difficult to tell which had been louder: the seconding cries for Palpatine, or the concurrence to Mace Windu's advice. Arguments began to break out in the Rotunda.

"Order! Order!" cried Mas Amedda. Chancellor Valorum raised his hands.

"Senators, Master Jedi," he addressed the clamoring assembly, "We will table Senator Palpatine's motion and reconvene after a brief recess." His microphone went off, and he addressed the pods hovering by at normal volume: "Master Windu, I would like to see you in my office."

The Jedi bowed to Valorum, but glared at Palpatine on the way down. "Of course, your excellency."

"Good afternoon, senator," Ben smiled at the new arrival. Bail smiled back, jogging down the landing ramp.

"Smoggy and hellish traffic, but yes, overall, it is," he grinned back. Ben laughed.

"Isn't our world a wonder?"

"Only from a certain distance. I'm surprised you Jedi stay here, I thought you were naturalists, the lot of you."

Ben shrugged. "Perhaps we are; but the Force is with us. We've eked out what we can."

"I look forward to seeing it."

They walked into the Jedi Temple together at an unrushed pace, Ben slowing his gait so Bail could tip his head and ogle the vast ceilings and halls, the carefully adorned floors and the mammoth statues lining the great hall beneath the mezzanine. Bail was unsure if he'd actually been here before; last time, he'd only really seen the medical wing. Everything before that was a blur of running behind Ben. He turned fully around, taking in the sheer size of the hall.

It was stunning.

"So this is where you spend your days?" The Jedi Temple was well-lit, spacious, and airy on the inside despite its blockish appearance on the outside. The massive bronze statues shone in the daylight filtering in from outside. He shook his head. "And they call you ascetics."
Ben chuckled. "Simple pleasures. I've seen where you live, you're hardly one to talk."

"Yes, but I don't keep it a secret. The way you Jedi parade around so maudlin, I'd expected the entire complex to be one giant cell block."

Ben let out a laugh, which drew a few looks as they walked deeper and deeper into the temple. "According to Obi-Wan, we do have one of those. It's what he calls our medical bay."

Given the circumstances, Bail was not sure if it would be polite to laugh. He chuckled anyway, but sobered quickly. "How is he doing?" Ben had sent him updates over the past several weeks as Obi-Wan recovered and adjusted. However, hearing and seeing were two different realities.

Ben shrugged. "Why don't you see for yourself?"

Bail followed Ben through more of the Temple, passing great halls and training rooms and a shimmering labyrinth Ben told him was the archives. He nodded at Jedi as he passed. The older ones nodded back; the younger ones often gave him puzzled expressions, looking at his odd robes. He smiled at them anyway. He almost missed it when Ben stopped in front of a door.

When the door opened, Bail was met with a lean, bear-like man whose beard twitched when he smiled in greeting.

"Master Jinn," Ben said, smiling, "I'd like you to meet my friend, Senator Organa."

"It is an honor to finally meet you," Qui-Gon said as he shook Bail's hand. "Please, come in."

They went inside, all smiles. "Likewise, Master Jinn. Ben speaks of you often."

"As he does for you. It's strange we haven't met before now." He sent an accusatory look at Ben. "It's good to finally meet the man turning our dear friend into a politician."

"And here I was thinking that it was Ben who was trying to turn me into a Jedi."

They all laughed. "Oh, if only," Ben lamented.

"And you must be Obi-Wan," Bail said, reaching out a hand to the freshly-appointed knight appeared by Qui-Gon's side. Obi-Wan reached out very carefully and shook it, one eye and hand coordinated somewhat clumsily in that unforgiving field of depth perception. "It's good to see you up and healing," the senator said earnestly. Obi-Wan smiled.

"It's good to be up. I think if I'd stayed in that prison one more hour I'd've gone mad." Bail and Ben exchanged a look of private humor. Obi-Wan frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," Ben laughed, and snuck past Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. "I'll put the kettle on."

Small talk became shop talk as soon as they were all settled in for tea. Obi-Wan, ever the scholar and cooped up for weeks as he recovered, was one of the most well-informed among them. Still, being holed up in the Temple did limit one's sources; Bail presented an irresistible chance at the latest news.

"So, Senator, how did Master Windu represent us to the Senate?" the young knight asked.

"Very well, very direct." An odd look overcame the Senator's face. Entirely serious, he said, "You know, I think he might be the most terrifying man I've ever met."

Obi-Wan snorted into his tea. Qui-Gon smiled. "He'd be flattered."
Obi-Wan's mind was still occupied with the Senate. "And what about the vote? Will there be an investigation?"

"What?" Ben looked surprised. "Was that today?"

Qui-Gon turned to look at Ben. "I'm shocked you didn't know - it's all Obi-Wan's been talking about."

Bail set down his tea and leaned back. "It was yesterday morning, actually." He glanced at Ben. "I was meaning to tell you, I suppose I forgot."

"Forgot?" Obi-Wan sounded hopeful. "Then it's not so bad, then?" All Jedi turned to Bail, expressions expectant and hopeful. The Senator took a breath and spoke in a level voice:

"Before the vote, Chancellor Valorum presented his own thoughts on the affair. He holds your Order in great esteem, you know. The added weight of his opinion swayed the vote to a marginal victory. The Senate will not pursue an investigation."

The Jedi sighed in relief. After a beat, Qui-Gon said, "They wouldn't have found anything anyway. We've got our own versions of bureaucrats here, and they keep better records."

"An investigation would have put everything else on hold," Ben cut in, emphatic, "and we would never get the clearance to continue our own investigations into Kamino. It would give the Sith a perfect escape from all this."

Obi-Wan's eyebrows were raised high. He sipped at his tea. "Well then, it's good that an investigation won't happen." The unspoken addendum of *for now* hung in the air. "Anyway, whose idea was it in the first place? The holos are reporting the leaders of for and against, but not the instigators."

"Oh, yes. It was Naboo - Sheev Palpatine, actually."

The Force ran cold. Obi-Wan nearly dropped his cup and Qui-Gon's fist clenched. As one, they looked in surprise at Ben, who was sitting, stock still and face set in a pleasant expression. He set his teacup down with a small, polite *clink*. "I see," he said.

"I was rather surprised, actually," Bail admitted, looking somewhat hurt. "He's always seemed to have a benevolent view of the Jedi."

"I'm afraid Sheev Palpatine is a politician of the Old Guard, Bail," Ben said with a smile. Obi-Wan's hands were beginning to freeze from the icy choler radiating out from his older self. "He does not share your honest heart."

Bail gave a wavering smile, flattered but confused. Immune to the movements in the Force, no matter how dramatic they might be, he breathed a light sigh and picked up his tea to drink deeply. "We do not agree on all things. Still, I'm sure he had his reasons."

"Of course."

There was a silent pause as Bail poured another saucer of tea and Ben fought to bring his own emotions in check. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon waited on him, almost motionless, until the frigid currents had passed. Obi-Wan sent his older self a wide, one-eyed *what the hels* glare over the rim of his cup. Ben ignored him.

Sitting between the two Kenobis, Qui-Gon remained silent. He almost reached out to Ben mentally...
to ask what was wrong, but before he could, a thought struck him, and he held his proverbial tongue.

At length, Ben set down his empty cup and stretched out in his chair. "So," he thought aloud to the room, "what will happen to the clones?"

The spell broken, Qui-Gon shrugged. "The whole operation will be shut down, I suspect."

The new topic brought Obi-Wan out of his distraction. "Yes, but there are thousands of them, some of them children, or not even born," He thought of Cody, and the nursery, and the numbered child who'd never seen another human before. "They're not to blame for any of this."

"No, but they are at the center of it."

Bail shifted in his seat. "You know, I don't think I'm strictly allowed to talk about this, but..." which immediately got everyone's attention. He sighed, and dove headfirst. "Ben might've mentioned that I am a member of a Coalition, the Sentient Rights Coalition."

"Yes, he did mention it," Qui-Gon said.

"Well, it's not complete, but we're in the process of drawing up a set of accords, a resolution to ensure the safety and humane treatment of the clones. We hope to present a rough draft to the Senate next week."

"Really?" Ben asked, delighted.

"Yes," Bail perked up, warming to his theme. "I got the idea when Master Windu was presenting the financial paperwork before the Senate. If I've understood the accounts correctly, the Kaminoans have been paid far in excess of what they've created so far. With the operation shut down, the funds will be stagnant. The money has already left Republic hands, and since it was legally moved and Kamino has no official ties to the Republic, we can't get it back unless the Kaminoans give it back, which I can't imagine they will. And so, I've suggested that we extend a set of accords to the Kaminoan government, an agreement they halt their current clone productions and use all remaining funds to raise the clones currently living in their facilities. Once the clones are ready to leave the planet, the Republic will accept them as citizens and find productive civic employment for them."

The Jedi listened in impressed silence. It was a grand proposal, and would require a project of massive scale, expense, and time, but…it was, in all, entirely doable considering Kamino's resources.

Ben was smiling and nodding. He could see in his mind's eye all the clones with real lives, and jobs, and maybe even families. "That's really quite ingenious," he said. Bail beamed.

"Thank you."

"Why civic employment?" Obi-Wan asked.

"If the clones are required to work in the federal sector, the senators are less likely to go after the money and more likely to see the benefits to the accords," Ben explained.

"So the clones are to become an army after all?" Qui-Gon asked. Bail shook his head.

"Not necessarily. They should be able to choose any field of Republic service, I think. They have military training, so perhaps they will gravitate toward police work or the Republic Guard, but they could also become pilots, administrators, interpreters, maybe even officials one day."

"Do you think Kamino will agree?" Obi-Wan asked, skeptical. Qui-Gon seemed more at ease.
"The Kaminoans seemed very dedicated to their clones. I'm sure they would like nothing more than to see them safely raised and sent off."

"Hmm," Ben rubbed at his beard. "Still. They are practically programmed since birth. The upbringing ought to be changed for the younger ones - among other things."

"All in good time, Ben," Bail chuckled. "I haven't even finished the first draft." The senator stood and stretched. "Which is one of several reasons why I ought to get back to my office."

"So soon?" Qui-Gon asked, standing as well. The Kenobis followed suit. "A short visit for hours in traffic. Did Ben have time to show you around?"

"Only from the docking bay to here," Bail admitted, "but what I saw was magnificent. The Temple is beautiful, I'm glad to have finally seen it."

"Force, Ben was right, you work far too hard. You should see more of it," Qui-Gon persuaded. "Let Obi-Wan take you on a tour."

Obi-Wan seemed taken aback by this suggestion. His eye flicked around helplessly. "What?"


"And will you join us?"

"Why? Do you need an escort, Knight Kenobi?" Qui-Gon asked sweetly. The younger man blushed.

"No, of course not." Bail was on his right, so he had to turn his entire head to look at him properly. "Please, follow me, Senator. Are you coming, Ben?"

"Bail spends too much time around me already. Let another Kenobi pester him."

Bail laughed, and the Jedi Knight and the Senator left together.

As soon as the door hissed shut, Ben turned to Qui-Gon. "What was that about?"

The master's face had fallen into a frown that suggested something dangerously close to brooding. "He's been hiding," he explained, looking at the door. "Vokara says he's fit enough to fight, but he refuses to leave his room unless he has to." Spotting Ben's puzzled expression, Qui-Gon shrugged and said, "Everyone's heard about what happened. People stare. You know how he is with attention."

"Oh," said Ben. Shame over the defeat, embarrassment over his disfigurement, fear of not measuring up to others' expectations, to his own expectations of recovery. He could only imagine it, but his imagination was vivid.

Qui-Gon let out a long sigh, the pained sound of a parent unable to help their child. "Perhaps it is a cruel remedy, but... he's going to have to get used to it sooner or later."

"Yes." Ben realized that, for all the parallels in Obi-Wan's experience on Kamino and his own on Naboo, there was very little he could offer either master or former apprentice by way of advice. "Yes, I suppose so."

"And what about you?" Qui-Gon asked. Ben looked up at him.

"Hmm?"
The Master studied him and said, "Sheev Palpatine."

Involuntarily, Ben's blood ran cold. Qui-Gon felt it. Suspicions confirmed, the master clenched his jaw and breathed slowly in, slowly out. "He's the Sith, isn't he," he said, voice flat.

Ben's eyes darted up at him. "Yes."

Qui-Gon absorbed this. He was angry, Ben could tell. But he was also too stunned to let it show. "Does Mace know?"

"He's the only one who knows. Besides me. And you, now."

Qui-Gon nodded, soul comforted to imagine Mace as point man on the Senate debacle. If there was anyone fit for such a task, it was him. Mace could be, as Bail had pointed out, as hard as platinum and absolutely terrifying, even when faced with a Sith. But Ben... "If I figured it out, others will too," Qui-Gon warned. "And if he were to sense a reaction from you... it's hard, I understand. But keep your emotions in the here and now, rooted in what is, not what was or what could be."

It was a typical Qui-Gon Jinn maxim. However, coming from a man who'd almost lost his closest companion at the hands of this Sith Lord, the same one that remained hidden in plain sight, it was powerful advice indeed.

"I will try," Ben said.

Qui-Gon did not retort. He nodded. "As must we all."

"And so, I've got this whole posse of children behind me, and I turn the corner and the trafficker is right there, and he sees me, and sees the kids, and says," Feemor screwed up his face in a snarl and dropped his voice as low as it would go and said, "'You chssk-sack son of a vetch'." He chuckled, and fought off more laughter to finish his tale: "And then suddenly, Aola jumps from the roof and lands behind him. He turns around and she slaps him full on the face and shouts 'Language!'"

The table erupted in laughter. Qui-Gon in particular seemed amused by the turn of events. "You are raising a hypocrite, Feemor," he glanced at his grandpadawan. "Aola, I've heard you talking when you pick fights with Garen Muln."

Aola blushed indigo. "Yeah, but Garen Muln is a barve. They were just kids. They'd been through enough already."

"By the looks of it, you have too," Ben commented, stepping carefully around Aola's leg as he carried a pot of rice to the stove. The leg was held together in a decorated splint.

"He tried to run away, so I kicked out his kneecaps. Slowed him down, but apparently he had joint replacements in both." She grimaced at the memory. "Durasteel versus bone... bone loses."

"And what's all this?" Qui-Gon waved a finger at the colorful adornments. Aola smiled at them.

"Ah. Well, we had a long trip back to the embassy, so I let the kids color on it to pass the time." She pulled the injured leg up and propped it on the table, a miniature gallery of juvenile scribbles. She pointed to a crude drawing on her thigh, a green twi'lek and what might have been a human. There was a pink heart between them. "Daria, the littlest one, drew me and her. She didn't have a blue pen, so I'm green."

Qui-Gon laughed. "It's precious."
Ben shook his head. "So we have two collectors of pathetic life forms, now. Lovely."

Feemor leaned back in his seat, looking innocently around the room. "Qui-Gon, remind me, which one of us is it who visits the creche once a week to see a favorite youngling?"

"You know," Qui-Gon feigned thought, "I don't know. Surely Ben would never do that, he's far too heartless."

"Yes, he hates pathetic life forms."

"Which is odd, you know, he's always seemed rather fond of himself."

Feemor snorted. "Aye, both of them."

Aola burst out laughing.

Ben sighed. "You're all ridiculous."

"So how is Anakin these days?" Aola asked, putting her leg back under the table.

"Well enough. Growing a bit restless, I'm afraid. Thankfully, he's starting another basic robotics course in a few weeks, hopefully that will occupy him."

"Oh, that reminds me," Feemor grinned at his apprentice, "you should tell them about that thing with the kid and the protocol droid at the embassy."

Aola smiled. "Oh, of course. I was going to wait until Obi-Wan got here."

"Yes, where is Obi-Wan?" Ben glanced around. "I thought he'd be out here as soon as he smelled food."

"In his room, I think," Qui-Gon answered. "Apparently he's taken knighthood as a chance to become the reclusive scholar we all knew he is, deep down."

"Hmm." Ben finished stirring the spices into his curry and wiped his hands. He went over to Obi-Wan's door and knocked. "Obi-Wan? We'll be eating in a little while, and Aola's sharing all her best stories from Boz Pity without you." He waited for a response, and received none. "Obi-Wan?" He knocked again. "Obi-Wan?" He opened the door. "Obi-Wa- oh." He looked around, and closed the door.

"He's not here," he announced to the table, going back to stir his dish.

Qui-Gon was frowning. "What? That's odd."

"Did he say he was going somewhere?" Feemor asked. Qui-Gon shrugged.

"No, he didn't." He got up to get himself a glass of water. "Of course, he doesn't have to. I'm just glad he's not cooped up in his room." He smiled, trying to make light of it. "He's probably cooped himself up in the archives, now. Anything to drink?" he offered. The table politely declined. Ben was staring at the wall above the stove, mind running through the possibilities. Obi-Wan was not ready to start going out in public again, not from what Ben had seen. He might've gone to the archives, but he would not have stayed there. Surely he would not be visiting friends; he still wanted very much to be alone. If he had wanted company, he would have sought it out here, in the safety of his own home. And if he wanted to meditate, he would never go somewhere public - not even the gardens. So where on earth was he?
"Ben?" Qui-Gon broke into his thoughts. "A drink?"

"No, thank you," Ben said, wiping his hands and turning around. "Look after this, will you? It should be done in a half hour or so."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back soon."

"Uuuugh!" a sheet of flimsi was torn away from its perforated base, crumbled up into a frustrated wad, and thrown off the edge. It landed near Ben's foot. The Jedi master looked up at the ledge from whence it had been launched. He could see the sole of a boot dangling there, kicking at the wall with unnecessary force. He glanced down at the crumpled flimsi and saw half a dozen other crumpled balls just like it, sitting dotted around the floor. He picked one up and smoothed it out.

"Are you designing a lightsaber?" he asked aloud. The question echoed in the vast hall. He looked up at the boot, above which a face appeared. The face sighed.

"What are you doing here?"

"Are you referring to me, me, or you me?"

Obi-Wan scowled. "Very funny." He kicked pebbles down on his older self as he drew up his boot.

Ben pocketed the design and climbed up the stairs, around the boulders, and over the broken pillar to the ledge where Obi-Wan sat with a pad of flimsi, some books, and a floating lamp.

"Sorry. You set yourself up for that one." He lowered himself into a seat, and peeked over at Obi-Wan's work. "You are designing a lightsaber."

"How did you know I'd be down here?" Obi-Wan asked, scribbling away.

"Because you were not in your room, and there is nowhere else you'd go right now." Ben picked up one of Obi-Wan's discarded designs and studied it. "This is a beautiful design, why are you redoing it?"

"It's not right," the knight rubbed furiously to erase a portion of his work and redraw it.

"How do you mean?"

"I don't know," he said, a little angrier than he'd meant it. "I don't..." He breathed in, and out. More calmly, he said, "It's just not right."

"Ah." Ben watched him for a few moments, glancing occasionally at his holobooks, gripping his stylus so hard his fingers were white. Sighing often. He glanced back at the 'not right' design in his hands. "A Makashi hilt; a bold choice."

Obi-Wan shrugged. "It works better."

"Does it?"

"With the... my... my vision," Obi-Wan said eventually.

"Oh."
"Master Dooku was here last week - just a few days - and he was training with me. I was using one of Master Drallig's sabers, and it wasn't going well. Master Dooku leant me his, and it went better. Much better."

"Well that's wonderful," Ben said, looking again at the design. Makashi hilts, with their distinctive curved design, were cumbersome for those who did not know how to handle them. But, for duelists who valued speed and precision and the ability to feel their blade turn as well as see it, it was an advantageous tool indeed. "I'm sure he'll be thrilled to see it."

Obi-Wan sighed. "If I ever complete it," he growled through clenched teeth, tore off the sheet, crumpled it up, and tossed it off the ledge. Its fall was met with a quiet echo. Obi-Wan immediately started drawing it again, jawline tense, hand cramping.

"Obi-Wan, what are you doing?" Ben asked.

"I'm designing my lightsaber," said the knight stubbornly.

"It's supposed to be a meditative experience, you know, you're far too angry for this right now."

Obi-Wan slammed down his stylus and wheeled on him. "I'm not angry," he snapped, and blushed when he realized he'd yelled it. "I'm just... I need to get this finished."

"Why?" Ben asked, half listening, devoting more attention to studying the lines in Obi-Wan's brow, the rapid tempo kept by the muscle in his jaw, the slight rocking motion he kept up subconsciously as he drew.

"I need it. I need a saber to train, to get better."

Ben knew this stance. He'd worked himself into a point of obsession. "Better? Better at what?"

"At... at everything. All over again." Obi-Wan put down his pen and pad and put his face in his hands. He slid them up and around to the back of his head, grabbing his hair. There was not much to grab; he'd cut off the padawan nerf tail some days ago, and now looked like a shorn sheep.

It hurt Ben's heart to see him like this. But at the same time, he knew he needed to drag himself up again. "As Jedi knights, we must be patient with the Force's timing," he said.

"As a Jedi knight, I should be able to complete katas made for children," Obi-Wan snapped back. "But I can't. I can't even make tea without slipping and burning myself."

"You can't see."

"I can see," Obi-Wan corrected, "but not well enough. I'm blind enough to kriff up everything I touch, but not blind enough to make it an excuse. But if I could just get better..." He huffed and picked up his stylus and flimsipad again. "I need this to be perfect."

Ben gave a slow nod, folding his hands into opposite sleeves. "Of course," he said.

"You can't understand."

Obi-Wan had a point. Ben had no idea what it was like to suffer such an injury, much less a permanent disability because of it. "No, you're right. I don't understand. Not exactly. But I do understand what you're doing to yourself."

"What?"
Ben sighed, raising his eyes and leaning back in thought. At length, he said, "When I was knighted, I was knighted for killing a Sith right after that Sith had killed my master. You said you saw that."

"Yes."

"What you didn't see was the day after my knighting ceremony, when I got it into my head to master Soresu. I had seen Ataru kill my master, I knew I would not let it take me down. So I trained in Soresu day and night. If I could just master Form III, I told myself, I would master that thing that had taken Qui-Gon's life. I would, somehow, at least a little bit, make up for what had happened. And do you know what?"

Obi-Wan watched him, and shook his head silently.

"I was miserable at it," Ben confessed. "In fact, I was so bad at Soresu that I had padawans refuse to duel me out of pity. I couldn't even do a simple sunset kata properly. So, to get better, I kept doing them. Over and over and over and over again, determined to get it right. But every attempt ended up worse than the one before." He brushed away a few crumpled lightsaber designs, which tumbled over the wall and joined their many brethren on the floor far below. "I stayed in the dojo for hours - days, even. I once fought for over twenty-four hours straight without even realizing it."

"But… you got better," Obi-Wan said. "Obviously you did."

"I did, in the long run. But fortunately, before I did, Mace Windu found me working myself to death and did the best thing that any person has ever done for me."

Obi-Wan frowned. He did not know Master Windu well enough to imagine what this might be. "What?" he asked.

"He yelled at me, called me a disgrace to Qui-Gon's legacy and the Jedi Order, and whipped my ass - multiple times."

Obi-Wan blinked, looking as though he'd just been struck in the face. Ben ignored it.

"If memory serves, I think he broke two of my ribs. Or just one - either way, I deserved it." He shrugged. "Afterwards, I cried in front of him - just imagine how embarrassing that would be."

Obi-Wan's face, now even more horrorstruck than before, said that he was.

"But, then… he picked me up and led me back to his rooms, and made me tea, and told me the secret to getting better after something like this happens."

Obi-Wan was watching him, waiting on every word. When he received no explanation, he asked, "What?"

Ben waited a moment to reply. "Time," he said. Obi-Wan wilted. Ben felt sorry for him, but continued: "The point is, Obi-Wan, you will get better. But you're not going to get better today, or tomorrow, or even six months from now. But one day, you'll wake up, and someone who's never known you without one blind eye will tell you that you are the most observant, insightful person they know." When Obi-Wan gave him a supremely skeptical look, Ben smiled and shrugged. "Or something to that effect. It will not depend upon this saber design any more than it will depend upon my own past experiences.

Obi-Wan looked back down at his 'pad and his stylus, and the piles of discarded sketches around him. He sighed, shoulders drooping. Ben reached over and swept the remaining flimsi sheets off the ledge. He closed the holobooks and took the pad and pen from Obi-Wan's grasp. "You're leaning too
much on what you've lost. Close your eyes."

Obi-Wan couldn't help it when he grimaced at the plural, but he obeyed, closing his seeing eye and his blind eye together. "A saber is not about what you see; it is about what you feel. Both in your hand and through the Force. So, feel the saber that you know you will make. How heavy is? What is the grip like? The switches? How strong is the angle?" He paused to let Obi-Wan think about this. He stole a glance at the man, and his face was screwed up in concentration. Good. "Now, go through your katas in your mind. What does the saber need? What do you need from it? Try to see without looking at it. With the Force, you will overcome your blindness, and with your saber, you will rise above it."

After a while, Obi-Wan nodded slowly. "Do you have it?" Ben asked. Obi-Wan nodded. "Good. Open your eyes." When he did, he could see Ben watching him. "Do you know what it looks like?" the master asked. Obi-Wan nodded. Ben smiled at him.

Immediately, Obi-Wan reached for his pad and stylus, but Ben moved them out of his grasp, "No, not yet. You've drawn enough for today."

"But -"

"You have seen it once, you can consult the image again. But right now, you have other things to attend to. Feemor and Aola are back from Boz Pity, and have been wondering where you've been all evening."

"Oh," Obi-Wan said. Perhaps that's why Ben had gone looking for him. But there was another thing. "It's evening?"

Ben laughed and got to his feet. "Come on, let's clean up this mess." They picked up the piles of discarded designs and packed them away in a bundle with the books and the lamp. Obi-Wan held open a small bag while Ben packed them in.

"Did Master Windu really make tea for you?" Obi-Wan asked. "I've never seen the man drink tea."

Ben laughed. "Of course he did. After Qui-Gon died, Mace was something of a father figure to me."

"Really?" Obi-Wan had a hard time imagining it. "He's a bit stern."

"He is. But it was what I needed at the time." He put the last of the flimsi wads into the bag and zipped it closed. "Come on, dinner will be growing cold by now."

As the two Kenobis made their way to the lift, the lift doors opened to reveal a figure inside.

"Master Windu," Obi-Wan said, surprised.

"Knight Kenobi," he gave a small smile. "Master Kenobi. So this is where you two go off to hide."

Ben shrugged. "It has a nice atmosphere. What are you doing here?"

"Council business," he said.

"Obi-Wan and I were just headed to dinner."

"Of course. But since you're here, Ben, could I have a word?"

Knight Kenobi and Master Kenobi shared a glance. The elder gestured for the younger to go on to the lift. "I'll be along shortly."
Obi-Wan glanced between the two, unable to not consider, if only briefly, what it would've been like to have Mace Windu as a father figure. "Of course. Good evening, Master Windu."

"You as well. By the way, Obi-Wan," Mace said, causing Obi-Wan to turn around in the lift.

"Yes, Master?"

"You're a knight now, which means as soon as I have access to a computer I can grant you access to this level. Next time, use your own access code."

Seven years of postponed guilt washed over Obi-Wan's face in an embarrassed flush. He ducked his head, but had to fight back a smile. "Of course, Master, thank you."

As the knight disappeared in the lift, Mace Windu turned around and began trekking back toward the great hall of rites. Ben followed after him.

"Why are you really here?" he asked.

Mace sighed, and shrugged. "I've been cooped up with senators and councilmembers all day. With everything that's going on...I thought maybe if I went to meditate where this all began, it would clear my head."

"It's a good place for it. The Force is strong down here."

"So Pada-Knight Kenobi has told me. I'm going to have to get used to that name."

Ben chuckled. "So will he."

"Do you two come down here often?"

"Yes. We have a habit of running into each other down here. I suppose we're very alike in that respect."

"And do you always give him such fatherly advice when you're down here?" He emphasized the word and slid his eyes meaningfully over to his companion. Ben did a double take, affronted.

"Wh- you heard all that? How long have you been here?"

Mace shrugged. "Long enough. When I heard you coming I went back in the lift. I didn't want to embarrass Obi-Wan."

Ben was shaking his head. He scoffed. "You have no qualms about embarrassing me, though."

"You're a grown man, a master. He's still in sutures. I'll embarrass him later, when he's not so sensitive." Their boot heels clicked against the stone walkway. Utterly alone in the distant levels of another age, it was easier to let the barriers of time blur and converse freely about the never-was.

"Did I really break your ribs?"

"Yes, you kicked me right in the gut."

Mace's eyebrows raised. "You must've been making an ass of yourself."

Ben let out a laugh. "Oh, you have no idea."

Another long pause. The great wooden door into the hall of rites hove into view. "I am flattered by
your regard, master Kenobi. I always have been. But believe me, if anyone is going to be a father
figure, it's you. So," he gently pushed the door and it creaked open on its hinges. "How does it feel
to mentor yourself?"

Ben smiled and shrugged. "He's not me. He never has been, and now he definitely never will be. So
it's not really that odd."

"That's good - I have a feeling he's going to need a lot of mentoring, considering all that's headed our
way."

They stepped into the hall. Mace reached into a pocket and tossed out a small glowing sphere, which
hovered in the air above them and illuminated their surroundings.

Very little had changed in seven years. The walls were still as broad and soaring as they were the
day Ben had erupted into this dimension, the inscriptions just the same, the marble floor still polished
by hundreds of thousands of footprints. The massive fissure in the middle of the floor stood with
sides propped up on each other, a Force-made testament to balance and destiny.

It all looked so grandiose, Ben thought. It was a real red herring; he knew as soon as he ascended to
the real world, he would have to roll up his sleeves and get to work.

"I take it Bail Organa came to visit you," Mace said.

"Yes - I was finally able to introduce him to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan."

Mace smiled. "Finally. I saw him just as he was leaving. He told me about these accords he's
writing."

"And?"

The Korun shrugged. "He has my support. Whether he can get the Senate's approval… that's another
story."

"Bail is good at what he does, Mace. He's grown a lot since we met."

"So he has."

They walked around the center of the hall and went to sit on the far side of the stairs leading down to
the crevice. "I hear Yan Dooku was back on Coruscant," Ben said.

"He was, just briefly. He got caught in a scuffle with some pirates, his ship needed repairs. He also
briefed the Council on his ongoing investigation."

"And?"

Mace gave Ben a look, and pulled something out of his pocket. "I think Bail might be interested in
this - and hopefully it'll jog your memory." He held up a small recording device and hit the playback
button. A static-laden recording began.

"This is Jedi Master Sifo Dyas. Former Master. Whatever - I don't know what I am nowadays. I… I
ordered the Kaminoan cloners to create an army for the Order some years ago. I went to Kamino
under a false name to see that they were doing their job and… have discovered something
alarming."

Ben looked up at Mace's face, but the councilor's gaze was fixed to the far wall.
They are implanting each of the clones with a biochip. It contains programming that can control their actions, override their training. The Kaminoans tell me that this is a failsafe, intended to protect against mental insanity, but I am not so sure. I have stolen a copy of the program on the chip. I will try to decipher it. I do not know what to do. I think the Kaminoans may know what I stole. They are very guarded. I sense a deep disturbance. The same darkness I was trying to guard against is now stronger than ever. I do not know what to do. I will do what I can…"

The transmission cut off. Ben's mind was awash in memories. Tup. Master Tiplar. Fives, who Anakin swore had been onto something. There'd been an investigation, but they'd never found anything. Insanity, some had said. Breakdown. But if Sifo Dyas had uncovered evidence of mind control...

"Order sixty-six," Ben whispered. He saw, in his mind's eye, Cody turn and give the order to fire. Mind control.

"What?" Mace asked. Ben looked at him, and swallowed against a sudden sick feeling.

"Did Master Dooku find the code that he's talking about?"

"Not yet. He hid this recording and the code separately, probably as a precaution." Mace was frowning, face overcome with sadness. "I'm beginning to wonder if Sifo knew he was going to die. I don't think he was working for the Sith. I think he was scared, and played into their hands. He only realized it too late."

It was a harrowing thought. "We must find that file," Ben said.

"Yan is the best man for it. He'll find it."

Ben nodded. In the meantime, "We'll carry on working with the Senate. If the clones do have biochips implanted, we'll want them removed before they're allowed in the Republic."

"I'll press the Kaminoans for details. You don't think the Sith will come along to destroy their failed army?"

"No," Ben squinted into the dim air. "No, not after what's happened. He won't want to make another move so soon. He's regrouping, licking his wounds."

"Giving speeches in the Senate," Mace grouched. Ben ticked his head.

"He's angry. He's desperate. But he's not that desperate yet."

"What do you suppose he's thinking?" Mace wondered allowed. "What could possibly be going through his mind?"

"New candidates for apprenticeship," Ben said immediately. Mace looked at him in surprise. "If there is one thing my two lives have taught me, Mace, it is that the Sith will not die. They will not allow death to slow them down, they will not mourn, they will move on to accomplish their goals. If Palpatine does not already have his eye on someone, I'll eat my cloak."

Mace raised his brows. "Already?"

"Perhaps even when the last apprentice was still alive. Palpatine has contingencies for everything."

"They're starting to show."
"Good," Ben said, assuredly. "As long as we can keep him running through his plans, as long as we can eat up every angle before he can get to it, we'll stay ahead. And in the end, we will work him into a corner."

Mace regarded him with stale disbelief. "Obi-Wan is half blind, the Senate is in an uproar, and we have twenty-thousand clones to relocate, and that's a good thing?"

"All things considered, yes. The Sith apprentice is dead, Palpatine is panicking, and we're all still alive," Ben gave Mace a bright smile. "Everything is a matter of perspective." The Korun shook his head.

"You're crazy, Kenobi."

"Only because the galaxy is crazy."

"And about to get crazier." Mace sighed. "Did Bail mention Alaris Prime when he was here?"

"What? No, what's happened?"

"The Federation has finally turned over the droids from the Alaris Prime facilities."

"Oh?"

"Yes. There are considerably fewer of them than what you and Qui-Gon reported."

Ben sighed, unsurprised but aggravated. "They've hid them elsewhere."

"So it would seem. The investigative committee is pressing them for answers, but of course no one likes dealing with the Neimoidians, and jurisdiction over intergalactic corporations is always slippery. They don't know how big this is. If we're going to find those droids, we're going to have to push the matter ourselves."

"Maybe not now," Ben said. "Let things cool down in the Senate."

"We don't have to push them officially, just yet," Mace said. Ben turned his head around to fix his friend with a surprised stare.

"Mace Windu, are you suggesting that we break with protocol?"

"I'm saying we hunt down the bastards and stop a war," said the Master of the Order with uncharacteristic abandon.

"You know," Ben said, a smile fighting to break through, "I could not agree more."

"It's going to take time. A long time."

"Yes.

"And Palpatine's got an eye on us all, now. Me. You. Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon. There's no telling who he'll go after next."

"Which is why we keep one step ahead of him," Ben said. "As you most likely heard me telling my nephew, Mace, we will not win today, or tomorrow, or even six months from now. But if we continue to work as the Force guides us, doing only that which is right in front of us, one day we will wake up on a morning when we no longer worry about these problems."
"You're quite the philosopher," Mace admitted quietly. "And you're right. But right now, we have work."

"Actually," Ben pressed up on his knees to stand. He strolled past the mountain of granite and let his hand run across the top fondly. "Right now, I've promised to go have dinner with the rest of my branch. Palpatine can steep in his failures for another day. We'll catch them all eventually, figure out the clones and the droids and the Sith. But leave tonight for the politicians." As he strode toward the door, he turned and asked Mace, "Would you like to join us? There'll be more than enough."

Mace smiled. "I appreciate the offer, Ben, but I've had enough company for one day. If you don't mind, I think I'll stay here and meditate."

"Of course, Master Windu. May the Force be with you."

"It is. And also with you."

Ben bowed and left.

He spend the rest of his evening in the apartments of Master Jinn and Knight Kenobi, laughing at Aola's stories and Feemor's reenactments of their mission to Boz Pity. Qui-Gon slipped between calling Obi-Wan 'Obi-Wan' and 'Padawan', and Obi-Wan tried to fiddle with his braid at least three times at dinner. He bumped into things and missed it when Aola tried to make faces from the chair on his right, but no one said anything about it. They only smiled, and righted the glass he knocked over, explained what he hadn't seen with his head turned, and exuded an air of comfort. At the end of the evening, Obi-Wan felt more useful when he fetched Aola's crutches for her and walked her and her master to their rooms.

They would not grow used to the changes today, or tomorrow. But down the road, a few months or perhaps years in the future, Ben could see a time when all of it would just be another part of life. And then, they could dig their heels into this new monster of a galaxy. They would, eventually, overcome the mountain by taking each small step that the Force had laid in front of them.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! If you've read this far, first off, I just want to say thank you. This fic has become an absolute monster, so, so much longer and more in-depth than what I'd anticipated. Especially if you have commented on or reviewed this fic, I just want to say thank you. Fanfiction is a hobby for me, and I really write for myself, to see what I can do and explore and practice writing fiction. But I'd be lying if I didn't say it was a major boost to share my love of these characters with other people and see you guys enjoying something I'm having such fun writing. I know I don't respond to reviews/comments often, but know that I read each and every one of them. You guys are the cause of a lot of smiles over here.

Before I say anything else, YES Reprise III will be happening. I'm going to finish this thing, so help me.

However, I've just started up my school-time job again, my second year of grad school classes start on Monday, and I am about to have very, very, very, very little free time. One of my main goals for this summer was to finish Reprise II so I would not have it hanging unfinished over my head while I worked on school and got back into the
rhythm of things. Also, I just really need a break. If you think I've been updating this thing so often because I just write that quickly all the time, you're wrong. I've been scheduling writing sessions simply to get this thing done before school starts. I'm really happy I was able to do this, and I'm ready for a break. As of tomorrow, I will be spending my days reading for class. I'm worn out on this project, and need some breathing room.

So I'm going to take a break. I'm going to finish outlining Reprise III, maybe post the first chapter (which is already partially written) and do my real life stuff, and might even write some short stories about Obi-Wan coping with his loss of vision and address some of the questions about it that you guys have posed in the comments. So you can look for that.

I've worked on major fic projects while I'm in school. I wrote most of the Reprise series while in school. But as time goes on the classes get harder, so I don't know how much time I'll have. So I don't know exactly when I'll post again, but keep your eyes peeled!

Thanks guys!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!